



IN SEARCH OF
(a novel)
EDEN



Linda Nichols

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In Search of Eden

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For Bridget,

with love.

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*“He will make her wilderness
like Eden,
and her desert like the garden
of the Lord.”*

ISAIAH 51:3 AMP

Eden's hands trembled as she opened the heavy box. She had waited ten years to look at its contents—until the conditions in the instructions had been met. *Wait until you don't need to know what's inside the box to know who you are inside your heart*, the tag had said. So each year on her birthday she had asked herself if the time was right. And each year something inside her had hesitated, and so she had put it away. This year, on her twenty-first, with college and Christmas and applying to police academy, she had almost forgotten about the box. Mom had reminded her, looking at her with a steady, settled smile. So she knew the time was right.

She lifted off the lid and carefully folded back the sheets of tissue paper. She gave a half smile of puzzlement when she saw the contents. It wasn't what she'd been expecting.

It was an artist's spiral sketch pad—a huge one—and with so many things glued to and stuck between the pages that it bowed out into an arc of papery waves. A scrapbook of sorts, but raw and lively, not polished and cleanly edged. The front was covered with a collage of glue-bubbled images: a country road heading off into the woods, babies and mothers, an iceberg. She fanned the pages and saw sketches and tiny watercolors, handwritten and typed entries, and more magazine pictures. She didn't understand. But she would, and she was finally ready. She opened the front cover, and there inside was an envelope addressed to her. Her heart began to beat faster. She opened the flap and slid out the solitary piece of stationery.

Dearest Eden, she read.

Today is your birthday. I don't know if I will see you, or even if I'm a part of your life. But I want you to know that you are in my heart, as you always have been. I think of you every day. I pray for you every day. I pray that your life will be happy and blessed. I pray I did the right thing.

My friend says the luckiest people are the ones who don't walk away. Those words have settled in, and I carry them around with me because, for most of my life, I was what you would call unreliable. It's not that I wanted to be that way. It's just who I became. I have walked away from almost everything in my life at least once. When things became marred, I always thought they were ruined. I was the kind of person my friend would say was unlucky because I floated away from things like dandelion fluff drifts off in the breeze. Almost before I realized it, I let go of people and jobs and promises and just slipped away, the wind lofting me off to someplace new. But I am getting ahead of myself—another one of my faults.

I'm sure you'll see them all for yourself before I'm finished because I'm going to give you the whole unvarnished story. Not the sanitized version. This is another friend's expression, and it was his idea, too. "Gather it all up," he said. "The old parts and the new parts. The parts you're proud of and the parts you're not, and put them all together in your book. It will be your gift to her," he said, "and you will know the right time to give it." So that is what I've done. I have written all of it down just as I remember it and as others have told me they remember. I've told the tale in total honesty, which, I have to admit, is a good quality of mine. I do have a few, I think. But that's up to you to decide.

Anyway, you'll see. I'll tell you all about what happened and then you can see for yourself whether or not I did the right thing. You're the only one who can really judge. I hope you will do so tenderly, for I am now and always will be,

Your Miranda

Eden took a deep breath and smiled, her joy spilling out from the edges of her too-full heart. She supposed a part of her had always known. Had always hoped. She wanted to get up and run to the phone, to the car, but instead, she read the letter again, slower this time and with tears. And finally, when her heart had become calm and steady and she was ready to know the how and why, she turned the page and stepped into the story.

DECEMBER 14, 1995
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

Wanda stifled a yawn. Ever since the hospital had gone to ten-hour shifts, she'd begun feeling her age. It crept up and settled in her back after a long day on her feet. Especially on days like today. She felt another pang of sympathy for her patient. She was just a girl, not quite sixteen, barely past childhood herself. Much too young to be having a baby.

But she had. They had whisked the newborn away so quickly Wanda had barely gotten a look at the child herself. They hadn't wanted Wanda's patient to hold her child or even look at it. They. Dr. Herbert and the baby's grandmother, who reminded Wanda somehow of the wicked stepmother in all the fairy tales she'd read. Oh, she was pleasant enough to look at with her red hair and heart-shaped face, but there was something to the narrowed eyes that gave Wanda a shiver, like feeling a cold hand clamped down on the back of her neck.

"The baby's being *adopted*," Dr. Herbert had said with that same pursed-lip expression. "It's been *privately* arranged." Emphasis on *privately*. Wanda thought that kind of secrecy had gone out in the fifties, but you didn't argue with Dr. Herbert. Not if you wanted to keep your job. Wanda had a sudden image of some rich socialite buying the baby from that horrible grandmother. She shook her head and closed her eyes. Where had her patient's mother been when her daughter had been crying and frightened out of her wits during her labor? Nobody had sat with her. Wanda had made her as comfortable as she could and held her hand throughout, but it had been a long, frightening ordeal for her. Dr. Herbert had finally done a Cesarean, which had made it easier for them to keep the baby away from her.

The infant was fine, though. Born healthy and squalling, Apgar scores of nine, but Wanda hadn't even been allowed to tell the young mother the vital statistics. Not the birth weight, length, not even the baby's sex.

