

*Hearts
Reunited*

by JEANE WATIER

Part I

Those miracles that they talk about every day—they're not miracles at all, they're just the natural order of things. That's the way it's supposed to be. You're supposed to thrive.

—Abraham-Hicks



Chapter 1

The others began to leave the graveside, but Stephanie stayed behind, wanting a moment alone to say her final goodbye to the dear woman who had so lovingly raised her.

As she knelt beside her mother's grave, the unsettling emptiness within her grew. More than ever before, Stephanie saw her life as a puzzle with too many missing pieces. She had no one to call family now besides her husband and children. Her father had passed away six years earlier, and she had no siblings, not even an aunt or an uncle—at least none that she knew of.

Again her mind entertained the possibility of finding her birth mother. Although the thought had become a familiar one over the years, out of respect for her parents, she'd never allowed it to develop into more than a persistent curiosity.

Having learned she was adopted at the age of ten, Stephanie was surprised by the news but not upset. She adored the two people she knew as Mom and Dad. At the time it had been impossible to imagine anyone else filling that role.

In fact it was a secret that Stephanie couldn't wait to share with her friends at school. She'd played it up, telling her classmates simply that she had a secret—one she was only going to share with a select few.

The response of her classmates had surprised and disillusioned her. Her closest friends had been intrigued and full of questions initially, granting her celebrity status in their grade-school world. But as the news spread, other kids began to tease her—so much so, the hurtful comments still held a bitter sting. One boy had told everyone she'd been such an ugly baby that her “real” parents didn't want her. Her friends rallied around her at the beginning, but as the months and years wore on, Stephanie became more and more of a loner.

On top of that were the differences between her and her parents that she began to notice and sometimes even resent. At twelve she hit a growth spurt and didn't stop until she was sixteen. Quickly overtaking her five-foot-two mother, Stephanie even gained two inches on her father.

At sixteen she dyed her naturally blond hair an ebony black in a subconscious attempt to blend with her Italian parents, but the response of her peers made her feel like even more of an outcast.

Talking with her parents about it hadn't been easy. When she inquired about her birth mother, they answered her questions briefly, but Stephanie couldn't ignore the pained look on her mother's face. When her mother excused herself and left the room, her father's disapproving look made it clear that she was never to ask about it again.

She'd suffered immense guilt for having hurt her mother. Not only that but the information she'd received was minimal—her birth mother was young, unmarried, Catholic, and Italian. Stephanie vowed that day never to distress her mother again by asking about the woman who'd given birth to her. It would have to remain a mystery.

Despite her resolve, the questions continued to mount. She found herself looking for people who looked like her whenever she was in a shopping mall or an airport. She'd daydream, wondering what it would be like to have sisters or brothers, wondering if she was like them.

Sometimes in her darkest moments, Stephanie questioned why the young woman had given her up, asking the image in her mind if it had been a difficult decision, or if she'd been glad to be rid of her. But most of the time the dominant image in her mind was one of a girl, sixteen or seventeen, crying. Stephanie was sure it was her birth mother, sure that she regretted her decision or that the decision had been made for her, against her will.

Overall Stephanie felt the decision—however it was made—was the right one. Despite what might have been, she was given the gift of devoted parents.

Married later in life and unable to conceive, they'd chosen instead to adopt, taking Stephanie into their home and their hearts. They'd given her all a child could want, including their love and attention, and she knew she would cherish them always. But now they were gone.

Stephanie reached forward and placed a single white rose on the casket before her. A tear rolled down her cheek as she stood up and blew a kiss one last time to her mother. Turning away, she walked back to the limousine where her husband, Graham, and their two children waited.

Graham put his arm around her as she sat in the limousine beside him. She appreciated the gesture. He was a man of few words, especially when it came to emotional issues, but she knew he cared.

"Mom," Tyler declared as they drove to the church where the women were putting on a lunch. "Now we don't have any relatives on your side of the family. Kyle says it's weird that we don't have any cousins. Why don't we?"

At nine Tyler had the childlike innocence to speak his mind. Ironically, it perfectly summed up what Stephanie had been thinking. She'd always encouraged her kids to ask questions, and since the issue had never come up, she decided it was time to deal with it.

