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CINDY WOODSMALL & ERIN WOODSMALL

A NOVEL

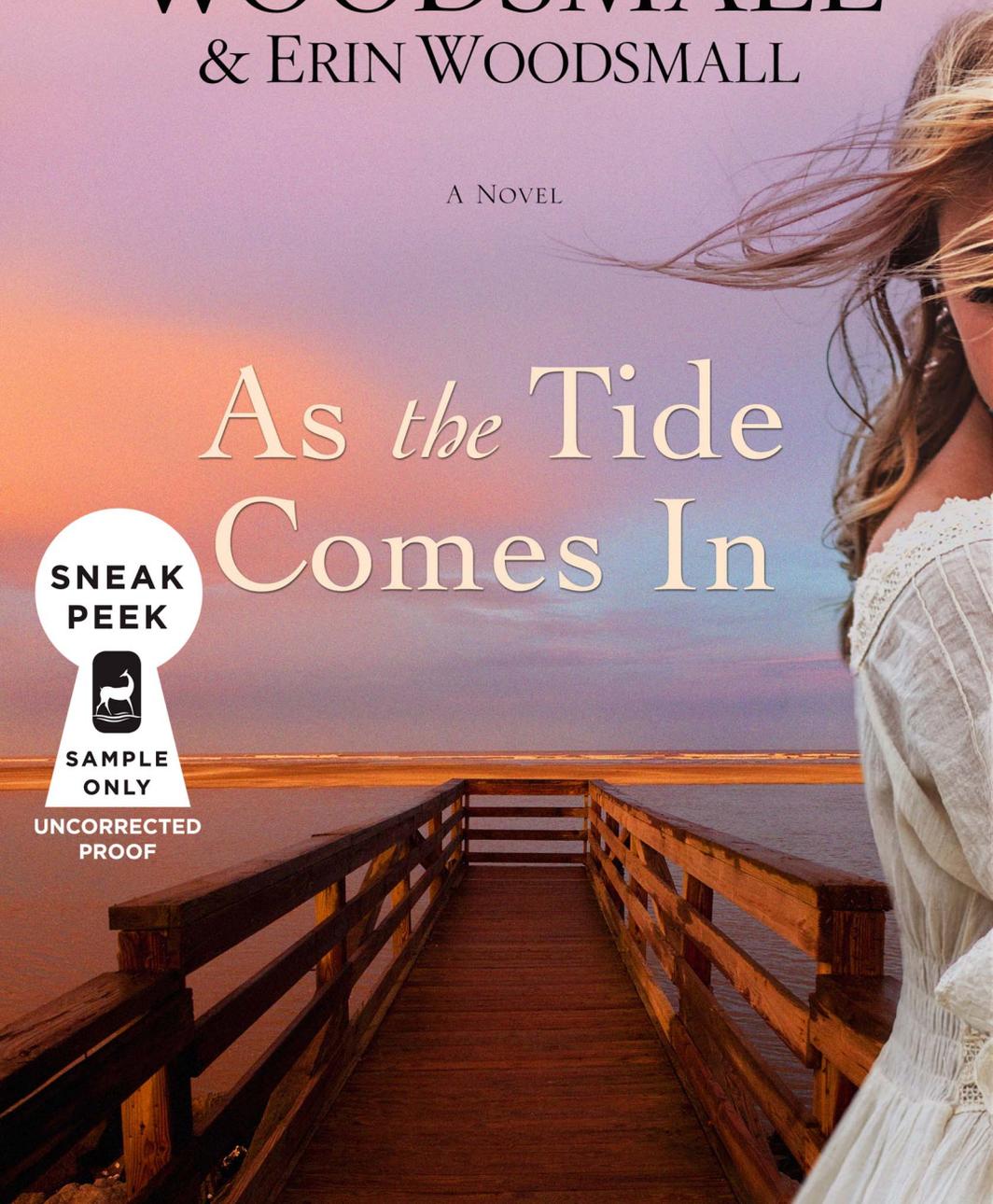
As the Tide Comes In

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As *the* Tide Comes In

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July 2, 2005

The canvas painting on the wall called to Tara as she walked back into the kitchen, this time her arms filled with rock-climbing gear. She set everything on the table and went to the painting. Once again her heart beat faster, and whispers from a past she didn't remember haunted her. It was the sole remaining object from her childhood. The day social services arrived at the trailer to take her away, Tara begged to take the painting with her. After all, it had been given to her . . . maybe.

