

Only One Way Home

“I am the way...” John 14:6

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For my Great, Great Grandmother Mary Ann Jones Bohannon, the “Indian Woman,”
and for my brother Kenny Woods who inherited his good looks from her.

Chapter 1

Merrideth Randall ran a strand of blond hair through her flatiron. She took the time to do it every morning, because she figured if she had to have flat hair it might as well be shiny flat hair. But it was a tiresome process, made worse by her inadequate bathroom. For one thing, the mirrored medicine cabinet had been installed at a height suitable for her apartment's ten-foot ceilings—if the person trying to use it was also of gigantic proportions—but since she was only five foot two inches, she had to stand on tippy-toes if she wanted to see what she was doing. She reminded herself that at least her calves got a good workout.

Besides, it was impossible to be annoyed on such a glorious day. The window behind her claw-foot tub was filled with golden sunlight, and if the weatherman hadn't lied, temperatures would be more typical of April than January. More importantly, it was the Friday morning of a four-day weekend, her grading was caught up, and she would not have to be back at McKendree College until her Tuesday afternoon freshman history class. Furthermore, she would be spending the day antique-hunting, one of her favorite pastimes, with her best friends Abby and John Roberts.

Rising on tiptoes once again, she examined her hair. It actually looked pretty good, and so she added "good hair day" to the weatherman's propitious forecast. Setting the flatiron on the ledge of the pedestal sink, she bent to get her little zippered cosmetic case from the cardboard box on the floor. She took out her bottle of honey-beige foundation and wedged the case behind the faucet. Although she'd lived there for over five months, her grooming paraphernalia and towels were still in boxes. The bathroom was large, it had little actual storage space. But today, if all went well, she would bring home a small antique dresser in which to put all her stuff.

Since her apartment was part of a historic old house—one of the many that graced Lebanon, Illinois—something antique was the only rational choice. She figured the price for a solid wood dresser would probably be only a little more expensive than the plastic (horrors!) shelving units at Walmart. Something in cherry or mahogany would be nice, although pine would be acceptable—and probably less expensive. She felt confident she would find something that would work. Antique dealers from several states would be at the Marion Cultural Center for the annual two-day event called the Egyptian Caravan of Antiques.

She smoothed on a bit more foundation and then put the bottle back in the case and took out her mascara. In the process, her elbow bumped the flatiron. It skittered over the porcelain surface, but she caught it right before it would have landed in the basin under the dripping faucet. She was grateful to have good reflexes, because getting electrocuted would have really put a damper on the nice day. Grinning at her thought, she unplugged the flatiron and set it back down. The cord snagged on the cosmetic case, sending it to the floor. The bottle of foundation shattered on the black and white checkerboard tile, splattering honey-beige makeup to the four corners of the room.

Drat! It was almost seven o'clock, and like her, John was habitually prompt. She would have to hurry in order to get downstairs before he and Abby arrived. She got paper towels from the kitchen and wiped up the broken glass and the worst of the gloppy mess. The doorbell rang. The floor was still smeary, but there was no time to mop it. John hated to be late. The doorbell rang again.

"All right. All right. Hang on, would you?" She washed the makeup from her hands and hurried to the living room where she got her keys from the faux mantel of her faux fireplace and her coat and purse from her lumpy couch.

She opened the door, expecting to see John. Instead, Brett Garrison stood there, hand raised in mid-air. Grinning, he pretended to knock on her forehead. As usual his smile made her stomach do flips. As usual, she forced it to stop its gymnastics. Today, instead of his usual suit and tie, he was decked out in jeans, blue chambray shirt, and work boots. And instead of a briefcase, he carried a shiny red tool chest. He looked like Hollywood's version of *A Working Man* when he was, in fact, McKendree's youngest physics professor and thus a man who used his brain rather than his hands to make a living.

Brett's get-up should have made her laugh. Instead, it made her cranky. He looked just as attractive in it as he did in his elegant professional attire, and like everything else he wore, it seemed to accentuate his good looks. It was annoying, given her determination to keep the man at arm's length and firmly in the *friend* category. No way was she going to sabotage her position at McKendree by getting involved with a colleague. It was a small college in a small town, and rumors flew like carrier pigeons.