Graham had a look of reservation on his face as if to say, "Are you sure you want to talk about this now?" She nodded. She had yet to tell her kids she'd been adopted, and it was long past due.

Stephanie began by stating what they already knew. "You do have cousins. Daddy has a sister in England. They have two boys."

"Yeah, but we never see them, and besides, they're old already."

"Old" to Tyler meant over twenty. The cousins were eighteen and twenty-one, but they may as well have been forty. The distance and age difference made them strangers to her young son.

Taking a deep breath, Stephanie grappled with how to approach the subject. She began by telling them how much Nana and Papa loved children and then started to explain their dilemma. "They really wanted to have a baby, but..."

“You were adopted?” Twelve-year-old Katie quickly jumped to the conclusion. Her words weren’t meant to hurt, but to Stephanie they still held the connotation of being “less than” when she heard them spoken aloud.

“Yes.”

“Does that mean Nana and Papa weren’t our real grandparents?”

Surprised at the direction Katie’s mind was going, Stephanie quickly explained that they were indeed real grandparents, that it took more than a blood connection to make someone family.

The children’s questions seemed endless after that. Graham helped her out by fielding some of them, and she was grateful for his support.

The questions were innocently asked, but some of them were difficult just the same. Tyler wanted to know why her mother didn’t want her and whether Nana and Papa had been required to pay for her. Katie began to speculate that maybe the young woman who’d given her up had gone on to become a famous movie star or that the father might be a gangster of some sort.

When Stephanie finally arrived home after the luncheon, she was exhausted. She was tired out by all the children’s questions, by all the smiling and handshaking, and particularly by the well-meaning friends of her mother’s who felt they had to point out how unfortunate it was that Stephanie had no family at all now.

Leaving Graham to tend to the kids, she went to lie down. She’d been tired a lot in recent weeks, blaming it on the stress of her mother’s illness and the demands of her job at the hospital, but inwardly she feared it could be more than that. She’d been meaning to ask her doctor about it. It was nearly time for her routine physical anyway, so she decided to schedule an appointment.

As tired as she was, sleep eluded her; there was too much on her mind. When Graham came into the bedroom later, she sat up and looked at him. “I’ve been thinking. . .” she said. “I want to make some changes in my life.”

He stared at her with a wary expression but said nothing.

“I’m going to take that job at the medical building.” Her friend Betty worked there and had been encouraging Stephanie to join her. She was more than qualified. In truth, it would be a step down, but something about it appealed to her. It would mean flexible daytime hours, and she could work less than a full workweek if she wanted.

“I think that’s a good idea.” Graham sat down on the bed beside her. “You’ve been pushing yourself too hard lately. You’re wearing yourself out.”

“There’s something else I’ve been thinking about.” Stephanie hesitated a little, suddenly not sure whether her husband would be as supportive about her next decision. “I want to see what I can find out about my birth parents.”

“Steph,” he cautioned. “I know this has been a difficult few weeks for you. You’ve just lost your mother. I can only imagine how hard that must be, but think this through a bit. Don’t rush into something you might regret.”

Stephanie almost laughed. She was hardly rushing into it. Barely a day had gone by that she hadn't wondered about it since she was ten. But simply satisfying her curiosity was not the basis for her decision; there was a more important reason.

"Graham, I want to be able to fill in the blanks. I want to find out about my medical history. If I could learn that, I think it would be enough. I owe our kids that much. What if they're in line for some hereditary disease?"

It was something she'd given much thought to over the years, even questioning the decision to have children when her medical history was an unknown. She wondered and even worried what might be lurking around the corner for her as well.

"How would you find that out—without actually contacting them?"

"Well..." Stephanie began to feel guilty. She hadn't mentioned it to Graham, but she had some numbers to call. "I've thought about this for a while now. I've even done some research. There are quite a few agencies that specialize in this sort of thing. They track down the information and tell you as much or as little as you want to know. They do all the legwork and make all the calls. There wouldn't be any direct communication..." She hesitated, feeling strange saying the words aloud for the first time. "Unless both parties were in agreement."

"How long have you been planning this?" he asked, sounding annoyed. "And why now on the day of your mother's funeral do you bring it up?"