The painting was of a lighthouse, beach, and ocean, as if the artist's view was from the ocean. Deep red and gold reflected off the water as though it was depicting sunset, or maybe sunrise, but those colors were usually brighter and lighter. That painting and the woman who painted it seemed connected to Tara somehow. At the bottom the artist had signed it "To my Spunky Boo ~ Love you, Nana." Tara had no recollection of anyone named Nana, but she did recall her mom calling her Spunky Boo at times, so the artist either knew that or also called Tara that. As a child abandoned to the foster care system by a drug-addicted mother, she liked to daydream that someone somewhere loved her.

A noise from the bedrooms in the small apartment pulled Tara from her thoughts. Why was she marinating in old hurts? After months of working two jobs, she had the entire day off, and she would not spend another second thinking about sad things.

She sat in a kitchen chair and put on her athletic shoes. She'd restocked

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the grocery store shelves until midnight, so she'd slept late. As good as that felt, she knew the best part of the day was still ahead. Her gear was spread across the small table: dynamic ropes, various sizes and shapes of carabiners, and a climbing pack with power snacks and water. Her TomTom was on the table too. It had nothing to do with climbing mountains, but it got her to the agreed-upon destinations to gather with other climbers.

"Oh, thank goodness." Hadley's voice carried down the short hallway. She stepped into the kitchen, wearing a robe, her hair wrapped in a towel. "I smell coffee."

"Tara,"—Elliott was behind her, already in her hospital uniform—"please never quit your job at the grocery store." Her roommates made a beeline for the coffee maker.

Hadley and Elliott had worked second shift last night and then stayed for some overtime hours, so they'd slept in later than Tara.

"The good news is we have coffee." Tara picked up the TomTom and began entering the address of today's destination. "The bad news is we only had enough money for either coffee or milk, not both."

"As always, T,"—Hadley put the mug to her lips, closed her eyes, and took a sip—"you made the right decision."

"Yeah," Tara scoffed, "it's almost as if I'd spent years under the same roof with you two while growing up or something."

Hadley and Elliott chuckled. The three of them had shared a foster home for several years. That's when the feeling of sisterhood began, and even though Hadley and Elliott had quit high school and run off to work and live in Georgia until they were legal adults, they had continued the bond with Tara through phone calls and emails, so very many calls and emails.

Tara shoved the TomTom into her backpack. "Be sparing with the sugar. It doesn't go on sale until next week."

Maybe when they had college degrees, they'd make decent money, but for now they eked by on minimum wage jobs, sharing the bills and saving every penny for their education. Tara had graduated high school a couple of

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months ago, and with some help from the state, she'd begin college this fall, although she was unsure what her major would be. Was there a degree that could mix her two favorite things: food and outdoor life?

Hadley and Elliott knew what they wanted degrees in, but right now they were working toward getting their GED.

"Oh, this came for you yesterday." Elliott pulled a letter out of the pocket of her scrubs.

Tara took it from her. "A real letter?" She glanced at the return address. There wasn't a name on it, and what little Tara could make out, she didn't recognize. But it was to Miss Tara Abbott and had her address. "Who even sends these anymore?"

"That's exactly what I thought." Elliott opened the fridge and grabbed the carton of eggs. "Have you eaten, T?"

"Yeah." She glanced at the clock on the stove. "I need to leave in a few." Her climbing buddies would be gathering at a specific parking lot in ninety minutes, and it'd take Tara more than an hour to drive there. She and her climbing buds had been planning quite a while for today—Saturday, July 2. They'd climb the face of a mountain long before sunset, waste time until dark, and watch fireworks. Afterward, using flashlights, they would hike down a clear trail on the slope of the mountain.

Tara pulled the letter from its envelope. The notebook paper looked as if it'd been jerked from a three-ring binder. She glanced at the signature. "It's from Patricia."

"Who?" Elliott asked.

Tara looked up, surprised by the question. On the other hand, Tara had met the woman only once, four years ago when she'd brought Sean and Darryl to the foster family and biological family picnic. It was the first and last time Tara had seen any of them. "She's my half-brothers' grandmother."