"*The family has decided it would be best if the girl doesn't know*," Dr. Herbert had said. The family. Meaning the bride of Frankenstein.

Wanda glanced at the grandmother, now sitting in the waiting room. Every so often she would go outside to smoke a cigarette, and when she returned, she'd pace the room or rearrange all the magazines in that nervous way she had. Wanda shook her head and glanced at her watch. It was a sad situation all the way around. She sighed and felt the weariness again. It was time for her shift to end, but she wanted to check on her patient one more time.

She walked down the hall to the postnatal wing. Here was another cruelty, she thought. Wasn't there any place they could have put her besides here on the same floor as the other mothers and babies?

She found the room—510. At least it was a private room, and Wanda thanked the Lord for small mercies. The door was closed. Wanda opened it slowly. The lights in the room were off, the curtain on the far window pulled shut. It was gloomy and dark. She heard sniffing. Sure enough, the young girl was crying. *Who wouldn't be?* she thought with a surge of anger. Here the child was, not even sixteen, trying to cope with all the emotions of having given birth, the baby's father absent, her own mother absent, not to mention the physical pain she was in from the long, fruitless labor and resulting surgery.

Why, just the anguish and fear of going through such a thing by herself at such a young age would be enough to leave a scar on the heart. Not to mention having her baby taken away.

“Hey there,” Wanda said gently, approaching the side of the bed. She leaned over and smiled. Her back gave another twinge, but she barely noticed.

The girl opened her eyes, and Wanda saw them light with recognition and then fill with tears. The girl turned her face away, looking ashamed.

“It’s okay,” Wanda said. She took the girl’s hand and stroked it, and that seemed to open the floodgates. Wanda put down the rail and sat on the side of the bed and opened her arms. The girl let herself be gathered in close, as close as she could get with her fresh incision, and she cried against Wanda’s chest for quite a while. The shoulder of Wanda’s scrubs got wet, but she didn’t care. She hugged the thin shoulders and kissed the thick, slick hair and murmured, “Hush, now. It’ll be all right. It’s okay,” just as she did to her own daughter, but somehow those crises seemed minuscule compared to this.

After five minutes or so the little mother seemed to have cried herself out. Wanda handed her the box of tissues and then rose up and filled the plastic pitcher with water, feeling another little spurt of irritation at the nurses on the floor. This child was just a few hours postpartum, postsurgery, and no one seemed to be paying much attention to her. But even as she thought these things, she knew they weren’t true. They would be monitoring her closely. In fact, someone would be coming in to check her any minute. She knew her irritation wasn’t really toward the nursing staff but toward the situation in general.

“Here, drink this,” Wanda said, holding down a plastic cup of water and bending the straw so the girl wouldn’t have to raise herself up.

The girl took a sip. Then another. After a minute she moistened her lips and spoke. “I never got to see my baby. They wouldn’t even tell me if it was a boy or a girl.”

She looked at Wanda with a question in her eyes, and Wanda felt torn between hospital policy and her tender heart.

She was opening her mouth to speak when she heard the patient’s mother. She couldn’t make out the words, but she could tell from the tone that she was complaining about something. She caught “left me sitting out there in the waiting room” and “went downstairs for some food and took the wrong elevator.” The door opened and in she came with a whoosh.

“There you are,” she said, her presence, if not her slight frame, filling up the room. Her tone was accusing, as if her daughter had done something wrong. Well, perhaps she had, but Wanda thought that was not exactly the time for blaming and shaming.

“Hey, Mama,” the girl said weakly, her voice containing more misery than Wanda could stand to think about.

The woman gave Wanda an accusing look, as well, though she had no way of knowing Wanda really had no official business here. Wanda patted the small hand, now trembling slightly, and left the room. She waited at the nurses’ station, feigning nonchalance, talking and sipping coffee until she saw the woman leave.

“There’s a piece of work,” the charge nurse said, shaking her head in the new grandmother’s direction. Wanda nodded and waited for more. She was not disappointed.

“Adoptive parents are on their way. They’re taking the baby home today.” Wanda and the nurse both watched Grandma march toward the elevator, heard her heels clicking on the polished floor, saw her cross her arms and wait impatiently, tapping the button several times before the elevator arrived and she stepped inside. The doors slid shut. So she had left without even saying hello and good-bye to her

grandbaby. Wanda shook her head and exchanged another glance with the charge nurse, who shrugged and ~~grabbed up a chart, and headed toward the other end of the hallway, leaving Wanda alone.~~

Wanda hesitated just a moment and then went straight to the nursery, not letting herself think too much about what she was doing. Not thinking about the fact that this could mean the loss of her job, just knowing what she would want someone to do for her if she were in the same situation. She punched in her code, then stepped inside the nursery doors. The attendant was Martha Green, nearing retirement too. In fact, Wanda had gone to nursing school with Martha back in the dark ages. Martha was busy bathing and weighing a new arrival, the father helping, all thumbs and elbows. She gave Wanda a quick smile and a nod before going back to her task.