She made a show of looking at her watch. "Kind of early for a visit, don't you think?"

"I figured since you're an early bird you wouldn't mind. I did try to call, but your phone isn't working."

"Oh! I forgot to charge it." She dug in her purse for it. "Speaking of phones, I don't seem to remember calling a repairman...er...carpenter or whatever you're supposed to be."

"Sure you did," he said, edging his way past her into the apartment. "You've been complaining for weeks about your sticky doors." He strode across her living room like he owned it when, in fact, he'd only been there a couple of times.

She laid her purse down and followed him, nearly running to keep up with his long stride. "Well, then where's the Acme Construction label on your shirt, Mister? I insist on Acme for all my construction needs."

"The only one I know who uses Acme is Bugs Bunny."

“It’s really nice of you to take an interest in my doors, Professor Garrison. But they’re happy as they are, in spite of all my griping. And I’ll be moving anyway...as soon as I find a place to buy.”

“Well, you might as well have decent doors while you wait. Is that the one?”

“That’s one of two.”

The bathroom floor looked even worse now that the smears of makeup had dried in a honey-beige glaze on the black and white tile. Brett shook his head and clucked in mock dismay. “You really should think about switching to Mr. Clean, Merri.”

“My cleaning products are perfectly fine, thank you very much. I just didn’t have time to mop.”

He set his tool chest down in the hall and pulled her bathroom door toward him until it stuck with a creak on the tile floor a full three inches from closing. She knew because she had once measured it.

“If I want to shut it completely, I have to win at a very spirited game of tug-of-war, which I don’t like to do because the door knob is loose.” Like the rest of the house, the door had its original china knobs, just one of the quaint features that made it worth living in what Abby called “chic squalor.”

Brett swung the door back and forth a few more times. “Pretty typical with old houses. Everything settles over time.”

“My landlord Mr. O’Connor keeps promising to do something about the doors. But he’s so decrepit that I don’t think he can actually make it up the stairs to my apartment any more, much less do any repairs once he got here.”

“That’s where I come in.”

“You can fix it?”

“Sure. It’s a simple matter of planing a little off the bottom of the door.”

“It would be great if you could fix them, Brett, but today’s not good. We’ll be gone all day.”

“We? Where are *we* going?”

Oh great. Now she had roused his raging curiosity. It was one of his most annoying traits. When she didn’t volunteer her itinerary for the day, he put on a bland expression as if he had lost interest. But she wasn’t fooled by it for one minute. From experience, she knew that he would continue to try to weasel information out of her. He seemed to have an insatiable need to know every detail of her life. Too bad, because she didn’t care to tell all her business to everybody who asked. The blasted man should be grateful. She had already shared more with him than she did anyone else except Abby and John.

“So you should go on home now,” she said.

“Always the polite hostess, aren’t you?” Completely ignoring her request, he bent and got a hammer and chisel out of his tool box. Then he went into the bathroom, pulling her after him, and shut the door as far as it would go.

“What on earth—” she squeaked. With him in it, her bathroom no longer seemed so large after all. And the air was noticeably deficient in oxygen. He was frowning, so maybe he noticed it, too.

“I need you to help me get the doors off before you leave. So where did you say you’re going?”

“Aren’t you full of nosy questions?”

“It only seems like a nosy question to someone who guards her secrets like the gold at Fort Knox. As for me, I’m an open book.”

“Okay, then I’ve got a question for you.” She had her own share of curiosity, truth be told. For weeks she had been dying to ask him about something he had said.

“Ask away.”

“A while back you told me that everyone has family secrets.”

“And you’re asking what mine is?”

“I guess I am. Let me remind you that you know mine.”

“But you didn’t tell me. I discovered it on my own.”

“Which you did by snooping!”

“I did not. Your father’s letter from Joliet Prison was right there for anyone to see on your couch.” He put the chisel to the upper brass hinge and tapped it with his hammer. The pin popped up like a turkey thermometer, and he pulled it out and set it on the floor. “My secret is that I’m not a real Garrison. Thus, I am not related to those heroic ancestors you found for Aunt Nelda’s family tree.” He didn’t wait for her to respond to that bit of news, just started in hammering on the middle hinge.