"Ah." Elliott slid her hands into the shirt pockets of her scrubs. "I'm not sure I even knew her first name. You say little about her, and when you do, you usually call her Mrs. Banks."

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The three of them had no real family, so it seemed that the name of Tara's almost relative should be etched in Elliott's mind, but she had a reasonable point. Tara nodded and turned her attention to the note.

Hi, Tara.

I know it's been years since the boys and I have seen you, but I have good memories of that day. I'm hoping you'd be willing to reconnect. I have some important matters I need to talk to you about—they are rather urgent, but they are also familial ones.

Could you come for a visit in the next few days?

Warmly,
Patricia

It ended with the woman's address written in large letters.

Hadley sat in one of the kitchen chairs. "Anything important going on?"

Tara passed her the note.

"Interesting." Hadley held up the letter and pointed. "Is that word *familiar* or *familial*?"

"I wondered the same thing, but my guess is it's *familial*, as in a family-related issue." Tara shrugged. "My mom probably showed up on her steps, looking for shelter—and money—and that very kind, sweet old woman has no idea what to do about it. I have good advice for Mrs. Banks. Tell her, 'This isn't your house. Now get out.'" She shrugged. "If that doesn't work, she should call the police."

"Maybe she needs you to say that for her."

"Maybe so." Tara had no burning desire to see her mom, and maybe that wasn't what was going on, but she was curious. Why was Mrs. Banks reaching out? Were the boys okay?

Memories of the day she met Mrs. Banks and her half brothers were more like snapshots than a video clip. Tara had been fourteen at the time. Sean was the older of the boys, and he'd been five. Despite the awkwardness

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of having just met and the nine-year age gap, they'd had fun, even won a three-legged race and came close to winning the watermelon-eating contest. The younger one, Darryl, hadn't been quite a year old then, and he'd been whiny or asleep the whole time.

Hadley studied the envelope. "And there's no chance that Patricia Banks is your nana, right?"

Tara's attention moved to the eleven-by-fourteen canvas painting. "No." She fidgeted with the rope, uneasy with any talk of unearthing a maternal or paternal family member. It was never going to happen, and she didn't like entertaining the false hope that it would. She'd not seen her mom since she'd abandoned her ten years ago. Within a day of her mom walking out, Child Protective Services showed up and took Tara away, allowing her to take the painting with her. After hightailing it elsewhere, had her mom called CPS and left an anonymous tip?

It didn't matter. For Tara, foster care was definitely the better place to grow up. "No way. Mrs. Banks is Sean's and Darryl's paternal grandmother. My mom met her after we moved to North Carolina *and* after I entered foster care. I'd had that painting for years by then."

"Okay." Hadley rapped her fingers on the table again. "I figured as much, but it was worth a shot."

Tara used to dream of finding the woman who'd painted the picture, but how did one search for an unknown place where a "Nana" may or may not live?

Elliott cracked an egg into a bowl. "How old are the boys now?"

"Nine and almost five."

Hadley pointed at the letter. "How did Patricia even know where you live?"

Tara put the ropes and carabiners into her backpack. "Maybe she got our address from Dianna."

"Our last foster mom?" Elliott asked.

"It's possible." Tara shrugged. "Mrs. Banks and Dianna talked a good

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bit the day of the picnic. When Mrs. Banks needed my new address, my guess is she called Dianna. She's made a reasonable request, and I'm pretty curious about what's going on." Tara opened the short letter. "It says they're in Sylva, North Carolina. Either of you know how far that is from Asheville?"

"Sure." Hadley opened Tara's backpack and pulled out the TomTom. "It's about an hour west of us here in Asheville, not far from my dream school of Western Carolina University. I think the best way to get there is on the Great Smokey Mountains Expressway, but your TomTom should take you right to it."

"Okay. Good to know. I'm not changing my plans today. If it's that urgent, she can call the police." Besides, if Tara kept her plans in place, she could show the note to James and get his opinion. He was close to thirty, a bit of an older-brother type, and he'd taught her how to rock climb and rappel. She didn't see him outside of group gatherings for hiking or rock climbing, but he and his longtime girlfriend were always willing to listen and offer some helpful life tips. "And I gotta be in the bakery department at four in the morning. I work until noon on the Fourth, but I could go that afternoon."



