

Excerpt from *Wander Home* by Karen A. Wyle

This book is set in an afterlife: what sort of afterlife, the reader may decide.

Chapter One

Cassidy stood tall and watched the wave approaching. Fifteen was a good age for confronting the ocean. That morning she had been five years old, playing happily in her sandbox; from sand to beach, from beach to ocean waves, seemed a natural progression.

The wave loomed above her, glowing turquoise and green. She dove under the crest, through the surging water, and popped up behind the swell, bobbing in the follower waves. The water held her and rocked her; over the hiss and roar of the waves, she could hear the distant squawk of seagulls. All around was the smell of seaweed and salt and sunshine.

Once, her mother had held her, carried her, rocked her, surrounded her with love and safety. She had no idea how long it had been, but she remembered. Remembering, she let herself slip younger as she floated on the swells. But larger waves were coming, so she grew again, six, ten, sixteen; then caught a wave and rode it into shore.

Her grandparents and her great-grandmother were waiting for her. Great-Grandma was young today, slim and blonde and straight, standing like a dancer just before the music starts. Grandma Sarah and Grandpa Jack had chosen to be older, gray-haired, with the comfortable look of a couple who for years have weathered each other's moods and followed each other's thoughts.

Cassidy ran up the beach toward them. She slipped to eight years old as she reached them, so Grandpa Jack could pick her up and toss her in the air. The sun flashed in her eyes as she flew up, and again as she fell back toward his hands. He set her down again and flopped onto the sand, patting the space next to him. She sat, folding her legs tailor fashion; Great-Grandma flowed gracefully down to sit on her other side. Only Grandma Sarah remained standing, younger now, her hair in a long red braid.

Grandpa Jack and Great-Grandma both put their arms around her. Cassidy looked at Grandpa Jack. He was blinking as if he had something in both his eyes. She swiveled around toward Great-Grandma; Great-Grandma nodded toward Grandma Sarah.

Cassidy threw her head back, looking up at Grandma Sarah and squinting in the sun. Grandma Sarah squatted down in front of her. "Cassie, love, we have some news for you. Good, important news."

The seabirds were calling as if they wanted to be first with the message, whatever it was. Grandma Sarah leaned forward to kneel in the sand, reached out and took Cassidy's hands.

"It's your mother, sweetheart. She's coming. She'll be here soon. We'll all be seeing her again."

Cassidy felt herself getting smaller, small. She was two years old. She scrambled to her feet. "Mommy!" Her own shrill voice frightened her, and she called even louder, twisting from side to side, searching the beach and the water. "Mommy! MOMMY!"

Great-Grandma had slipped old, white hair shining in the sunlight, her cheeks pink, soft wrinkles in her face, smelling of flour. She pulled Cassidy close, crooning, "Hush, hush. It's all

right, baby. Shhhh." Cassidy burrowed against her and breathed the comforting scent. She thought she might feel better if she got big again, but nothing happened.

She heard Grandpa Jack speak. "Mama, Sarah, let's go somewhere cozier." Then the sun, the waves, the seabirds were all gone, and they were in Great-Grandma's living room. She was snuggled up next to Great-Grandma on the big shabby couch. There were shortbread cookies on the coffee table. Grandma Sarah sat on Grandpa Jack's lap in the big armchair, Grandpa Jack playing with Grandma Sarah's hair.

"Cassidy, honey, it's time to be a big girl. We have more to talk about." Great-Grandma stroked her cheek, then kissed it.

Cassidy squeezed her eyes tight. "I'm trying. It's hard. Why is it hard?"

Grandpa Jack spoke. "Well, baby, you were just this age when your mama left. You're remembering it so hard, right now, that you're maybe a little stuck. Relax, honey, and know that everything's all right. It'll come."

Cassidy took a deep breath, and another, and another. Great-Grandma scootched away to give her room. Cassidy opened her eyes. She was thirteen years old. She reached for a cookie.

"There, that's better, isn't it?" Great-Grandma picked out a cookie for herself and took a hearty bite.

"When will she be here? When can I see her?"

Grandma Sarah brought Cassidy a glass of milk, then sat back down on Grandpa Jack's lap. "Honey, those are two different questions. She'll be here very soon, and you can see her just a little while after that. It's going to be —"

"Why can't I see her *right away*?" She didn't want to yell at Grandma Sarah, but she felt like yelling. It was always harder to be patient at thirteen. She slipped to twenty, but it felt wrong, too big, too grown up for a little girl missing her mother. She slid back to ten.