He was obviously offended that she'd kept something so important from him. Not wanting to annoy him further, she stroked his arm in an attempt to soothe his ruffled feathers.

"Graham, these are questions I've had since I was a child. I asked mom about it once, and it hurt her so much I never brought it up again. But I didn't stop thinking about it or wondering about that missing part of my life.

"I couldn't do anything while Mom was alive. I'd have felt too guilty. But she's gone now.

"Besides..." Stephanie knew she shouldn't have to justify her actions, but she added, "All I want to do is find some answers. I'm not looking for a mother to replace her if that's what you're thinking. No one could ever take her place. She was my mother, and she'll always hold that place in my heart."

Graham seemed satisfied with her response and left the bedroom. Afterward, as Stephanie began to contemplate the plethora of possibilities before her, she felt a ripple of excitement.

Making such life-changing decisions was easier than she had expected. She'd been grappling for months with the idea of calling one of the agencies, but the thought of what her mother would say always kept her from picking up the phone. She'd been contemplating changing jobs for a while too. Now that she'd made the decisions, she was eager to act on them. She only regretted having to wait until morning to make the calls.

"I'm so glad you decided to do this," Betty exclaimed over drinks several days later.

The job at the medical center was Stephanie's whenever she was ready to start. She'd dropped off her resumé, but it was merely a formality. Betty's cousin, Dr. Loewe, had his practice in the

medical center. He was also part owner of the building and on the board of directors for the center itself.

“That’s not the only thing,” Stephanie informed her friend. “I called an agency that specializes in helping adoptees. I’m going to have them track down my birth parents.”

“Oh my God! You’re really making changes,” Betty laughed. She had a vivacious personality as well as a positive outlook on life that Stephanie admired. They’d been friends for years and had worked together before. Betty had some rather strange ideas, in Stephanie’s opinion. She was spiritual, although not in the traditional sense, and was always making reference to books she’d read. Her appetite for the spiritual, metaphysical, and just plain weird seemed to be insatiable. But for all her quiriness, there was something refreshing about her.

“How do they go about it,” Betty inquired, suddenly serious. “You don’t have much information for them to go on, do you?”

“I told them all I know,” Stephanie replied. “You’re right; it isn’t much. Obviously the more they have to start with the easier it is and the quicker it goes. But the woman did mention they’d had success in other cases with nothing more than the basic info I gave them.”

“That sounds hopeful,” Betty encouraged. “So what happens when you find them? Do you call them up and tell them you’re their long-lost daughter? *That* could be rather awkward.”

“The agency is government funded, so they have strict guidelines to follow. Neither party receives any details unless both are in agreement. The agency makes the initial contact, and if my birth mother or father are interested in communicating with me, I receive their contact information.

“If not, all I get is what they call non-identifying information. It could include anything from medical data to a physical description, how many kids they have, what their hobbies are—that sort of thing. The agency asks them a standard list of questions; they’re free to give out as much or little information as they choose.”

“Did they give you any indication of how long it would take?”

“It could take months, maybe even years,” Stephanie shrugged. “Each case is different.”

“I know a woman who does psychic readings,” Betty offered. “She might be able to shed some light on this, help prepare you for whatever the outcome might be. She’s very accurate.”

Uncomfortable with the idea of psychics and mediums, Stephanie tried to think of a polite way to refuse her friend’s offer. She didn’t understand the power behind such phenomena. Even though she’d formed her own convictions and no longer attended church, something in her catholic upbringing had instilled in her the unshakeable belief that those things were just plain wrong.

“Thanks anyway, but I think I’d rather just wait and find out the regular way.”

“Okay,” Betty laughed. “No pressure.”

Stephanie was relieved at having sidestepped the controversial topic. She also appreciated her friend’s easygoing manner. Despite Betty’s strange ideas, she was on a very deliberate quest to find answers in life, yet she respected others’ beliefs and honored their journey, whatever that might be.

“I’m so glad we’ll be working together again,” Betty declared, changing the subject. “Have you given your notice at the hospital yet?”

“No, but I’ll do that right away. Then I think I’ll take a week or two off. I’ve been feeling a bit run down lately; I probably just need a rest. Besides, I have to sort through all Mom’s things and get her house ready to sell.”