Tara drove up a long gravel driveway, hoping she was at the right place. About two miles back her GPS claimed she was on unverified roads, so it was useless at this point. That didn't stop it from suggesting two dozen times that she turn around at her earliest convenience.

She felt out of sorts about this whole thing, which made her agree with the device. She was tempted to make a U-turn and go the other way, but after coming this far she'd stay the course. She hoped to be on the road back to Asheville within the hour, but it might take a little longer than that to send her mom on her way or to sort through the issues with the police.

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An old cabin on a hill came into view. A short set of rock steps was on the far side, and split railing ran across the front of it. The house itself was tiny and probably seventy years old. She imagined it'd been built as someone's weekend fishing cabin.

Did the occupants constantly trip over one another? Or maybe it wasn't as small on the inside as it appeared from the outside. The yard was nicely mowed, and the bushes lining the porch were trimmed.

Tara parked the vehicle and stared at the cabin, her heart pounding. The full impact of her awful plan hit her—to reintroduce herself to two half brothers, send her mom packing, and leave.

The front screen door flew open and stayed there, but she saw no one. She got out of the car, carrying a container with homemade cookies. *Look, kids, our mom has to go, but I brought cookies! And there's a watermelon on ice in my trunk.*

Just how insensitive and self-absorbed could she be?

A horizontal silvery, pipe-looking object edged out of the shadow of the doorway. Soon an elderly woman appeared. She hardly resembled the woman Tara had met four years ago. This woman was skin and bones and hunched over a walker as she shuffled onto the porch.

Tara took a deep breath and closed her car door. "Hi." She went toward the stairs.

Mrs. Banks stopped walking, raised a shaky arm, and waved.

Was she managing to take care of the boys, or were they tending to her?

"Hello." The woman smiled. "Tara?"

Tara remained at the foot of the steps. A whisper inside her said this visit had nothing to do with her mom. Something far more difficult than facing a deadbeat parent was happening here. In that moment her mouth went dry, and her heart pounded. "Yes."

Two shadows peered from behind the woman. The bigger boy seemed to be supporting the woman, and the younger appeared curious.

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“You’ve grown up.” Mrs. Banks motioned. “Come.”

Tara climbed the steps and held the plastic container out in front of her. “Cookies.”

The woman wavered as she released her walker and accepted them. “This was very kind of you.”

Sean gently lifted the container from his grandmother before he guided her hands back to the walker. He studied Tara with a gentleness in his dark brown eyes.

“Boys,”—Mrs. Banks gestured toward them—“this is Tara. You met her a few years ago.”

“Hi.” Tara smiled, but the warnings inside her rumbled like thunder.

“I don’t know you.” Darryl narrowed his eyes. “But you look familiar.” He held out his small hand.

Tara put her hand in the little boy’s and squeezed it gently before letting go and turning her attention to Sean. “Win any three-legged races lately?”

He shook his head, stone-faced as a con man playing poker, and she had no idea if he remembered their fun at the picnic.

Darryl snatched the container of cookies from Sean’s hand and lifted it to his nose. He breathed deeply. “Didja make these?”

“I did.”

“Are they for me too?” Darryl’s eyes were big with hope.

Why wouldn’t they be for him too? Did he have food allergies?

Mrs. Banks glanced at the little one. “Yeah, for you too.” She nodded toward the front door. “Sean, take your brother inside and get him a glass of milk. Two cookies each.” She paused. “How many?”

“Two each, Granny,” Sean repeated. “Come on.” He cast a wary look Tara’s way as he motioned for Darryl.

Darryl clutched the container close, as if hugging a bear. “Two *whole* cookies each?”

“Yeah.” Sean opened the screen door and waited for Darryl to go inside

first. Sean studied her again, appearing unsure whether she was friend or foe.

Mrs. Banks turned, shifting her walker. “Go. This ain’t for children.”

Sean lingered another moment. “You look like her.”

Tara nodded, trying to hide her embarrassment. “I do.” Their mother was pretty enough, she guessed, but she wished she didn’t favor her. How could he remember what their mom looked like? At the picnic Mrs. Banks had said that Tara’s mom left the boys right after Darryl was born. Maybe he had a picture of her, or maybe she’d come back for a visit.

