



Stray Affections

A NOVEL

"So joyous...so magical..."

—CASSANDRA KING, author of *The Sunday Wife*

CHARLENE ANN
BAUMBICH

AUTHOR OF THE DEAREST DOROTHY SERIES

Praise for
Stray Affections

“*Stray Affections* is a story so joyous and so magical that it should come with a warning label: Do not pick up this book unless you, like Cassie and the unforgettable characters who are part of her world, are prepared for a journey that will change your life!”

—CASSANDRA KING, author of *The Sunday Wife*

“Charlene Ann Baumbich takes us to a town populated with characters—so delightfully quirky they must be real—and illustrates the power of love and forgiveness. Even the tiniest miracle is still a gift from God.”

—JOAN MEDLICOTT, author of nine *Ladies of Covington* novels

“Do you believe in mystery? After reading *Stray Affections*, you will understand that the Almighty works in mysterious ways! Charlene Ann Baumbich creates mystical meaning from a snowglobe, canine friends, and an intriguing cast of characters. A real treat.”

—ANGELA HUNT, author of *Doesn't She Look Natural*

“A tender story by a writer who understands the magic of second chances and the redeeming power of unconditional love.”

—LISA WINGATE, author of *Tending Roses* and *Word Gets Around*

“Through a handful of wonderfully imperfect characters, some unforgettable four-legged companions, and one extraordinary treasure—a simple snowglobe—Charlene Ann Baumbich unfolds a story showing the strength of hope and faith, of forgiveness and acceptance, and above all else, the resilience of the human spirit. *Stray Affections* is a heart-warming, delightful read.”

—GAIL FRASER, author of *The Lumby Lines*, *Stealing Lumby*, and *Lumby's Bounty*

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DEAREST DOROTHY SERIES

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Slow Down, You're Wearing us Out!

Help! I've Lost Myself!

Who Would Have Ever Thought?

Merry Everything!

If Not Now, When?!

Don't Miss Your Life!

Don't Miss Your Kids!

365 Ways to Connect with Your Kids

The 12 Dazes of Christmas (and One Holy Night)

The Book of Duh

How to Eat Humble Pie and Not Get Indigestion

Mama Said There'd be Days Like This

Stray Affections



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*Behold, Thou dost desire
truth in the innermost being,
And in the hidden part Thou
wilt make me know wisdom.
Purify me with hyssop, and I
shall be clean;
Wash me, and I shall be
whiter than snow.
Make me to hear joy and
gladness,
Let the bones which Thou
hast broken rejoice.*

—PSALM 51:6–8

Part One



September 2008

One

Preoccupied by troubling news, Cassandra accidentally broiled a batch of cookies. She didn't realize her error until after she'd corralled all four of her young sons into a corner of their backyard, away from the assured danger the smoke alarm proclaimed. In the midst of their huddle, it struck her: the problem wasn't in the oven.

Once again, the problem was her.

The commotion caused her neighbor, outside hanging clothes on the line, to stick her head over the fence.

"We're all out!" Cassandra hollered through the blare. "But if you could come over for a minute and watch the kids while I run back in and check something, I'd sure appreciate it!"

Glenda popped the latch on the gate and flew through the opening. Cassandra passed eleven-month-old Bradley from her hip to Glenda's, who wrapped her arm around his chunky waist. With her free arm—and the focused eyes of a herding dog—Glenda set to work funneling the rest of the boys through the gate into her yard, where they turned and stared at their crazed mommy.

"MAYBE YOU SHOULDN'T GO BACK IN THERE!" Glenda wailed as she watched Cassandra's backside disappear into her house, startling Bradley into panicked screaming.

Within a few moments, Cassandra reappeared through the back door, coughing, a charbroiled cookie tray filled with black smoking wads held at arm's length in front of her. She looked angry as she hurled the whole mess, red plaid oven glove and all, to the ground.

“CAN YOU KEEP THE KIDS A LITTLE LONGER?” she screamed over the sounds of the alarm.