Wanda looked across the cluster of Isolettes and found the one she was looking for. Oh my. What a sweet, beautiful baby. Pink cheeks, dark hair, and a tiny pursed mouth. But then, they were all precious. The baby was wrapped in an anonymous white blanket, and she remembered the charge nurse's words. "*Adoptive parents are on their way.*"

She had only a minute. She picked up the tiny bundle, opened the door, and headed back across the hall, moving quickly and holding her head high. Acting as if she were on official hospital business and had every right to be doing what she was doing, not as if she were breaking hospital policy and maybe even the law. She went down the hall toward the girl's room and pushed open the door, pulling it close behind her.

The girl looked up, then dropped her mouth in shock. "Oh," she said before tearing up again. "Oh, thank you!"

Wanda helped her sit up, put the baby in her arms, then went to the door and cracked it slightly. So far, so good. She flicked her eyes back and forth between the scene on the bed and the hallway outside. The girl held the baby gingerly and was saying something too quietly for Wanda to hear. She reached down to touch one tiny hand, bent her mouth to brush the baby's cheek.

Wanda checked her watch and moved to the bedside. She didn't want to interrupt the sweet scene, but she put a hand on the young mother's head and another on the baby's. "Lord Jesus," she prayed aloud, "your heart is loving and forgiving. You said just as a mother would never forget her child, so you would never forget us, for you have engraved us on the palms of your hands. I pray now for these two, that somehow, someday, your love would bring them back together and that in the meantime you would guard and keep them. In Jesus' name. Amen."

The little mother wept and wiped her eyes on the back of one hand, the baby gripped with the other. A noise from the hallway jerked Wanda's attention away. She went to the door and looked out. Someone was coming out of the elevator. It was Dr. Herbert with a couple who looked so excited they could only be the adoptive parents. Oh dear.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but I've got to get the baby back to the nursery. Now."

The girl didn't fight her, but she didn't hand over the baby, either. Wanda gently pried the child out of her hands, and the mother began to cry again. Wanda didn't look backward, slipped out into the hallway, and cut through the medication room just as Herbert and company were rounding the corner. She put the baby back in the Isolette and then, for no reason except sheer panic, went to the sink and began washing her hands. They were shaking so badly she could barely manage the simple task. Dr. Herbert and the adoptive parents came in just then, and there was such a joyful buzz that no one noticed when she slipped out. She went to the nurses' lounge and just sat there, waiting for her heart to stop pounding, thinking about the possible repercussions of what she'd done and trying to calm herself.

The new little family was checking the baby out of the hospital when she passed them in the hallway on her way out. The adoptive mother was a pretty blond woman and in tears herself. She was clutching

the baby as if someone might try to take it away from her. The father was beaming, his arm around both of them protectively. What a pleasant-looking man he was! Warm skin and eyes and a soft brown beard. He reminded Wanda of the way some people painted Jesus, and her heart softened a little toward them. Perhaps it would be all right. The baby was obviously going to a good home. That was the important thing.

Still, her heart ached again as she passed room 510 on her way out. She slowed for a moment but didn't go inside this time. She felt cowardly and ashamed, but the truth was, she didn't think she could stand it. Even though she could see that one person's heartache and loss was another's blessing, it hurt too much. It was all just too sad.

DECEMBER 14, 2006 MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

Dorrie didn't have the heart for making things up and playing games. Not today. It was better when this day fell on a Saturday or a Sunday, because then she could go off by herself, away from prying eyes. She could hide until it was no longer December fourteenth. Although the pain never went away completely, it was better on the fifteenth. More like a dull ache than a sharp, breathtaking drill bearing down on the exposed nerve of her heart.

But today there was no hiding. Today would be sandpaper rubbed across that nerve. The problem was her current job at Good Shepherd Lutheran School. Normally she was the crossing guard and playground attendant. She usually loved being here and dressing in her silly outfits to entertain the children. One day she was Pippi Longstocking with pipe cleaners twisted into her hair to make her braids stand out. Another time she'd been Tinker Bell. The clown was the old standby. Then there was the pirate, the astronaut, the firefighter, the nurse. The children liked to see who she would be each day, and she smiled a little now as she looked out the classroom window and watched them chase one another.

She glanced down at the plain jumper and blouse she wore today. The only thing silly was her Cinderella watch. And her shoes. They were patchwork with an assortment of buttons and bows, and she had bought them just because the children would like them. She checked the time, for today she was not playground supervisor or crossing guard. Today, due to the desperation of the tiny school, and the fact that they weren't governed by the same regulations as public schools, she was pretending to be a teacher. She was pretending to be someone who had set a goal and accomplished it. Someone who had made something of her life.

A nasty flu bug had made the school desperate for teachers. They'd already been hiring substitutes for the substitutes when the kindergarten teacher's children had caught the virus. So she'd been put in charge. Temporarily, of course, and ordinarily she would be thrilled. Ordinarily she would be pinching herself and wondering when they would realize they had made a huge mistake. Ordinarily she would be heartsore that tomorrow was Friday and that on Monday their teacher would return. But today was no ordinary day. Today would be the most painful of places to be on this most painful of days.

The bell rang and the children came in from recess. They hung up their coats with the noisy confusion that was as close to organization as they came, then semiquietly arranged themselves in an uneven half circle with legs crossed and hands on their laps. Crisscross applesauce, the way she'd taught them.