“Sean.” Mrs. Banks twitched her head toward the door, a clear signal she wanted him to make himself scarce.

“Sorry, Granny.”

Mrs. Banks gestured toward the only decent chair on the porch, a rocker. “Sit, please.”

“Has she been back?” Tara refused to say the word *mom* out loud, but Mrs. Banks had to know whom she meant.

Mrs. Banks shook her head. “I’ve not seen or heard from her.” Her eyes held sympathy, but she pointed at the rocker again. “Sit.”

Tara started toward the rusty folding chair, wanting to leave the good one for Mrs. Banks.

“Nah.” It was more like a squawk from an angry goose than a word. “Not there.” She pointed at the rocker.

Tara went to it and sat.

Mrs. Banks shuffled, using the walker. “I remind myself of that nursery rhyme. ‘There was a crooked man, and he walked a crooked mile,’ but that’s not who I was until recently.” She eased into the weathered chair, wincing. “I was healthy and strong until a few months ago, but I started hurting deep inside, shooting pains that stole my breath.”

Tara could hardly breathe as she pieced together why she was here. “You’re sick.”

“I am. I thought the pain and tiredness were just part of the normal process of aging. Then I fell ten days ago, and while taking an x-ray of my ankle and foot, they found tumors. I have bone cancer, spread far and wide in my body, and the doctor has no idea how I’m not already dead. He says I shoulda been bedridden long ago. That’s what he says, but I say that God’s given me the strength to tend to my boys. And now He’s giving me time to sort through this mess the boys are in.”

Tara’s head spun from the news. “I . . . I’m sorry.”

“Death comes to us all.” Mrs. Banks pursed her lips, nodding. “But God is good. Still, I got no time to waste, so I’m gonna get right to the point. My boys need you, and maybe you need them.”

Tara’s thoughts twisted into knots. “Wh . . . what?”

“I know this is a shock, and no girl your age wants to be a guardian, but—”

“How are Sean and Darryl taking this news?”

“Sean knows I’m sick and getting weaker by the day, but neither one knows I’m dying.”

Tara’s world spun with anger and disbelief. “Why? What on earth are you waiting for?”

“A miracle.”

“Wait.” Tara raised her hands, giving herself time to piece together what was happening. “Are you suggesting *I’m* that miracle?”

“You could be. The three of you have the same mother, and they need you.”

Tara’s heart raced. “Look, I don’t mean to be disrespectful. You’re clearly in an awful predicament, but the idea of me being their guardian is crazy. And you can’t keep putting off telling them. Imagine the shock they’ll feel to lose you without warning.”

“I was hoping to have a bit of good news to go with the bad. They’ll take the news a lot harder if they know they’ve got to go into foster care. They could be separated, you know.”

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"I'm sorry. I really am, but I'm just eighteen."

"You don't got to worry about your age. The law says you can't be a foster parent until age twenty-one, but you're their sister, and if you'd move in before I die and make sure they attend school, the state won't have no reason to come poking around here as long as you don't go to them for financial support."

Tara wished she could give the woman the comfort she longed for, but everything within her was screaming *no*. "That's not what I meant. I just can't. I'm sorry. Truly."

Mrs. Banks's eyes filled with tears, but she nodded.

Tara's hands trembled. Mrs. Banks and the boys were in a horrid predicament, but Tara wasn't the answer. She had dreams of her own, and she had no experience, not even of taking care of a kitten or a puppy. "You need to tell them what's going on, Mrs. Banks."

"Patricia, please."

Tara nodded. "Patricia."

Patricia ran a loose thread over her frail fingers. "Can I count on you to come here when I pass, help them through that time? Maybe just a couple of days?"

Tara's boss at the grocery store would let her off for a few days, maybe a week, if she explained the situation. "I can do that. I'm sure of it. But they'll be in a home by then, right?"

"Maybe so." She sounded resigned.

"I'm barely out of high school."

"I know, child." She tugged on the thread. "But you gotta let me tell you everything so I know I did my best."

Tara could give her that much. "Okay."

