

Northern Exposures

Family Reunion—In the Wisdom of the Ancestors Series

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The journey continues and the struggle for
literary perfection shall never end.

The search for our Eden, our Paradise is the search for Goodwill among peoples of all colors, cultures and creeds. The search back into the history of our individual universes to a simpler place in time outside of the dense and hectic orbit in which we find our realities. To a time of peace and harmony. A search for the source. That deposit of matter and combination of molecules which created us. The center of our universe which permits us all to look at ourselves from another point of view and brings us Goodwill. As in the Garden of Eden, within our realities lurks the barrier to goodwill. The promise of genesis. The beginning.

Ann Jeffries
USA, 2014

TITLES BY ANN JEFFRIES

In the *Family Reunion—Wisdom of the Ancestors Series*

Southern Exposures

Another Point of View

An Unguarded Moment

Touch Me In The Morning

Chapter 1

“Attention!” Sergeant Higgins shouted and saluted as Benjamin “Benny” Alexander entered the outer area of his office at March AFB in California near San Diego.

The other four airmen also snapped to attention.

“As you were, gentlemen,” Benny said, with a quick salute while still on the move.

“Welcome back, Colonel Alexander and congratulations on your promotion, Sir.”

“Thanks, Sergeant. Is there anything urgent that I have to handle before I go on leave?” Benny asked, as he entered his inner office.

Sergeant Higgins followed. Benny put his gear down on a nearby chair, put his briefcase on his desk and opened it.

“Only a few matters, Sir, but nothing urgent.”

“Anyone in my family try to reach me?” Benny asked, going through his briefcase.

“No, Sir. Your brother, Kenneth, called to say that he and his family arrived safely in Goodwill with your daughter. Your friend, Lieutenant Commander Bruce Payton, called a few times, but didn’t say that it was urgent. A few ladies called who claimed to be close personal friends of yours.”

Benny looked up at Sergeant Higgins. “Did these ladies say why they were calling me?”

“No, Sir, but they never do, Colonel.” Sergeant Higgins said, smiling. “I’ve prepared an alphabetical listing of the women who called you. It is quite extensive.”

“Is there a Lieutenant Stacy Greene on your list?”

The sergeant pulled up the list of calls on his iPad and printed it out while Benny looked through and signed supply orders, transfers, leave requests, and other administrative papers.

“No, Sir, no Lieutenant Greene—. Say isn’t that the attractive friend of yours who used to...” the Sergeant stopped short when Benny looked up with a strained expression on his face. “Begging your pardon, Sir. Will that be all, Sir?”

“Yes, Sergeant Higgins. I’m going to put in a few more hours here and then you can reach me in quarters later. I’m leaving for my parents’ home at 1530. You have the number there if you need me or you can reach me on Sky Net, but only if it’s an emergency. Major Keason will be CO in my absence.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Benny worked later than he planned. He gathered his laptop, briefcase, bid farewell to his staff, and rushed to a waiting vehicle with driver, who drove him to his condo in San Diego.

Fred Mann, the resident condo desk clerk, greeted him with a big smile.

“Good to have you back again, Major—I mean, Colonel! Congratulations!” Fred said. As a former military man he noticed the new insignia on Benny’s uniform.

“Thanks, Fred. Anyone looking for me while I was away?”

“You mean Lieutenant Greene? No, she hasn’t been here, but Dr. Jordon and Dr. Atterly called me over a month ago and told me that they wanted you to call them.”

“Did they say that it was urgent?”

“No but they were excited about something.”

“I’m going to see them in Goodwill tomorrow. Whatever it is can wait until then.”

“Sure, Colonel. Here is your mail.”

“Thanks, Fred. Uh, I’m only going to be here for a few hours so if anyone’s looking for me, I’m not here, right?” Benny said, palming some money and shaking Fred’s hand.

“You got it, Colonel!” Fred said, smiling at the generous gratuity.

Benny went up to his condo. It seemed dark and lonely inside without Whitney. He missed his daughter’s infectious laughter and the smile on her face whenever he returned home each day or from a mission. He threw his dirty clothes into the laundry, showered, and sat at his desk, going through his mail. Forty-two messages on his answering machine,

he noticed. He didn't bother to listen to them. Rather, he picked up the telephone and heard his father's voice on the other end. "Hi, Dad. How are things going?"

"Great, Son, the family is starting to arrive already, but why aren't you on your way home yet?"

"I will be shortly. Just needed to clear up some work at the base and pay a few bills before I leave."

"We're looking forward to seeing you, Son. Kenneth James, JeNelle, the twins, her parents, and Whitney Ivy all arrived a few days ago. Gregory Clayton is on his way and so is Vivian Lynn. They should be in sometime tonight."

"That's good, Dad. It will be good to be home again."

"Son, are you all right? Did something happen?"

"No. I just miss my daughter."

"She's fine, Benjamin Staton. Sounds like Whitney Ivy isn't the only one you're missing."

"As usual, Dad, you don't miss anything. Yes, I'm missing Stacy more than usual."

"Son, I know that it's been hard on you raising Whitney alone, but you're doing a fine job."

"Thanks, Dad. Whitney makes it easy. The hard part is not knowing anything about where Stacy is, what she's doing, that she's safe."

"When it's time, Benjamin Staton, Stacy will come home to you."

"I try to believe that, but the longer she's away, the harder it gets. It's been years since she left."

"Come home, Son. We'll talk about this together."

"I will. I'll see you later tonight."

"Are you flying yourself home?"

"No, I've already logged too many flight hours. I'm flying commercial."

"Fine, I'll have someone pick you up at the airport in Columbia."