"We're not going to do our story today," Dorrie said brightly in a falsely cheery tone, holding up the fairy-tale book. "I'm going to read to you instead." She hoped the children didn't ask why.

As they received the news that there would be no new installment of Hero, the talking blue jay, their small eager faces were slashed with disappointment they were powerless to hide. And, of course, her own heart wrenched. They were so vulnerable, children. So at the mercy of what the powerful ones decided to do with them. To them.

"We tried to be good, teacher." Roger earnestly pushed back his tortoiseshell glasses and leaned forward, as if the weight of all his noble deeds rested heavily on his back. His small face was knit into a frown of concern. It undid her.

“You *have* been good. Oh, my goodness, there *never has been* a group of children more cooperative and well-behaved!”

Their faces lit with hope, and she, as always, plunged toward it despite her intention to do otherwise. “As Hero was telling me the other day, not all children are as lucky as you are.”

Their faces shone with happiness, hope barely saved from being dashed on the rocks, and her own heart eased. They cupped chins in hands, sprawled down more comfortably on their resting mats, and Dorrie grasped something and pulled it down from the air—a gift, as all stories were.

She paused, groping for a plot, catching one from the whirring in her mind. “There was one little girl Hero knew in a town far, far away who wandered away one day and couldn’t find her way back home.

A slight rustle, a shift of warm bodies. She heard their quiet breathing, felt the warmth of their bodies and their love, and her heart eased.



It was nearly three-thirty before the classroom was empty. Roger, her favorite, although she tried hard to hide that fact, was the last one to leave. His mother was barely out of her teens, and Dorrie had been suspicious of her immediately. Today she arrived late, in a flurry of hair and exposed midriff under a black leather jacket. Dorrie stood at the doorway and continued to hold Roger’s small hand in her own, not realizing what she was doing until she became aware that both Roger and his mother were looking at her in puzzlement. She released him and took a step backward.

“Bye, teacher,” Roger said with a squinting grin, pushing those glasses back with his small hand.

Dorrie felt another twist of anxiety. He was so small and vulnerable. She looked at his mother. The woman’s bangs hung down in her eyes. She was much too young to have such a responsibility. Who was she really? Who had qualified her for this? You ought to have to pass a test or something in order to raise kids. They were such little souls, children, and so desperately helpless.

“Yeah, thanks,” the girl said brightly, and Dorrie had a flash of hope that she was, in fact, an older sister with her platform shoes and short skirt.

“Look, Mom,” Roger said, squashing her hopes. He held up his artwork as the two of them walked away. Dorrie forcibly put Roger out of her mind, repeating a familiar refrain. *He is not your child. He is not your child.*

She turned around to survey the room. It was a disaster, as usual, so she took a few minutes to put it in order, then turned out the lights and left the classroom.

She walked the few blocks to the bus stop and paced to stay warm. It was bitter cold. Sometime since recess, it had begun to snow. Tiny, mean flakes hurtled sideways through the frigid air. The bus arrived warm and well lit inside. Dorrie took a seat near the middle and looked around. Her eyes brushed over the middle-aged men and college boys without thinking, coming to rest on a young girl. She looked about eleven. She was sitting with an older man who looked a little dissolute. Dorrie frowned. She took another look at the girl’s face and was somewhat reassured. The child looked happy enough. Yes. She supposed so. She had brown hair and pale skin, and her pink coat looked dirty but warm. She studied the girl’s features but looked away before she crossed the line to rudeness.

She deliberately turned her gaze out the window. They passed a bookstore, a few coffee shops, a car dealership, and after a few more turns, the church that had once been a theater. The Father’s House it was called now instead of the Rialto. Services Sunday at 10 A.M. and Thursday at 7:00 P.M. Open each morning for prayer. This week’s message title was featured on the other side of the marquee. “A Place at Abba’s Table,” it said. She didn’t know who Abba was, but the image captured her at once. It would be a good place. She knew that much.

The traffic slowed. A line of brake lights lit up the gray dusk. There was an accident up ahead. Someone had probably spun out. ~~Maybe a visitor to Minneapolis, someone not used to driving in the snow.~~ She thought of all the places she had lived where winters were serious. There had been that winter in Chicago, a short stay in Bozeman, Montana, and the year in New York City. Yes, she'd seen her share of snow.

The bus wound around a few more streets. She pulled the cord. The bus groaned to a halt. She stood wrapped her scarf tightly around her neck, and got off.

Dorrie stepped into the dark apartment and tensed.

"Hello, Frodo," she said into the gloom. He was here. She knew he was.

Thump! He pounced at her feet, and she started. She cringed as she turned on the light, but there was no mouse corpse slung over her shoe today, only Frodo himself, bored and a little angry at her for leaving him all alone again. She leaned over and tried to pet him, but he stalked away in a huff.

"You'll get over it," she told him, giving up her attempt at affection. She hung up her coat, put down her book bag and purse, then filled his dish with dried food and replenished his water. Not that he was hungry, for the floor was littered with his breakfast.