"This cabin is old, but it's sturdy. My daddy built it in 1939 as his fishing cabin. It has a pond and a little over three acres. Most important, it's paid for, and there's money in an account to cover property taxes for five years, assuming they don't go up too much. I got a car, six years old, and

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there's money set aside for day-to-day living that ain't for my funeral or taxes, about ten grand. I know it's not much, but it's yours. All of it if you'll keep them."

"It's not about money."

"There's a community college less than six miles from here. You could go there," Patricia said. "I know the dean, and he'd help you get a scholarship. The town's nice, real nice. I've lived here all my life, and I have friends who'll help you get a job and look in on you and the boys."

Tara's heart ached. "I know what you want, but—"

"I call them *my boys*." Her weathered hands shook as she wiped away a tear. "They're good boys, Tara, and nothing like their dad. He was difficult most of his life. Argue with anyone about anything. Not just normal stubborn, but mean stubborn. By the time he turned eight, I took him to be seen. The doc said he had oppositional defiant disorder. His dad and me kept trying to work with him, but he got into drugs, swearing there was nothing wrong with it. And then he married your mama, and they fed off each other's worst traits. He ran off to who knows where a few months before Darryl was born, and I ain't heard a word from him since. But like I said, the boys aren't like their dad. They're good boys, but it'll break their tender hearts to lose me and then be put with strangers, shuffled from one home to another until they break and turn mean. It'll ruin them."

Tara had little else to say, and she needed to be on her way. "I'll return in a week or so, after you tell the boys the truth of what's going on, and I'll help them adjust to the idea of foster care." She stood. "But I need to go. I'm sorry."

The door flew open, banging against a nearby chair. "Those cookies was so good!" Darryl stumbled to a stop in front of her. "You're gonna do it again sometime, right?" He held out his hand as if wanting to shake her hand.

Sean was behind him, his face blank as he studied her.

She put her hand in Darryl's.

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He shook it, smiling up at her. “Then it’s a deal!”

Tara made a mental note to bring fresh cookies when she returned after Patricia passed. “Sure.”

Should she call social services and explain the situation? She didn’t want Sean and Darryl waking one morning to find Patricia dead.

“You’re stayin’ for supper, right?” Darryl asked. “Granny has a big roast in the oven, and she don’t do that unless someone’s staying. Will ya be here for the fireworks?” He made a blasting sound and spewed his hands out. “I love fireworks. Could you take us with you? Granny says town is too crowded for her on nights like this, but we can’t see them from here. Last year I could hear them and see the smoke. That was cool. Oh, and we saw a few fireworks.” He made the whispery sound of an explosion again.

“Darryl, stop,” Sean fussed. “She ain’t staying. Can’t you see how she’s standing there, angled toward her car, ready to hurry off?”

Sean was observant and sharp, and he reminded her of herself at his age.

Darryl shook his head. “Tell him he’s wrong. He thinks he knows everything, and don’t nobody ever tell him he’s wrong.”

Did anyone correct their grammar? Dianna, her last foster mom, wouldn’t have put up with that poor grammar for two seconds. But that was the least important concern here. “I can’t stay.”

The hurt on Darryl’s face sent a dagger through her heart. She wanted to scream, *Look, kid, I don’t know you, and you’re not my responsibility!*

“I’m sorry.” Since arriving Tara had apologized enough to last a lifetime. Couldn’t she at least take the kids to see the fireworks before hurrying back to her own life?

Sean walked to her. “You were nice at the picnic all those years ago. I remember having fun. But we’re nobody to you. I get it. Darryl will too in time. But we got Granny.”

Tara looked at the old woman. In that moment she understood. Patricia Banks wasn’t just hoping for some good news to add to the bad. She didn’t have it in her to break their hearts.

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Sympathy for what the coming weeks would bring worked its way into Tara's heart and out of her mouth. "I could stay for a few hours."

"And take us to the fireworks?" Darryl sounded so hopeful.

She nodded. "Why not?" What could it hurt to give them a really nice memory to look back on?

"Yes!" Darryl jumped around clapping. "Real fireworks!" He ran to her and grabbed her hand. "Come see our pond. I'll teach you how to throw a rock so it skips. I can make a rock skip two times." He held up two fingers. "But Sean, he made one jump twenty times."