“That doesn’t sound like resting to me. Are you sure you understand the meaning of the word?”

“Sometimes a change is as good as a rest,” Stephanie smiled as she repeated one of her mom’s favorite sayings. “I’m going to take my time with her things; there’s no rush. Her house was always neat as a pin. She was very organized. Knowing her, everything will already be sorted and labeled.”

“Well, that’s not too bad then. Let me know if you need any help.”

Stephanie sincerely appreciated the offer, but going through her mother’s possessions was a very personal thing. It could be emotional too. It was another form of closure.

Closure. The word had a cold sense of finality to it. She didn’t know whether she felt ready to close the door to that part of her life, especially with so much else being an unknown.

As she pondered the idea, she was reminded of another saying her mom often used: “Whenever God closes a door, He opens a window.” *Are windows about to open in my life?* The simple question caused her to examine her beliefs about God and the control he had, or didn’t have, over people’s lives. For some reason the idea of an all-knowing, all-powerful God scared Stephanie rather than comforted her.

She wanted to believe she had some control over what path her life took rather than leaving it in the hands of a Being whose power was so widely disputed and even denied.

It was something she’d contemplated often in her youth as she searched for meaning and direction, but as an adult she’d allowed the busyness of life to take precedence over her philosophical inquiries.

As the questions emerged again, she found herself wondering what Betty would have to say on the subject. Part of her felt almost compelled to bring it up next time they talked; another part was leery of what her friend might say.

I’m not searching the way Betty is, Stephanie argued. I’m content in my life. My belief system serves me. I may not have all the answers, but I’m happy, and I have everything I need.

...except family.

As the two simple words lodged themselves in her mind, for the first time Stephanie wondered whether she might be deceiving herself.

Is part of me looking for more than just information? Am I subconsciously wanting a connection, a relationship? What if I do meet my birth parents and they aren’t the kind of people I’m comfortable with? What if I open this door and don’t like what’s on the other side?

As she neared her home, she attempted to get her thoughts under control. *A lot has just happened in my life, and now I’m making even more changes. But there’s no reason to think the worst. Calling the agency is just the first step, she reminded herself. I’m in control. I’m seeking information, that’s all. I get to decide what, if anything, I do with it.*



Chapter 2

Dan took the elevator down to the parking level and clicked the button on the remote start as he walked to his car. After sliding into the leather seat that was already starting to heat up, he sat a moment, allowing the seat to adjust automatically.

Pulling out of the underground garage, he waved at Jerry, the attendant, then flicked on the windshield wipers as he noticed the snow falling on the street outside. The traffic was heavy, but Dan wasn't in a hurry. He had no plans for the evening—it was a typical Friday, and he was headed home after work as usual.

His housekeeper had his dinner waiting for him in the warming drawer. As he sat down to a meal of chicken stew and dumplings, he smiled, breathing in the mouthwatering aroma. It was one of his favorite meals. Mrs. Davis made the best cornmeal dumplings he'd ever tasted.

After dinner, Dan went into the living room and poured himself a brandy. He sat down to relax in his large leather recliner and picked up the book he was currently reading. It was a routine he'd become accustomed to.

His regimen all but excluded social outings; consequently he'd lost touch with many of his old friends. He had his business acquaintances and of course his sons, but they were busy with their own lives. And that particular day more than ever, Dan wanted to get lost in the monotony of routine. That day marked five years since his wife's death.

He tried to concentrate on what he was reading, but he kept thinking about his life. It certainly wasn't the life he had planned. He'd dreamed of retiring and growing old together with his wife, but cancer had taken Laurie, and now when he considered retirement, he realized it was something he wanted to postpone as long as possible.

Financially, he was set. He didn't need to work. But as he thought about empty days blending endlessly into one another, he shuddered. He felt old some days, but he was only fifty-three, and the prospect of being alone for twenty or thirty more years seemed unbearable.

He'd dated a few times in the past year. A colleague had introduced him to a friend of hers, and they'd gone out two or three times. But he couldn't see himself spending the rest of his life with her, so he decided not to lead her on.

His sons encouraged him to date. His eldest had introduced him to a single relative of his new wife's at the wedding with the assurance that she would be perfect for him. The "perfect" woman had turned out to be shallow and a little too interested in how much money he made and what kind of car he drove.