When the racket stopped and the second pin was out, she said, “Of course you’re a Garrison, Brett. You look—” Merrideth shut her mouth and turned away so he wouldn’t read her face. She had been about to remind him that he looked just like his ancestor James Garretson—the same glossy black hair and emerald eyes, even the same jaw line.

She knew because she had gotten a first-hand look at James Garretson back in November, courtesy of her *Beautiful Houses* software. The thought still made her shiver with excitement and wonder. True, she had taken only virtual trips back to Garretson’s time in the 1780s, but it was amazing all the same. Undoubtedly, Brett would be fascinated by a computer program that allowed users to circumvent a few of the supposedly immutable laws of physics to virtually rewind time. But if she told anyone it was working again after all these years, it should be Abby and John, and she didn’t have the guts to do so in case they insisted she stop using it. They thought it was too dangerous to let word of *Beautiful Houses* get out, fearing someone would adapt it to use for spying on everyone’s thoughts. But the technology was just too precious to give up—for her historical research and for her sideline genealogy consulting business.

Behind her, Brett grunted. “I never would have taken you for a snob, Merri.”

She whirled to face him, saw that he was frowning, and mentally kicked herself for taking so long to respond. “I do not care one iota what your last name is or if your parents were blue-blooded aristocrats or...or... orangutans.”

His frown was replaced with an amused smile. “Oh. Sorry. Here, take these,” he said, handing her his hammer and chisel.

“What am I supposed to do with them?”

“Now you do the bottom hinge while I hold the door.”

“Are you getting tired?” she said sweetly. “Maybe you should go home and take a nap.”

“I’d do it myself, but these old doors weigh a ton, and if I don’t hold it level it will torque and get jammed, making it more difficult, if not impossible to—”

“Okay, okay. I got it.” She knelt and positioned the chisel as she had seen him do and then hit it with the hammer. It wasn’t as easy as he had made it look. The pin only moved up a quarter of an inch. She looked up at him. “So what makes you think you’re not a Garrison?”

“You hammer. I’ll talk.”

“Just don’t let the door fall on me.”

“I won’t,” he said, rolling his eyes.

She went back to hammering, or rather lightly tapping. She didn’t want to get the pin out too quickly or she might lose the opportunity to pump him for information.

“Mom died when I was eight.”

She looked back up at him. “I’m sorry, Brett.”

“Don’t look so tragic, Merri. I was used to her letting me down.”

“It hardly seems fair to blame her for dying.”

“It is, if the cause of death was booze.”

“But alcoholism is—”

“A disease. I know it now. But try telling that to an eight-year-old. Fortunately, Aunt Nelda scooped me up and took me to her farm, so I didn’t have to watch Mom drink herself to death.”

“It must have been horrible.” It was obvious from his expression that he didn’t want her pity, so Merrideth went back to tapping on the hinge. “What about your father? Where was he during all this?”

“My alleged father died before I was born. He got food poisoning in Athens.”

“I presume you have a reason to believe he wasn’t your real father.”

Before he could answer, the pin finally came out and clattered to the floor. Brett lifted the door off the hinges, lugged it into the hall, and leaned it against the wall. “Is that the other one?” Without waiting for an answer he started down the hall toward her bedroom.

“Wait!” She slid past him and stuck her head in the door. Seeing him approaching her room had given her the sudden fear that she had left bras hanging from the bedpost or forgotten to pick up her underwear and dirty socks from the floor. But everything was as neat as always. “All right, the coast is clear.”

He smirked as if he knew very well what she had imagined. After a ridiculously short time, he had the first and second hinge pins out and handed the tools to her again. “Okay. You know the drill.”

She saw right away that she wouldn't have to fake it this time. The blasted pin only budged a couple of millimeters with each swing of the hammer. "You were explaining why your father was of the *alleged* variety."

"To be my real father, he would have had to be present for my conception. But he was gone on a three-month business trip to Rome during the pertinent time period. He was gone a lot during my childhood. I guess Mom got bored and had a little fling. Or a dozen, for all I know."