"Cassie, you were so young when you got here, only six years old. You weren't set in your ways yet — you expected to learn new things every day, to have adventures and surprises. Coming here was just another and bigger adventure. But it's different for older people. It's more of a shock. We think it'd be best if Great-Grandma welcomes her first, and explains things."

"How long will that take?" Cassidy swallowed tears and washed them away with a gulp of milk.

Great-Grandma moved back over and hugged her. "Not as long as it will feel to you. I'll bring her to see you as soon as I can."

Eleanor felt very strange. Where was she? The pain that had seized and crushed her heart had vanished. She had been in an ambulance; but wherever she was now, the space was not in motion, and everything was quiet. And she could breathe again, freely and easily — no longer gasping for air, but breathing in and out as she had done for twenty-nine years.

And the room around her kept changing. One moment it looked like a Red Cross donor center, one of the many at which she had given blood from time to time. Then the cot became a bed in a motel room: a room with orange and brown plaid curtains, a tan shag carpet, a small television, a double bed and one hard chair. She had been in that room just once, years ago, and had never wanted to see it again. And now appeared a room from long ago, with pale blue walls and a white window shade, white wooden furniture, a small and overflowing bookshelf; and

Eleanor found herself sitting up in a single bed with a wooden bedstead, feather pillows, and a lavender quilt.

Grandma's house! Whenever she spent the night at Grandma's, it had been in this room. A room in a house that someone had bought and torn down, years ago, to put up a big modern showpiece, a blue and copper box with patios instead of grass.

Something lay lightly on her shoulder. It was her hair, long again, its chestnut color restored. And her shoulder and arm were curved, cushioned — no longer gaunt from months of neglecting her needs.

Eleanor felt a sudden urgency to get out of bed, to get up and go downstairs while this was still Grandma's house, before she found herself back in the horrible motel room. She pushed back the quilt and stood up, looking around wildly; then ran to the door, threw it open and stood, breathing hard, in the hall near the worn wooden stairs. She waited to stop trembling before walking slowly to the stairs and down to the lower floor. She could hear someone moving around downstairs, in the kitchen, opening and closing cupboards or drawers.

At the foot of the stairs, she stopped, clutching the banister. For four years she had stayed away, in hotel after friend's couch after cheap apartment, assuming that home and family would always be there waiting for her. And then, after the car crash, when it was too late and they were gone, she had longed so desperately and hopelessly to see them all again — Cassidy most of all, of course, but also Mom and Dad and Grandma. She had wanted so much to tell them how she loved them, to apologize, to try to explain. Now, in this impossible place, she might have that forfeited chance — and she had no more idea than ever what to say.

The stairs ended in the front hallway. The kitchen was toward the back, past the living room. Eleanor walked with small hesitant steps into the living room, stopping to touch the armchair, the couch, the coffee table. There was the framed poster from Grandma's ballet company, advertising one of their galas. Under the poster, on the mantelpiece, stood the row of photographs.

Dad and his brother, camping in their back yard, lying in the blue tent with their heads sticking out of the flap and grins on their grimy faces. Mom and Dad on their wedding day, with Mom in her gown and Dad in his tuxedo, both in climbing harnesses, hanging from a cliff wall somewhere in Argentina. Grandma and Grandpa on their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Then a much older photo of a much younger couple: Amanda and Stan, no one's grandparents yet, in black and white, standing near an old-fashioned car.

And then the picture that made her turn away, turn back, and walk closer, reaching out: Eleanor, on the living room couch, holding tiny baby Cassidy, just two weeks old.

"Is that you, dear?"

Eleanor froze in place. She forced herself to speak. "G-Grandma?"

"In the kitchen, Nory. Come on. It's all right."

Eleanor headed on into the kitchen. There sat her grandmother, looking just the same — soft white hair, soft wrinkled face, flowered apron, thin rounded shoulders. Eleanor stumbled forward as Grandma got up from her chair. They stood for a moment, face to face, Eleanor speechless, Grandma seeming to feel no need for speech.

Eleanor found her voice. "Grandma. I'm so sorry. Oh, God, I'm sorry." She started to cry.

Grandma opened her arms. "Oh, Nory. We'll talk about that later. Come here and hug me just as hard as you can! and then sit down. I've made some good strong coffee. Pour yourself a cup. I've got things to tell you."