But it was his mother who gave him the most grief when it came to his love life or lack of it. She meant well, but at seventy-five she had little else to occupy her time than the welfare of her only son. On Sundays he took her out for dinner, and more than once she had friends with their single daughters or nieces—who just happened to be at the same restaurant—join them for their meal.

Dan put the unpleasant thoughts out of his mind and went back to his reading. He was a practical man and had come to believe that everything worked out in its own time. His life experience had given him enough evidence to support that belief.

He had become an avid reader in recent years. He was philosophical in what he now jokingly referred to as his old age. Curious about God and religions, he wanted answers to the questions that were constantly on his mind—such as who he was and how he fit into the bigger scheme of things, how the Universe worked, and whether there really was a power or presence behind the seemingly random sequence of events called life.

There were many theories out there, some resonating with him more than others. The book he was currently reading talked about connecting with a greater power to co-create life's circumstances. The idea intrigued him; he wanted to believe that he could be in control of his life, but he felt there were flaws in the theory. It didn't make sense to him that so many would live their lives in such a haphazard way if such a power truly existed.

As he continued to read, however, he became more and more invested. There was something to it. Something deep within told him it was, at least in part, the answer to his questions.

Walking into her mother's house, Stephanie was instantly greeted by the familiar smell. Precious memories of the dear woman surrounded her, and she noticed a twinge of guilt as she thought of her plans to locate her birth parents. *Will she know what I'm doing? Will she approve?* Stephanie hoped so.

Looking around she wondered where to begin. As she'd told Betty, her mother was a very organized woman. In the kitchen cabinets, handwritten labels were neatly taped on matching plastic containers. The dry goods could now be taken home or disposed of. The perishables had already been used up or given away, as her mom had been in the hospital several weeks before she passed away.

Stephanie walked down the hallway to the bedroom that had once been her parents. As she looked through the closet, she noticed that her mother had pinned labels on a good portion of her clothes with the words "Christian Woman's Charity" neatly printed on them. The rest could go there now, too.

The only item of clothing Stephanie wanted to keep—for sentimental reasons rather than practical ones—was a coat of her mother's. It had been a gift from her father the year before he died. Her mom had loved the suede jacket with its fox fur collar but had only worn it on very special occasions. It was a beautiful garment in like-new condition, and Stephanie intended to have it made over to fit her.

Next she glanced in the bedroom that had been hers growing up and felt a wave of appreciation for the way her mother had kept it the same. Stephanie smiled at the memories held within those walls.

Finally she entered the spare bedroom. It was the room her father had used as an office, and his desk still occupied the space under the window. Sitting down on the intricately carved wooden chair with its padded leather seat, she opened each drawer one at a time and noticed that her mother had been through it also with her labels.

As she pulled open the heavy bottom drawer, she discovered a manila envelope lying on top of the other items. On the front, in her mother's handwriting, was Stephanie's full name. Picking it up she studied it for a few seconds before carefully inserting a letter opener from the desktop. Her entire body tensed as she tried to anticipate what the contents might be.

Her mom had written letters to her over the years when speaking face to face would have been uncomfortable for one or both of them. She'd even apologized for not being brave enough to come to her in person but explained that she could get her thoughts out better on paper.

As the contents were revealed, there was, just as Stephanie had suspected, a handwritten letter from her mother. Before reading it she set it aside to see what other papers accompanied it.

Stephanie's breath caught in her throat as she read the faded letterhead of the document in her hands. It was from St. Margaret's Home for Unwed Mothers.

Her hands were shaking as she noted that the date of birth listed was her own. The time of birth as well as the recorded weight concurred with the details she knew from her own baby album. The typing was faded, so she took her time, studying the page slowly and carefully. Not wanting to miss a single detail, she leaned forward and switched on the lamp in front of her.

The next paper was a legal document. Before reading the lengthy text, she glanced at the bottom of the page. Both her parents' signatures appeared along with another one in small, tight handwriting.

The block of type preceding the unknown name was a declaration stating that the person signing below gave up any and all rights to the baby that had been born to her.

Stephanie sat back in the chair and stared at the signature, scarcely able to believe it. After all the years of wondering and speculating, she held in her hand the name of the woman who had given birth to her.