Glenda nodded.

“I’LL BE RIGHT BACK!”

Shortly after she reentered the house, a fierce pounding, loud enough to rival that of the smoke alarm, radiated through the open back door.

Inside, wildly swinging the broom handle, Cassandra beat the ear-piercing alarm until it careened off the ceiling, thankfully crash-landing with a silencing thud. Glenda and the kids—plus the neighbor across the street who’d wandered over—watched as one window in the house after another flew open. Each time, Cassandra stuck her head out and yelled, “I’M FINE! EVERYTHING’S OKAY! I’LL BE THERE IN A MINUTE, BOYS.”

The way she swiftly appeared and disappeared in and out of the windows, her red hair flying this way and that, reminded six-year-old Chuck, Cassandra’s oldest, of that Bop ’em Sock ’em machine at the Pizza Party House, the game where every time you pounded that crazed-looking animal’s furry head, it popped up someplace else. When his mom’s head next popped out the bathroom window, he broke into a fit of giggles. Chuck’s laughter struck Bradley so funny that he finally stopped crying, sniffled, wrinkled up his nose, snorted, and started laughing, setting off the other two boys. They were all still giggling when Cassandra, huffing and puffing, finally trudged up beside them.

“So you think this is funny, huh, boys?” she asked, grin on her face, hands on her hips, trying to catch her breath. She raised an eyebrow at Glenda, whom she could tell was biting her tongue to suppress her own laughter.

“Wait till Dad hears *this!*” Chuck said, doubling over and holding his side.

Cassandra knew there was no point asking Chuck not to tell Ken, for two reasons: honesty, which they always preached in their family, and the fact that the house would no doubt smell like smoke for days, if not weeks. Plus, if she couldn’t laugh at herself, she was doomed. Thankfully, a warm fall breeze blew through southeastern Minnesota that day. The house could remain open to air out, and it wasn’t too cold for the kids to be stranded outdoors without their coats.

“Were the cookies on *fire*, Mommy?” wide-eyed three-year-old Howie asked.

“No, sweetie,” Cassandra said, smoothing her hand across the top of his wavy hair. “They were just smoking.”

“Why?” Harry, Cassandra’s two-year-old, asked, as he grabbed hold of her leg.

“Because Mommy accidentally set the oven to broil instead of bake, then your brother had to go potty and...”

Howie’s face puckered up. He was her sensitive child, vulnerable to every harsh word or errant blame. She noticed the waistband to his pants was torqued. With Harry still clinging to her leg, she leaned over and straightened Howie’s waistband, neatly tucking in his shirttail as she went, then hugged him. Harry detached himself, so she squatted down in front of Howie to look straight into his eyes. “It’s not your fault Mommy made a mistake,” she said, brushing his cheek with the back of her fingertips.

“At’s okay, Howie. It was an axiden,” Harry said, parroting his parents’ words for when he or one of his siblings spilled a glass of milk.

“Thank you, Glenda,” Cassandra said, reaching for Bradley. He

gladly held his arms out for his mommy to take him; he'd endured quite a bit in the last few minutes and appeared dazed. When the alarm went off, he'd been snatched out of his highchair so quickly that it toppled over, and then he'd been passed off like a hot potato. "Boys, tell Mrs. Caruso thank you, then let's head back inside."

After a chorus of "thank yous" and an "I owe you one, but I promise it won't be from *this* batch of cookies," launched over Cassandra's shoulder, they returned home.

As soon as they entered, with great drama Chuck announced it smelled "too rotten terrible" to stay. Cassandra agreed and proclaimed they should all go to the park for an hour. Ken would be due home from work by then, and he could drag out the fans. One of the perks of living in a small town like Wanonishaw: you didn't have to worry about locking up your house every time you left.

"Can I please have a cookie now?" Howie wanted to know.

"Pwease?" Harry added, shoring up their bid.