She didn't know what she would do with him when she moved to another town, another job, another apartment. For she knew she would. She didn't ever *plan* to leave places, but then again, she didn't plan to stay, either. It just seemed that whenever things started feeling cluttered or marred, she wanted to start over somewhere fresh. It was like turning over a new sheet of paper in her scrapbook.

Her pattern was the only thing regular about her. She would travel, work here and there, then go home to work in the Sip and Bite until she saved up for another six or nine months of travel. She couldn't imagine herself getting married and settling down like some of her friends from high school had done. Not that there was anything wrong with the boys they had chosen. It was just that they were so satisfied to stay in Nashville, working at the Jiffy Lube and bowling every Friday night. She knew that if she joined up with one of those men, she would never go anywhere, either. She would never go to Spain or France or any of the other places in those pictures she'd pasted in her journal. Every now and then someone would come close to convincing her, but then a part of her would become restless and drift away.

"*You need to grow up, Dorrie,*" her mama would say. "*You're twenty-six going on fifteen.*" And she supposed Mama was right. Even about her so-called age. Fifteen *was* the year everything had fallen apart, so to speak. She knew that some part of her was still back there, waiting for . . . what? She had no idea, but she wasn't getting any younger, and she supposed she needed to prove, even if only to herself, that she was not going to end up bitter and alone like Mama.

Her life had certainly followed a different course than her mother's, a fact that Mama was prone to point out to her on any given occasion with a definite lack of admiration. Mama was married with a baby by the time she was out of her teens. And here Dorrie was at twenty-six, still rattling around. She would go somewhere and work, sometimes renting a room, sometimes an apartment, sometimes staying in hostels.

She just moved along until she couldn't find another job or her money ran out. And, of course, the destination she had been saving for all her life loomed before her as an unfulfilled dream—a trip to the Basque country, that small bit of paradise situated between France and Spain high in the Pyrenees Mountains. Her father had come from there, and just the names of the cities gave her a thrill. Vizcaya, Alava, Guipuzcoa. She would go there someday. She *would!* Maybe she would hunt down her daddy and take him, too, she mused, a slight smile passing across her lips. She poured herself a glass of water

and went to the window, watching the silent snow.

~~She supposed she had gotten her love of wandering from her father. He had loved showing her pictures of his travels, and finally, when life with Mama got too tiring, he had resumed them. He'd sent her postcards for a while. She had saved them all. They were pasted safely in her scrapbook: scenes of Tokyo, the Philippines, London, Tibet. Then they had abruptly stopped.~~

"He's probably in jail," Mama had pronounced.

Dorrie smiled, remembering how he used to read her his favorite poem. She remembered bits and pieces of it now. "Vagabond's House," it was called.

*When I have a house . . . as I sometime may
I'll suit my fancy in every way.
I'll fill it with things that have caught my eye
in drifting from Iceland to Molokai . . .*

*My house will stand on the side of a hill
by a slow, broad river, deep and still,
With a tall lone pine on guard nearby
where the birds can sing and the storm winds cry.*

She smiled and could see Daddy's handsome face, his dark snapping eyes. He blew in like a wind himself, bringing life and joy, and then abruptly he would be gone. And once he just didn't come back again.

"Good riddance," Mama had said.

Dorrie had grieved for a year. Then, Daddy's DNA asserting itself, she had embarked on a trip of her own. She'd known Daddy was from somewhere east of them, so she had used her baby-sitting money and had gotten all the way to Sulphur Springs on the Greyhound bus before the police had picked her up.

"Where do you think you're going?" the kind, grandfatherly Tennessee State Trooper had asked her, gripping her hand firmly as he escorted her into the waiting car.

"I'm going to find my daddy," she had said, jutting out her chin.

"Well." He had looked at her sympathetically as he had returned her home, perhaps already having encountered Mama.

She walked over to her Christmas tree now, a pathetic little thing she had dug out from under the fuller, more expensive trees. The man in that poem had a paperweight made of a meteor that had seared and scorched the sky one night. She had loved that part so much that one day Daddy had appeared with a small piece of spiky gray rock.

"Here you are, baby girl," he'd said. "Now you've got your very own meteor." This year she had taken from her jewelry box, tied a ribbon around it, and hung it from her Christmas tree. She picked it up now, let it dangle in her hand, and looked at it. She turned it over and tried to imagine it hurtling through space, never stopping, flaming bright and clear in the sky as people watched, then disappearing as suddenly as it had flared up. A shooting star right here in the palm of her hand.

She felt its cold weight and remembered how that poem ended. The vagabond man remembered a place he had missed, something he'd failed to see. He had left his people and his nice house and had set off again. She wondered if that vagabond man had ever found what he was looking for. She carefully let go of the rock, and it swung gently from the bent branch on her tree, still in motion as she walked away.