"Six, Darryl," Sean said. "Just six."

Darryl was an enthusiastic ball of energy, and Sean was a reserved realist. It seemed odd, but she saw parts of herself in each boy. Tara had a lot of energy, but she was a realist like Sean.

"I've never skipped a rock," Tara said.

"Never?" Sean sounded appalled.

"I rock climb," Tara said, "so remove the shock from your face. I *am* familiar with rocks." Did he know she was teasing?

"But you could fall off." Darryl raised one hand high and slammed it into a clap. "Granny says so."

"We wear harnesses, use ropes, and have carabiners to anchor them into the rock, keeping us safe."

Darryl ran full force from the porch, but since neither Patricia nor Sean said anything about it, she didn't either.

She reached for Sean's chin. "You favor her too." She shouldn't have said that. Why had she? Maybe because it was clear they were siblings, no matter how much she wanted to use the word *half* to describe their relationship. "Not as much as I do, and you won't when you're a man."

He shrugged. "My plan is to grow a beard and shave my head."

The words of a wounded child. "It doesn't matter what's here." Tara jiggled his chin. "Or here." She put her palm on his head. "It only matters what's in your mind and heart." *Where did those thoughts come from?* They

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were freeing as she spoke them, and she gently squeezed his shoulder. “Her leaving wasn’t about us. You have to hold on to that truth. She’s broken, not us.”

Sean’s face clouded, and he swiped at his eyes, nodding. His dad left. Months later his mom did the same. Soon his granny would die. What would it do to him if his sister callously disappeared, leaving him to live with strangers, maybe in a separate home from his brother?

Darryl ran up the steps, tossed a rock near her feet, and jumped on it. “I can rock climb too!” He held out his hands. “Look, Granny, no biners or ropes.”

Granny laughed, but Tara couldn’t budge as a desire to protect the little boy’s sense of humor and innocence captured every thought. She couldn’t stand the thought of Darryl’s losing his enthusiasm and it being replaced with hurt and anger.

God, just stop it! You stop it right now! Would He listen to her?

“Boys.” Patricia lifted a shaky hand. “Wash your hands and set the table.”

“You won’t leave, will you?” Darryl’s eyes betrayed his fear that she’d drive off and he wouldn’t get to see the fireworks.

“Not until after the fireworks. I promise.”

“Yes.” He jumped up and down. “Hear that, Sean! You is wrong. Wronger than wrong.”

Sean pursed his lips and nodded. “Good.” He opened the screen door. “Now let’s go inside.”

Darryl skipped toward the door, singing, “I’m gonna see fireworks. I’m gonna see fireworks.”

Tara melted against the rocker, trying to stay in the moment and not worry about tomorrow or next week. A cool breeze roused from nowhere, and despite the heat a chill ran down her body. A feeling eased over her, as if God was more than inside her heart and in all of nature. It was as if He were there beside her. And she felt love as she’d never felt it before, and in

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that moment she had nothing but love to give. No reservations. No dreams that mattered beyond sharing His love.

She turned to Patricia. “I . . . I’ll be here for them. For your boys. And raise them.”

Patricia drew a sharp breath, staring at her, and soon tears rolled down her cheeks. “Thank you. Oh, dear child, thank you.”

Tara looked across the yard, seeing a pond at the side and the long gravel driveway that led to here. What was she doing?

Dear God, help me raise them right. Let love and joy mold them, not hurt and anger.

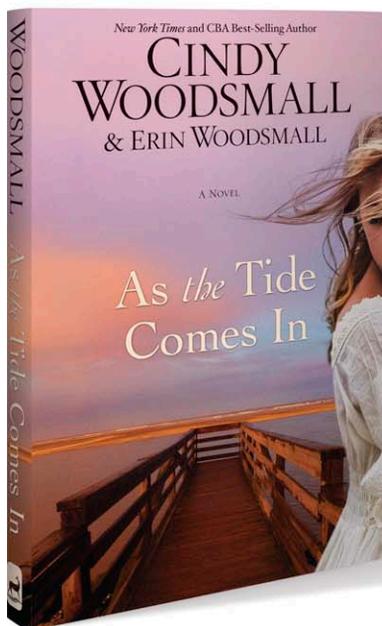
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