"Thanks. My flight gets in at United at 10:00 P.M."

"See you then, Son."

“Fred, have you heard anything from Major Alexander?” Cecil asked as she picked up her mail.

“Uh, Major Alexander, uh, no, Dr. Jordon. I haven’t heard from the Major.”

“That’s strange. I thought that he would have been back by now.”

“Well, I’m sure that he’ll contact you and Dr. Atterly as soon as he can.”

“I hope so. I’ve got some exciting news for him.”

“You and his cousin, Don Dixon, gonna tie the knot, huh?”

Cecil laughed. “No, Fred. Not likely.”

“Seems that he’s been visiting quite a bit lately. So maybe it’s his brother, James, and Dr. Atterly, huh?”

Cecil laughed. “Fred, I believe that’s a distinct possibility. I guess I’ll see the Major soon. Hold our mail, Fred. Dr. Atterly and I are leaving for South Carolina in the morning. Have a good Fourth of July holiday.”

“Thanks, Dr. Jordon. You do the same.”

Benny’s flight touched down at Columbia Airport on schedule. As he walked to the baggage claim area, he found Caroline Ann waiting for him.

“Hi, Benny,” she cooed.

“Caroline Ann, why are you here?”

“To meet my favorite man,” she said, smiling.

Benny shook his head in frustration.

“I was at your parents’ house when you called. I volunteered to pick you up,” she said, kissing him lightly on the lips.

“You didn’t have to do that. I could have rented a car.”

“I wanted to. I love to see you in your uniform. It makes me tingle all over.”

“If you’re ready, I’m anxious to get home to see my daughter.”

“Benny, don’t I even get a hug?”

“Sure,” he said as he hugged her lightly. “Where is your car parked?”

“In Lot #2.”

“Lead the way.”

They left the airport and Benny offered to drive. The traffic was heavy on Intrastate 76 East and Caroline Ann took advantage of the situation and chatted the entire time.

“Benjamin, I’ve made no secret about the way that I feel about you. I know that you haven’t been seeing anyone else. Your cousins told me that. They said that you still care about that Stacy Greene character.”

“What’s your point, Caroline Ann?” he asked, sighing in frustration.

“We’ve known each other practically all of our lives. We grew up together. I was your first girlfriend, remember?” she said, sitting close to him and rubbing his knee while he drove. “My mama had a crush on your daddy when they were younger—”

“I still don’t understand what you’re getting at.”

“You need a woman who will be there for you. A mother for your daughter. You need a wife, Benjamin Staton, and I’m qualified to fill all of those roles. I’ve got two fine boys who need a father. We could even have more children if you want. I was thinking how perfect this could be for both of us.”

“I’m flattered, but... I mean, any man would be. You’re an attractive, bright, and exciting woman. You have a lot to offer and if things weren’t as they are any man, including me, would jump at the chance to be with you. In fact, Bruce Payton has mentioned your name to me several times. I believe that he’s very interested in you.”

“I know. He’s called a few times, but I’m more than just interested in you, Benjamin. I think that if you let yourself go a little, you and I could have something very special between us. I want you to try to do that while you’re home for your family’s reunion.”

“I can’t promise anything and I don’t like disappointing anyone, but until Stacy and I—”

“Stacy again!” she huffed. “Stacy Greene is gone, Benjamin Staton, and the sooner you realize that the better! She’s not coming back! In all this time I know that she hasn’t contacted you once! She’s probably married to somebody else by now. And even if she’s not, she doesn’t deserve your time and attention for all these years. I’m here right now. Flesh and blood. You can reach out and touch me...”

Caroline Ann's words cut through Benny like a knife. The thought of not ever seeing Stacy again never crossed his mind. Nor had the thought of her falling in love with and marrying someone else. He and his family believed that she would come back one day. All of his efforts to find her had failed though. Only his family's support had sustained him. Particularly Kenneth's. Kenneth was the one who was more vehement than anyone, but Caroline Ann's words were beginning to create a state of uncertainty in his mind. He listened as she argued her case, but his heart was not in it.

The traffic came to a dead stop ahead of them. People began getting out of their cars and talking with one another. One motorist, with a CB radio, announced that a tractor trailer accident had caused a ten car pileup. It would be hours before the road could be cleared.

Benny leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes. He and Caroline Ann didn't speak after her outburst. He wanted to hold on to his belief that Stacy would return to him, but he had to face reality, too. Whitney deserved to have two parents in her life. He felt Caroline Ann's soft lips on his and realized that this was not just a friendly exchange. His body seemed prepared to react to her tenderness, but Stacy's face was still before him in his mind's eye.

"Caroline Ann, I can't do this now..." he said, as he turned away.

She stroked his face. "Let yourself go, Benny. Let Stacy go." She kissed him again with greater intensity. Her hands roamed over his body. Unzipping his pants, she reached inside fondling him and causing his nature to rise.

He felt her start down, stopped her, repositioned himself, and zipped his pants. Getting out of the car, he leaned against the hood. "Damn!" he spat, banging his fist on the roof of the car.

Caroline Ann got out of the car. "Benjamin, I just—"

Benny held up one hand. "Don't, Caroline Ann," he said. "I don't want to talk about this."

Caroline Ann said nothing as she just stood looking across the car at him.

Finally, the traffic was beginning to move ahead. He drove to Goodwill without saying anything more to Caroline Ann except to thank her for picking him up. His parents waited up and they chatted

for a while until he went into Aretha's bedroom where Whitney lay sleeping. He sat in a rocking chair, put Whitney on his lap, and closed his eyes while praying as he held his daughter. Stacy's daughter.