As Dan pondered the things he was reading, more questions began to surface. *Is it possible to have control over the events of my life? Is there a power orchestrating things, and if so, can I interact with it?*

Doubts were still present, but now there was something pulling at him. It was a drive, an intense determination to learn more—the likes of which he hadn't felt in a long time.

With a satisfying sense of purpose not to mention curiosity as his motivation, Dan began to comb the internet for answers. In his search he repeatedly came upon a phrase that was new to him. It was "Law of Attraction."

There were countless references to it, even sites dedicated specifically to the subject. Some were making spectacular claims; many were promoting their own books and seminars. It was obviously a very popular topic.

How am I to weed through all the bogus sites? He frowned as he scrolled down the seemingly endless list—*those using the term just to get on the bandwagon.*

After making a list of authors who wrote about or referred to the term, he decided to find out what he could about them. Some of the names he saw there were ones he'd read in the past. A few, he discovered, had been teaching the subject for many years already.

The Law of Attraction was being defined as a Universal law that states, "What you think about expands." The basic premise was that a person's thoughts create the reality they experience. There were examples of how the principle worked and stories of people who had used it successfully to change the circumstances in their lives. One of the sites even offered a step-by-step process that, if followed, assured the reader of consistent results.

Dan still had reservations. It sounded too good to be true. He wasn't looking for a "quick fix," a way to attract money or achieve success. What he wanted more than anything was to understand how things worked, what power existed in the Universe, and what part he played in the scheme of things.

That being said, there was one thing Dan would change if he could. He wanted someone to share his life with—someone with the same interests who was at a similar place in their life, asking the same kinds of questions. He wanted love. He wanted companionship and commitment. But he didn't want someone with a lot of baggage or emotional issues. He had almost given up hope that there was anyone out there who fit that description.

Stephanie continued to stare at the papers, astonished by what she was holding. Her parents obviously had the information her whole life—a fact that didn't trouble her. Rather than resenting them for not giving it to her sooner, she understood their concern. She could imagine how afraid her parents must have been to lose their only child.

Taking a closer look at the papers containing her birth information, she noticed the words *Child's name at birth*. The writing was smudged, making part of it illegible, but the name she saw there was definitely not Stephanie. It looked like Katherine or Kathleen—a name apparently given to her by her birth mother.

With the thought that her birth mother had cared enough to give her a name, came the familiar image of the young woman alone and crying. Instinctively, Stephanie knew that giving up her baby had been painful for her.

Maybe over time she came to realize it was for the best, Stephanie speculated. *But I wonder what she'll think now, getting a call out of the blue informing her that her long-lost child is seeking information.*

She had viewed the situation from her own vantage point, but for the first time Stephanie began to imagine it from the perspective of the woman who, for whatever reason, had chosen to give her up.

All at once, more questions arose. *What will this intrusion into her current life do to her? How will it affect her? Will the people closest to her now even know what happened thirty-five years ago?* Stephanie shook her head in silent protest; it was too much to think about. All the speculation was pointless anyway. She'd made the decision, and she wanted—now more than ever—to see it through.

Sure that she'd gleaned all the information she could from the documents, she turned back to the handwritten letter on the desktop. Tears streamed down Stephanie's face as she read her mother's final words.

The letter began with a humble apology for withholding the information. It continued with words of appreciation for the privilege of having her as their daughter. It ended with her mother's heartfelt wish that Stephanie be happy—and if that meant searching for her birth parents, the hope that it would bring her not only joy but also the answers to the questions she had been asking all her life.

Dropping the letter in her lap, Stephanie wept uncontrollably. Powerful emotions engulfed her, and it was a long while before she could even begin to compose herself. She missed her mother, but more than anything she longed to thank her in person for the selfless gift.

Stephanie could only hope that somehow her mom knew just how thankful she was. She wanted her to know, too, that she understood her reasons for waiting so long.

Wiping the tears from her face, Stephanie took a deep breath before she stood up. With the letters in hand, she walked through her mother's house and out the front door.

As she did, she began to feel incredible relief, realizing that the burden of guilt she'd carried for so long had lifted. Not only did she possess the information that would help her locate her birth parents, she had her mother's blessing as well.