

# **Place of Cool Waters**

by Ndirangu Githaiga

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For Magda

*“A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for  
adversity.”* PROVERBS 17:17

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## Prologue

*Minneapolis, Minnesota, November 1992*

Even in the fog of inebriation, Rita thought there was something odd going on in the shadows, close to the burned-out streetlight that the city was supposed to have fixed two weeks ago. She peered keenly into the darkness where the movement was.

“Hey! Over there! Look!” she whispered sharply to Donnie.

Donnie mumbled something incoherent as he stretched out drunkenly in the recess of the shop doorway, sheltered from the intermittent icy wind gusts that were blowing down the narrow street.

“Wake up, Donnie! There’s something going on over there!” Rita called urgently, tapping him several times, each time a bit harder than the last one.

“What now!” he roared irritably, scrambling to sit up. Before he could turn in the direction she was pointing, she let out a muffled gasp, which was followed seconds later by a soft splash from the river, about seventy feet below the bridge.

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“Oh my God, Donnie, somebody jumped! They jumped off the bridge!” she shrieked, struggling to get to her feet and tottering unsteadily toward where it had happened. “Come on, let’s go! Quick!”

Panting heavily as she got to the bridge, she peered over the concrete railing. The river below was pitch black, glistening restlessly as its surging currents rippled southward under the faint glow of the streetlamps and crescent moon.

Donnie caught up with her about a minute later, hobbling strenuously as he struggled to ignore the relentless throbbing in his gouty right foot.

“What . . . where? Down there?”

Rita turned toward him, letting out an irritated sigh.

“You need to stop smoking those damn cigarettes, Donnie. See how long it took you to get here? Half a day! If you’d gotten up and started moving the minute I told you, we might have been able to catch up with that person. Well, it’s too late now—they’re gone.”

Donnie leaned over the railing, staring into the river. “What an awful way to die—cold and wet,” he muttered.

Rita didn’t answer. She was thinking about the two other times they’d seen it happen. The most recent time—about a year before—was a warm summer night, about eight-thirty, so not completely dark yet. When she saw the man start to climb over the railing, she called out to him and started

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walking briskly in his direction. He was young, probably in his early twenties, with eyes that were empty and distant when he turned briefly to the sound of her voice—lifeless eyes, as if he'd died already. As she approached him, he took a quick leap and disappeared from view. The river was at least fifty yards wide at its narrowest point—as its waters thundered past, it was clear there would be no salvation unless the person who jumped in happened to be a very strong swimmer with an even stronger desire to live, or, perchance, there happened to be someone on a boat close by at the very moment it happened.

“What’s that over there?” Donnie asked gruffly, interrupting Rita’s thoughts. He was pointing to a small cardboard box on the ground, a few feet from where they stood.

Rita squinted. “Hmm . . . probably just some old clothes and things. Let’s take a look.”

They shuffled toward the box. As Donnie started bending forward to inspect it, he stopped abruptly, grabbing the lower part of his spine.

“Argh! My damn back,” he growled.

“I’ll get it, Donnie. You need to be careful with your back,” said Rita as she knelt down and quickly separated the lengthwise flaps at the top of the cardboard box that had been held down by a small rock.

“Oh my God, there’s a baby in here!”

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Donnie edged forward cautiously, the sharp odor of bourbon on his breath.

“Is it alive?”

Rita stretched out her thin, bony index finger and touched the baby’s face. In the dim glow of the streetlights, she thought she saw a grimace.

“It’s warm. I’m gonna move it over there, under that streetlight, so we can see better.”

In the light, they studied the sleeping baby, who didn’t rouse, even with the sharp wintry air that had penetrated the box and the sound of perplexed voices above it.

“Should we take it to the police?”

“I ain’t going to no police!” bellowed Donnie grumpily, shaking his head. “They’re gonna think we stole it. I’ve already been locked up enough times for stuff I didn’t do.”

“Calm down, calm down. . . . That was just a suggestion.”