"Maybe you were born prematurely."

"Not at eight pounds, fourteen ounces, I wasn't. No, dear old *Dad* was gone the spring I was conceived, on loan to the European branch of SysCom in Rome."

"He worked for SysCom?"

"He was the CEO of SysCom."

"Even more impressive. But you said he died in Athens?"

"He was attending a technology conference there, one of SysCom's charitable deals for developing nations. Unfortunately, the conference was cut short, because a lot of people got sick with food poisoning, and a few, including my dad, died. My alleged dad, that is."

"I'm sorry, Brett." Once again his face turned wooden, so she looked away and went back to tapping half-heartedly with the hammer.

After a moment, he said, "Aunt Nelda doesn't know that I know, so I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention it to her. And I'd appreciate it even more if you'd get that pin out of the hinge this century."

"I'm trying. How did you find out?"

"Aunt Nelda told me, although she doesn't realize it. She made me a little scrapbook when I first came to live with her. She put things about the family in it so I'd be proud of my Garrison roots. Ironic really, because it was the scrapbook that revealed to me that I wasn't a Garrison at all. One of the things in it was a newspaper clipping about Dad's work in Rome. I saw the significance of the dates right off. It's that number and pattern recognition thing I have."

"At age eight?"

He laughed. "I was an old hand at it by then. In kindergarten I used to amuse my teacher Miss Nelson by reciting the multiplication and division tables I'd seen on the big kids' notebooks. And the license plates of all the cars in the school parking lot. And how many smiley face stickers Miss Nelson had awarded over the course of the year and to whom. When I pointed out that Jimmy Owens had only gotten three all month, she started giving him more. It was a relief, because I had determined that I should probably give him some of mine."

She laughed because she knew he was trying to turn the conversation away from painful memories. "That was nice of you."

"We'll never know if I would have done the noble deed or not."

“Merri?” It was John’s muffled voice coming from somewhere in her apartment. “Sorry I’m late. Aren’t you ready to go?”

“I’m nearly ready,” Merrideth called through the door. “Just hang on a second.”

“Who’s he?” Brett said.

“Who’s *he*?” John said from the other side of the door.

“Oh, great, Brett,” Merrideth whispered. “Now you’ve done it.” She put the chisel back to the hinge and banged on it with the hammer. The pin rose enough for her to get a grip on it, but she lacked the strength to pull it out.

The door handle rattled. “Are you all right, Merri?” John sounded intense.

“Turn loose of the door, John,” Merrideth said. “You’re going to make things worse.”

“Stand back, Merri, I’m coming in.”

“Don’t be a moron,” Brett called through the door.

“The moron is going to rip this door off if you don’t tell him what’s going on,” John said.

“I’m going to take it off myself if you give me a minute.”

“And why exactly would you want to do that?”

“He’s going to fix it, John.”

“Why didn’t he say so?” John said huffily.

Merrideth banged on the chisel again, and at last the pin came out. Brett lifted the door and carried it into the hall.

Then John was there, scowling first at Brett’s retreating back and then at her. “Don’t you know to have someone with you when you have repairmen here?” he growled softly. “Especially in your bedroom?”

“For crying out loud, John, he’s not a repairman.”

Brett set the door down next to the other one, then came back toward them wearing a matching scowl.

“John, this is Brett. He’s a colleague of mine at McKendree.”

“The physics guy?” John said, extending his hand.

“And yet so many people call me Dr. Garrison.”

Their handshake might have been the quickest one on record.

“Dr. Garrison,” Merrideth said with a heavy coat of sarcasm, “may I present John Roberts, Attorney at Law.”

“We should go, Merri,” John said.

“And where are you two going, Merri?” Brett said. “I think you owe me that much.”

“Do you really think so?” John said. It was one of his favorite Atticus Finch lines from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and he often trotted it out for legal opponents in the courtroom and anyone else he considered a fool.

Merrideth rolled her eyes. “We’re going to an—”

“I’m growing old waiting for you two, and something’s wrong with your phone, Merri.” Abby appeared in the hall, studying her cell phone.