She paced restlessly around the small room. She opened the refrigerator, but nothing looked good to eat. She fixed herself a cup of tea, turned on the television, then sat down at the table, pulling her latest unfinished drawing toward her. She was always sketching and scribbling, as her mother called it. This

week's project was a Christmas scene, or at least a quick pencil sketch beginning of one. There was a beautifully decorated tree, warm candlelight, children playing on the floor, all viewed from outside the window, framed by the panes. She filled in detail now with ink. She would go back again and do a watercolor wash. She worked for several hours, until the only figures left to draw were the children. She outlined their faces and features, and as she did, the thoughts she'd been evading all day arrived on her with a thud. She felt tears rise up in spite of her resolve. She went to the bathroom, got a tissue and blew her nose, splashed some cold water on her face, then went back to her work, but it was no good. She had lost her concentration. She would finish it tomorrow, she promised herself, pushing the paper away from her.

She sighed, suddenly feeling the weight of life behind her. What did she have to show for all those years? She thought about her life and had a sudden sense of overwhelming . . . litter. She sighed again. Usually when this feeling struck, it forecast a change of address, the only remedy she could come up with.

She went back to the window and stared, her mind going back to the theater marquee with the beckoning words—"A Place at Abba's Table."



After a short walk she stood in front of the imposing building, a huge brick-and-marble monument to Serious Religion. She felt suspicious and wary. She had never found anything but condemnation and rules in the church. Well, she could stand it for a night, she supposed, and she started up the stairs. She opened the heavy double doors, made her way into the sanctuary, and found a spot on the back pew.

The speaker was a fatherly-looking man in his fifties, Dorrie guessed. He was medium height and portly with gray temples. He wore nondescript suit pants and a shirt and sweater. Ordinary in the extreme, except that he had a way of looking out over all of them just as a father would look upon his family. There was a tenderness in his gaze, a gentleness in his voice that made her want to move closer. She shook her head at her gullibility and stayed where she was.

They sang a few songs, the words to which were unfamiliar; then he launched into his sermon. He spoke about someone with a complicated name who was a friend of King David. The child of a friend, actually, who was lame. He was an orphan but had been adopted by the king. He sat at the king's table. Then it seemed to Dorrie as if the speaker was addressing her directly, telling her gently that God wanted to be like that to her. He wanted to be her Abba. Her papa.

"You were made for relationship with Him," he finished now, in that "in conclusion" tone of voice. "He loves you. Just the way you are. You don't have to be perfect or to strive all the time. He wants to give to you," he said, "not take things away. You can trust Him." His eyes were pointed straight into hers, or at least that's how it seemed, and if he had held out his hand just then and beckoned her to come, she might have.

He prayed and she stiffened, waiting for pressure and guilt that never came. He dismissed them with a blessing. The people around her began to rustle, murmur, then chatter. A few people greeted her, but she tried to avoid a conversation. She turned her legs sideways and nodded politely as people clambered over her on their way out. She pretended great interest in the contents of her purse. She looked up front at the pastor. He was standing at the bottom of the speaker's podium, listening as an earnest-looking young man spoke and gestured to him. There were two others milling around, obviously waiting to speak to him. She sat. He patiently worked his way through the people. Still she sat. She had no idea what she wanted to say. Her thoughts weren't coherent enough to formulate a question. Still, she didn't leave. And pretty soon there were just a few clumps of people left talking. The pastor looked at her then. She

looked back at him. She should get up and go forward, but she felt as if her rear end were glued to the polished oak pew. Then he smiled and started toward her. She watched him coming, getting larger as he approached.

“You’re still here,” he said, smiling, softening the impact of what might have sounded like criticism. She nodded but couldn’t seem to move or speak.

He sat down on the pew in front of her. He seemed to hesitate.

“Was there something you wanted to talk to me about?”

She paused for a moment and looked down at her hands. “I don’t know what to ask,” she said. “It feels overwhelming.”

“It can feel overwhelming if you’ve never heard any of it before. Tell me,” he said gently, “where are you on your spiritual journey?”

She felt a tear slide down her cheek, to her mortification. She wiped it away furiously. “I guess my spiritual journey never got out of the starting gate. I think I got on the wrong track. But I’m making good time,” she said, lifting her face with the hint of a smile.

He smiled back. “Someone wise once said that if you’ve made a wrong turn, the best thing to do is to go back to the last time you were sure you were on the right road. Go back to where the mistake was. I think that’s what Jesus meant when He talked about repentance. Turning around and going the other way.”

She nodded, her thoughts rushing too fast to examine.

“When would that time be for you?” he asked.

She blew a stream of air out of pursed lips and shook her head. She flicked her eyes past his and focused somewhere up near the ceiling. “Back when I was a kid, I guess.”

“Was there a fork in the road back there?”

“You could say that.”

He waited, obviously thinking she would say more.

“There’s no way I can go back and undo it.”

He shook his head. “Maybe I used the wrong analogy. I’m not talking about anything *you* have to do. God will take you right where you are. It’s not about you getting yourself ready for Him. All you have to do is give yourself to Him. If anything needs fixing, He’ll do it.”

“What do you mean, ‘give myself to Him?’”

He looked past her shoulder for a moment, then smiled slightly. “I think the simplest way to explain is to tell you what my Sunday school teacher told me when I was five years old. Just open your heart’s door and say, ‘Jesus, come in,’” he invited softly. “He’ll tell you what to do next.”