Silence followed as Rita mused quietly to herself, her lips moving wordlessly as she ran through options in her mind. Donnie sighed and leaned impatiently against the concrete railing, shuddering involuntarily as a chilly blast of wind blew over the bridge.

“Let’s get off this damn bridge. It’s too cold and windy over here. My fingers are starting to freeze.”

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“What are we gonna do with this baby, Donnie?” asked Rita, sounding mildly irritated.

“Why is it our problem?” erupted Donnie. “How come this is our problem when we had nothing to do with it in the first place?”

Rita stared coldly at him and said nothing. He sighed wearily and, after hesitating briefly, cleared his throat.

“Er . . . let’s take it to Saint Luke’s Hospital and leave it near the emergency room where someone can find it. There’s always people there, so someone will see it and figure out what to do with it.”

She frowned for a moment, then her face lit up. “You know what, Donnie? That’s a great idea. I hadn’t thought of that. Most hospitals have a place where you can take babies and leave them with no questions asked. I wish the person that left this gal or fella here had thought of it themselves instead of leaving them out in the open in the middle of winter. Maybe it was that person that jumped—they probably weren’t thinking clearly.”

The pair started down the road, with Rita carrying the cardboard box and Donnie shuffling with a limp, grunting slightly from the exertion.

“Should we tell someone about the person that jumped? It might help them find the baby’s family—”

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“That ain’t none of our business! Last time we poked our nose in somebody else’s business, I ended up in jail. And the guy I was trying to help when I called the police turned on me and said he thought I was the one who tried to mug him. Remember? One week in jail for something I had nothing to do with. And if they hadn’t found the guy who did it, they’d have kept me in there a whole lot longer. No way, Rita. This ain’t none of our business. We’re just gonna drop off the baby and walk away.”

“You’re right, Donnie. It’s none of our business. We’ll just drop off the baby and walk away.”

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## Part One

## Chapter One

*Clarksville, Washington, July 1999*

Jude Wilson and his dad loved camping. For as long as he could remember, as soon as springtime rolled around, they loaded up the trunk of their 1990 Subaru Forester every weekend and went camping, usually to campgrounds in and around the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest. By the time it got cold again in the late fall, they'd usually managed to make about ten such excursions. Like the beguiling melody of an ice-cream truck, the experience never got tedious with repetition, at least not to Jude's recollection. And anyone who knew Scoutmaster Tom Wilson—even on a superficial level—knew that he lived for the outdoors, never seeming satisfied with the bland comforts of suburban living.

Doris Wilson never joined her husband and son on their weekend getaways. A reticent, heavily built woman who rarely smiled, she remained irredeemably perplexed as to why anyone would choose to leave the solace of their house to go and sleep in the forest. It was an absurdity she was willing to tolerate as long as she wasn't expected to participate, and Tom had long given up trying to persuade her to give it a try. The serene look

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on her face when she sat down on Friday night in her favorite chair after the other two left suggested that she probably relished having the quiet house all to herself for the weekend.

Besides hiking, fishing, and swimming in a creek when it was warm enough, Tom and Jude spent a lot of time playing tracking games. These often started at the campground, with Tom heading off and leaving Jude, who then—after about fifteen minutes—would start scouring the vicinity for Boy Scout signs or symbols, usually well hidden, that directed him as to what path to take. The signs consisted of coded arrangements of twigs, grass, or rocks, directing whoever was lucky enough to spot them to either go straight, turn right, turn left, turn back, et cetera and were designed to blend in imperceptibly with their environment, easily overlooked if someone wasn't paying attention. Because each sign led to the next, missing one clue meant that a person could end up wandering off track and getting lost, as happened to Jude more than a few times when he was younger. Over the years, he developed a system of leaving his own signs, more easily noticeable, to guide him back if he missed the way. Having played this game several times with his father, he knew that Mr. Wilson tended to place most of the signs in the dirt or on the grass—rather than on a tree or bush—and mostly on the right side of the path. Tom made an effort to use different materials each time, whenever possible, alternating twigs,

knotted blades of grass, and pebbles. He was a large man who usually dragged his right foot, so Jude had learned—even by the age of nine—to look for additional clues in the form of crushed twigs or telltale scuff marks in the dirt.