“I forgot to charge it,” Merrideth said. “I’ll do it on the way.”

Abby stopped and looked up from her phone.

Merrideth expected her to scowl, too. With the two men standing one on either side of her, hackles raised like angry dogs, they must have made an interesting tableau. But instead, Abby smiled widely and came forward with her hand out. “Hi, I’m Abby.”

Brett politely lowered his hackles, put away his frown, and shook her hand. “Brett Garrison. Pleased to meet you.”

“He’s going to fix my doors.”

“Is that what they’re calling it these days?” John muttered testily.

Merrideth glared at him.

Abby ignored her husband’s stupid comment and continued smiling like she had the winning lottery ticket in her pocket. “You’re the professor at Merri’s college. Well, not *her* college, but you know what I mean. I’m Merri’s... *friend* hardly covers it. More like—”

“She’s the sister I never had,” Merrideth said. She pointed a thumb at John. “And that... that is my over-protective idiot big brother. Pretend big brother, mind you.”

“Oh. So he’s not your...” Brett smiled. “You’re Merri’s family. She went to your house for Thanksgiving and Christmas. You have two girls, Lauren and Natalie, right?”

“Yes,” Abby said. “We just dropped them off at my folks’ house for the day.”

“The day that is quickly passing,” John said.

“I’ve been hoping to meet you,” Brett said.

“Well, now you have,” John said.

“And I’ve been dying to meet you,” Abby said.

The gleam in her eyes indicated that she had gone into match-making mode again. It didn’t matter how many times Merrideth explained that she didn’t have time for dating while she was getting her career securely launched. Abby was dedicated to finding a man for her—any man, it sometimes seemed.

“You look nice, Merri. Doesn’t she look great, John?” Abby said it with a sidelong glance at Brett that made Merrideth want to wring her neck.

“Of course she does. Same as always,” John said, looking at his watch.

“Love your outfit. And great earrings, kiddo,” Abby said, tapping one with a nail. “What a clever design. They look like little silver rivers.”

“Brett’s Aunt Nelda made them for me.”

“Really? Brett, when Merri told me N/A Garrison actually lived in the next county I was astonished. I have two of her poetry books on my bookshelf.”

“I could take you to meet her sometime. She would be happy to autograph them for you and show you her latest jewelry designs. She’s been after me to bring Merrideth out again soon.”

“How sweet of her,” Abby said.

And devious. Nelda’s tactics to get Merrideth and Brett together were as creative as everything else she did. She had tried to manipulate the situation so that Merrideth would have to accompany Brett to her house in order to get the earrings. But Merrideth had no intention of being managed, no matter how nicely, and had circumvented her ploy. Now every time she wore the earrings she felt a pleasant sense of triumph.

“Okay, then,” John said. “We’d better go. My trailer is jutting out into the street more than I like.”

“Are you going camping?” Brett said.

“Not likely. It is January, you know,” John said.

Brett continued to ignore John’s bad humor. It spoke well of his forbearance, but curiosity fairly radiated off him. Merrideth decided to put him out of his misery. It seemed only fair, since he had told her his huge family secret.

“We’re going antique-hunting,” she said. “Although I don’t know why we need the trailer. These two couldn’t possibly cram another antique into their house.”

Abby laughed. “Which is why we’re going to be mostly looking for things you need to put in your apartment.”

“Really? I think it looks great as it is,” Brett said. “My condo, on the other hand, looks like a dentist’s waiting room.”

“You should come antique-hunting with us, Brett,” Abby said brightly. “Merri can help you find things to liven up your place. It will be fun.”

“I’m sure it would be fun,” Brett said, “but I don’t like to leave a job once I’ve started it.”

“Well, you can’t hang around in Merri’s apartment while she’s gone.” John said. After a pause, he added, “On second thought, maybe you *should* fix the doors while she’s gone.”

“He’s right, Merri.” Brett smiled when he said it, apparently unfazed by John’s verbal jabs at him. “This way, you won’t have to have me and my mess in your way, and you’ll come home to doors that actually shut when you want them to.”

“That sounds wonderful. But are you sure?”

“I’m