Dorrie’s eyes filled with tears. The minister waited quietly. “You don’t have to understand everything,” he said. “I didn’t for many years. In fact, I’ve done some things I’m not proud of at all, even since I’ve known Him. But God honored my prayer and I grew in my understanding. And He’s a forgiving God. A God of second and third and hundredth chances.”

She looked directly into his eyes and nodded; then she picked up her coat and stood. “Thank you,” she said. “I need to think.”

“Of course,” he said. She waited for some kind of ultimatum or pressure, but none came.

“My mind feels too full,” she said. “I need to let some of this digest.”

“God bless you,” he said. He stood and held out his hand. She held out hers. It was a brief, firm clasp, then she turned and went on her way. She looked back once and he was still watching. He held up a hand and she did the same in return.



Dorrie made the short walk home quickly. She had left the television on—she didn't like to return home to a silent house— and reruns of sitcoms were playing. She flipped through the channels and finally turned it off, then back on again after the loudness of her thoughts disturbed her. The talk with the religious speaker had upset her. She had the feeling that something menacing was gaining on her, something she must not face at any cost. She thought about going to bed but knew she would not sleep. She felt a mixture of love and anger and loss and bitterness that was too heavy to dream away.

She went to the table, but she was too upset to work on the drawing. Instead, she took out her book, half scrapbook, heavy on the scrap, and half journal. It was getting thick. And such a mess. The pages were warped with glue, pictures of anything and everything she might someday want to share with . . . someone. They were cut from magazines, taken from her own camera, sketched or drawn by her, arranged around snips of articles, quotes, things she'd read and wanted to pass on someday. And interspersed here and there was an entry written by her. She paged through it quickly.

There was a picture cut from a magazine of a winding road heading off toward green hills. There were a lot of pictures of children, at every age and of every description. And other things, as well, that caught her fancy. An old postcard of huge trees in Oregon ten times the width of a man, proven by the man standing beside it. There was a Christmas card, a black-and-white photo of a park bench covered with snow and a red cardinal perched in the tree behind it. There were pictures of houses where she might someday want to live, drawings she'd made of gardens she might someday want to plant. The cover of an Annie Oakley comic book she had loved as a girl was pasted beside a photo from the fifties she had found in an antique shop of two mothers pushing their babies in strollers. And last, the one she had pasted in yesterday. She had found it in an old copy of *Reader's Digest* in the teachers' lounge at the school. A picture of an iceberg floating in black water, only the tip protruding, the vast mass of it under the dark water, all the more dangerous for its invisibility. She blew her nose, turned to an empty page, and wrote:

December 14

Today is your birthday. You are eleven years old. I don't know where you are, even who you are, but I want you to know that you are in my heart, as you always have been. I only caught a glimpse of you, and even that was stolen, for you belonged to someone else already. You were dressed in white, so I don't even know if you are a boy or a girl. I touched your hand, and your fingers opened and closed around my own. The hardest thing I have ever done was to let them go.

I have thought about you every day since then. I pray your life is happy and blessed. I pray you can find it in your heart someday to forgive me. . . .

She kept writing, the tears flowing and wiped away while barely noticed, the pressure in her heart easing as the words flowed onto the page.

By the time she had finished writing, she knew, of course, the remedy for what ailed her. It was the usual cure. The one she employed whenever things like this came up. She would reinvent herself again. After all, as her aunt Bobbie was fond of saying, a change was as good as a rest. And that was what she needed. A change.

She needed to forget about kids. To put them all out of her mind. It was taking the substitute teaching job that had brought all this up again. That and the silly decision to go and hear the religious speaker.

She would not go back to being playground attendant and crossing guard at the school on Monday morning. She thought of Roger and the others and felt her usual steam-rolling regret. But she could not do it. She would call and leave a message that she would not be back.

She felt a little better once she'd made the decision. It always took pressure off to change the scenery.

She began reading the want ads. She would find another job. One that had no small people to tug at

her heartstrings. No warm little hands slipping inside her own, no small faces to leave such a gaping hole in her heart when the inevitable parting occurred. There would also be no one religious telling her she needed to change her life. What had she been thinking? She began getting ready for bed, putting the pastor's kind, earnest face out of her mind.

David Williams was lost. He held the directions from the church in Maplewood where he had delivered his seminar back to the Minneapolis/St. Paul airport. The street names were a blur in the meager illumination from the map light in the rental car. He shook his head. He had never been good at directions. But there was hope ahead in a familiar sign. He pulled into the Starbucks, got a cup of coffee and reorientation, then found his way back to the highway. Sure enough, the landmarks the clerk had described were just where she'd said they would be. He leaned back, relieved. He was on the home stretch now. There were only a few more miles to the airport, and he was making good time. It ought to be fine unless there was a crowd at the car rental counter. He patted his lapel where his electronic ticket confirmation was tucked along with his picture ID and the car rental agreement. He took out his cell phone and called home. It was sweet to hear his wife's and daughter's voices. He'd been gone only a week, but he missed them. He checked his watch. He would be back in Virginia in a little less than three hours. He would sleep in his own bed tonight.