“What an observant boy you’ve become,” Mr. Wilson exclaimed frequently, unable to hide his glee. “It’s getting harder and harder to hide from you for too long.” Jude would glow with pleasure at hearing the compliment for the umpteenth time.

Jude was adopted. Adoption wasn’t something that Tom and Doris had ever discussed in their twenty or so years of marriage, until just a year or two before it happened. Of the two of them, Tom was flightier and more prone to making hasty decisions without fully pondering the consequences. Fortunately, however, he handled failure with a self-deprecating equanimity, which allowed him to bounce back unscathed from one half-witted endeavor to the next. Doris, on the other hand, was a stoic, ruminative individual with devout Lutheran sensibilities, who tended to think long and hard about things. It was, therefore, a complete surprise to her husband when she tossed a folded newsletter in front of him one Saturday evening as he sat at the kitchen table and, without any preamble, announced, “I think we should adopt a child.”

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He glanced up with a befuddled look on his face as he hastily chewed up the large piece of steak in his mouth. “Adopt a child?” he echoed incredulously.

“Yes, Tom. There are many children who need a home, and I don’t think we should be sitting idly on the sidelines expecting other people to do something about it.”

That was her entire argument—no embellishment or self-absorbed fetishization and no hint of this having been the result of unsuccessful attempts to have a child in the early years of their marriage. No, it was simple—there were children who needed a home, and they were in a position to do something about it.

“This is a respectable organization,” she continued, turning the pages of the newsletter she had placed in front of him. It was from a Lutheran adoption agency based in Minneapolis. As he peered through the pages—feeling overwhelmed and discombobulated—he struggled to come up with an appropriate reply.

“So what do you think?” she asked, struggling to conceal her impatience.

“Well . . . um . . . I suppose we could consider . . .,” he mumbled as he sized up the enormity of the decision.

She smiled on the inside. Knowing him as well as she did, those words were as good as a yes. His feelings of certainty and exuberance would follow, which they did the

following day. When he woke up on Sunday morning, he completely immersed himself in the idea that had seemed so strange the night before and could not stop jabbering fervidly about it. In church, he sat restlessly in the pew, wondering how things worked in the children's ministry, which was held in the basement. Some families sat with their children in the main service, and he wondered why they would choose to deny their children the opportunity to socialize with their age-mates downstairs under watchful instruction. When service was over, he even made sure that he and Doris walked over and said hello to Mrs. Olsen—the head of the children's ministry—to find out how things were going and to let her know that they appreciated everything she did. For a brief moment, Mrs. Olsen allowed herself to indulge in the fanciful notion that they might have been considering volunteering in the ministry, but there was no hint of it in their conversation. After many years of working in that area of the church, she had learned to expect little of her fellow congregants and did not allow herself to get dazzled by the glib smiles and trite pledges of support.

Tom even considered telephoning the adoption agency when they got home from church, but Doris reminded him, for the second time that day, that the agency offices were closed over the weekend, and it would have to wait until Monday.

He was a science teacher at the local school, and he spent Monday laboring through his intense distraction,

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wondering what had happened with Doris's planned phone call to the adoption agency.

While remaining her usual imperturbable self, she accomplished what needed to get done so that when he got home that evening, she had arranged a visit to the facility on Wednesday afternoon. It was about an hour's drive from where they lived, and they would have to start heading out there as soon as school let out at three-twenty. She would meet him at the school so they could start their drive into Minneapolis without any delay.

Doris made up her mind about Jude the moment she set eyes on him.

"He's the one we're supposed to have," she declared quietly to her husband without a hint of hesitation.

"You think so?" he replied, looking surprised.

"I'm certain of it."

It was never really clear how she had decided on Jude—or even that this would be his name—but her rock-solid sense of conviction simplified things immensely as it allowed them to focus on the long, drawn-out process and tedious paperwork over the several months that followed, culminating in that delightful day in March 1994 when Jude officially became part of the Wilson family.