"We'll pick some up at Blanchard's Bakery on the way to the park," Cassandra said, reaching for her handbag and the keys to the van. "Thank goodness it isn't a day-care day." She hadn't meant to say that out loud, but there it was. She hated to think what little Megan's mom would have to say about this, although she had no doubt her own little blabbermouth, Chuck, would tell Megan the next day anyway. The only child she knew who delighted in tattling more than her son was Megan. And the only person who delighted in repeating a tattle more than Megan was Kerri, Megan's mother. The downside to living in a small town was there was no such thing as anonymity or hidden error.

But the only person who could—and surely would—make her feel even worse about the incident than she already did was her own mother,

Betty. Cassandra sighed just thinking about the overblown fallout sure to come. She loved her mom, but sometimes...

With Chuck's help, Cassandra got the last of the boys seat-belted in. She looked at her wristwatch. Her mom should be home from work by now. She might as well stop by and get it over with before Betty heard it from someone else. Maybe the boys could even talk Grandma Betty into coming to the park with them. Cassandra doubted her mom would join in; she almost never did *anything* spontaneously. Betty rarely invited them over, and she often declined invitations to come to their house for dinner, even with a week's warning. "I'm just too tired," she'd say.

Betty, at sixty, always looked and sounded tired, truth be told. Cassandra knew that her mom's factory job at Nodina Industries sapped all her energy. So many years on the assembly line running one of those punch presses had taken its toll, but her mother had never been educated or trained for anything else. Like Betty said, it paid the bills. After Cassandra's dad's untimely death, Betty had shored herself up and done what she needed to do to keep the family—Cassandra and her two older brothers—afloat. Her job wasn't hard physical labor, but it took concentration to stay safe while working around machinery. Manufacturing was loud and tedious work. Historically, Betty had taken any and all overtime opportunities, grateful for the extra money, which was always in very short supply, especially when the kids were little.

Nonetheless, both Cassandra and Ken kept trying to pry Betty out of her pitiful rut. There wasn't much they could do about her job, but they wanted more for Betty *and* their boys. With Ken's parents in California and her father deceased, Cassandra longed for her sons to enjoy a solid relationship with their only available grandparent, especially

since her brothers lived out of state and remained somewhat estranged from the rest of the family. Before Cassandra entered high school, they'd each graduated and moved on, leaving Wanonishaw and hard times behind them.

"Why don't I just spend my time plucking my nose hairs?" she'd said to Ken after each new disappointment with her mom. He would remind Cassandra that she was a kind and caring person, and that was just *one* of the reasons he loved her so much. "Yeah, well, life might be easier if I were a ratfink," she said once. Ken still teased her about the line.

Things had never been smooth between her and Betty, not even when Cassandra was young. "Wishing doesn't make it so, Cassandra," Betty often sternly said when her starry-eyed daughter began a sentence with something hopeful. "We can't have everything we want" and "*Many* things are not meant to be" rounded out Betty's favorite trilogy of doom.

Cassandra once described her mom to her best friend, Margret, as Our Lady of the No Wishing, Wanting, or Being. She'd laughed when she said it, but in reality the girls both knew there was nothing funny about Betty.

The deeper issue was that no matter how hopeful the young Cassandra had tried to remain, after years of hearing those downers, eventually she began to believe them.

Eventually, hope waned.

Eventually, Cassandra stopped believing, especially for her heart's greatest desire to come true.

Even after becoming a mother herself, Cassandra felt that the loss of her dream was her darkest heartache, one she no longer spoke of.

Perhaps that's why the phone call, the one that caused her to acci-

dentally set the oven to broil instead of bake, had been both devastating and so utterly distracting. Before the call, Cassandra knew she could at least count on one annual event to indulge in the illusion of surrounding herself with animals, even fake ones, but now...

Nonetheless, off to Grandma Betty's house they traveled. Even if Cassandra had stopped believing in the fulfillment of her heart's desire, when it came to the rest of life, she didn't stop doing the stoic, right thing. After all, she was her mother's daughter.