He turned his attention back to his driving. The roads were icy. A flurry of snowflakes pelted the windshield, their rhythm relentless and hypnotic. He thought about the book he was writing, about finding the heart and keeping the heart. All that remained was the last chapter, but it would be the summation, the charge, the call to battle, the map to the entire quest. He thought of his own journey toward that goal and remembered with regret the wrong turns he had made. Would he do any differently, he wondered, if he could turn back the clock, or would he still take what he wanted and leave others to pick up the pieces? He thought of his brother. The distance between them seemed as vast and cold as an icy continent. He did not know how to begin to span it. He prayed and felt the comfort and assurance of forgiveness he always received. He sighed, turned on the radio, and found the local classical station. His troubled thoughts eased, and his mind became a comfortable blank as he drove, the only sound the rhythmic thump of the wipers, the snowflakes mesmerizing as they floated down.

He came out of his reverie suddenly, attention focused but puzzled. It was an odd sensation, for one part of him was still listening to violin music and planning the last chapter of his book, and the other part was trying to understand what it meant that a set of eastbound headlights was coming toward him in the westbound lane.

Why did people say there was no time to stop? he wondered. There was too much time, stretched-out time. You could live an entire life in the seconds it took a small sedan to slide, brakes locked, across a hundred feet of slick highway. He was experiencing that lifetime pass now with an odd sense of objectivity, as if things were not real. He had the strange sensation of time hanging motionless, suspended, and in that drawn-out space David watched everything. He saw his coffee tipping from the cup holder, saw the white cardboard cup, the mermaid logo, the dried brown dribble marks down the side, all in vivid detail. He saw the amber liquid arc through the air, and as if from very far away, he felt the searing heat join his other bodily sensations—the tense pressure of his leg upon the brake pedal and the stiffening of his arms against the steering wheel. There had been no warning. Another incongruity. No horn sounded. No siren. Nothing at all but this event now unfolding. His car began to spin as he stood on the brakes. The movement was oddly graceful, and he noted things passing by—the dented metal guardrail streaked with tire marks, the hillside covered with snow-frosted trees, the staggered line

of matched headlights, which had once been following behind him but was now coming toward him in that same slowmotion dance. Life should have sirens, he realized. *Oh, Jesus, oh, Jesus*, and suddenly, as the grill of the oncoming vehicle met the driver's side of his car, the seconds became seconds again instead of hours. Events piled atop one another in a crushing heap, lights too bright, screeching, roaring, tearing screams of metal upon metal, metal dragging on concrete, metal into flesh, jagged glass, searing pain, then nothing at all.

NEAR ABINGDON, VIRGINIA

The Baby Ben alarm clock by Joseph's bed went off, the shrill ring jarring the morning stillness. He reached across and turned it off. He had awakened without it, as usual, even though he set and wound it faithfully every night in case he should oversleep. He shunned the electric models. He didn't like to depend on batteries or electricity. There was no reason for him not to be at his post just because the power went out, and that was not an uncommon occurrence up here on the mountain in winter. He was prepared. He had a woodstove for heat and plenty of lanterns and kerosene lamps. And his truck could drive through anything.

He set down the clock, got up and pulled on a pair of jeans and a warm shirt, then went to the kitchen. He measured out a generous portion of coffee and filled the metal coffeepot with water. Flick emerged from his bed beside the banked woodstove and greeted him with a few swishes of his tail. The wood planking under Joseph's feet protested as he went about his morning routine. It was simple and rarely varied. There was no newspaper here; indeed, the mailbox was a mile beyond, where the lane met the graveled road, all but impassable in the winter except by four-wheel drives. Then he picked up his mail at the post office. There was no television. His nearest neighbor was five miles down the mountain. He didn't know if he was lonely. There was the dog. And he saw plenty of humans every day as he worked. Besides, he didn't think along such lines anymore. He did his work and then drove the winding roads to his home. It was quiet here. He could rest.

Not everyone approved of his isolation.

"It's your choice if you want to live out there in the backside of nowhere," Susan Cummings, the mail carrier, had sniped. *"But I don't have to drive to your doorstep every living day."*

"It's not the end of the world," his mother had complained, snug in her house in town, *"but you can see it from there."*

Joseph turned on the burner under his coffee. Leaving it to brew, he shrugged on his jacket, pulled on his boots, and went outside. The wind cut at his cheeks and his hands. It blew hard and moaned between the empty branches. He guessed the temperature was somewhere in the twenties. The snow clouds were gray and low and looked like dirty cotton.

He walked toward the river's edge, Flick bounding along beside him. The ground was frozen hard under his feet. He stopped at a place he had always intended to plant a garden, a little flat spot that got good sun and was near the river. Maybe someday. For now, his mother kept him supplied with vegetables. In fact, she was expecting him for supper tonight, and that thought along with the responsibilities of the day began to line up like patient children waiting for a word with the teacher.

He went to the riverbank, squatted down, and looked out over the river. It was swift here but not deep. The water was frozen along the banks and out in the middle by the log snag. Most of the trees along the bank were a gray tangle. There was something about winter out here that let a little hope remain. He supposed that was why he chose to live here. Even though the bareness was more stark, at least here he could see the first promises of thaw, the first swelling of buds.

He stood and walked a ways into the woods. The air was heavy and still. He smelled earth and

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