

## Finishing the Journey

By Leslea Wahl

“Oh.”

Something about the way Mom says that one word makes me nearly forget the search for my sleeping bag. I close the basement door behind me and focus my attention on her.

Mom’s sitting in the kitchen, a stack of mail on the table before her, her attention locked on a white envelope. I’m unable to decipher the elegant cursive from my vantage point. It doesn’t look like a bill, her usual cause for consternation.

“What’s that?” I step closer.

She holds the envelope out toward me. “Liz, it’s from your grandmother.”

I stop and stare, my stomach sinking a bit. This can’t be good. I have only one living grandparent, my dad’s mother. She is not the warm and fuzzy stereotype of a grandma. She is hard, cold, and has always scared me. And since my parents’ divorce years ago, I’ve barely had any contact with the woman. I only hear from her on Christmas and my birthday—when she sends me a card and a check. Being mid-March, neither of those occasions are on the horizon, so this unexpected correspondence makes me pause.

As I gingerly take the envelope, my phone buzzes.

Grateful for the distraction, I glance at my best-friend Josie’s reply to my sleeping bag query.

*Yep, it’s here with our camping gear. I’ll bring it over now.*

“Josie’s on her way over to drop off my sleeping bag.”

Mom's forehead crinkles. "I sure wish she was going with you this weekend. It would make me feel better."

I unsuccessfully fight the eye roll. "Mom, it's a church retreat. I don't think you have anything to worry about."

She bites her lip—her go-to habit when trying to formulate her thoughts. I patiently wait. "It's just that I don't know these people. And you'll be several hours away."

I offer an encouraging smile. Since I'm an only child and Dad's not around much, I often feel the need to reassure her about things like I'm the adult in the relationship. "Mom, we talked about this. Even though Josie won't be there, there will probably be some other kids from school." Not sure that's true, but it could be.

"You'll call if you feel the least bit nervous—about anything? And you'll stick with the group?"

"Yep."

"And you'll drive safely?" Her crinkled brow turns to look out the window as rivers of rain slide down the glass. "Those curvy roads through the woods can be dangerous."

"I've driven them before." I give her a quick hug. "It will all be fine." Truth be told, I don't exactly want to spend my entire weekend at this diocesan-wide confirmation retreat. In fact, I'm not at all sure I should even be going, but there's no way I'm telling her that.

With envelope in hand, I head up to my room to finish packing. If I'm going to make it to the retreat center before dinner, I need to hit the road soon. All this rain will slow down the drive. I shove the envelope into my bag along with my clothes, not eager to discover what my grandmother has sent. I toss in my Bible and rosary as well.

"Are you excited?"

I turn to see Josie standing at my door, sleeping bag in hand.

“Excited? Not exactly the word I’d use.” More like afraid I’ve made a colossal mistake.

She steps forward. “Retreats are always fun.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Considering I’ve never been on one, I relied on her counsel when I agreed to go. I look from my bag to her, doubts weaseling into my mind. “What am I doing? Should I even be going?”

She takes my hand and pulls me down to sit on the bed with her. “Are you having second thoughts about joining the Church?”

I shake my head no, even though that’s precisely what’s on my mind. Last year when I informed Josie that I wanted to join the Catholic Church, I was excited about becoming a member of the church that I’d been attending with her and her family for years. But, at the time, I had no idea what that decision would entail. Now, with only a few weeks left until the Easter Vigil, where I’ll be baptized into the faith, I’m suddenly questioning the whole thing. Having to attend this retreat without my sponsor and best friend, Josie, is not helping my unease.

She gives me a hug. “I wish I could go with you, but it’s only for the teens receiving sacraments of initiation. I’m sure you’ll enjoy all the group discussions. You have such a different perspective than all those cradle-Catholics. They could learn something from you.”

“Yeah, right.” I appreciate her pep talk, even though I don’t believe it.

All the other teens this weekend will be there because they somehow missed their confirmation retreat or didn’t receive the sacrament when everyone else in their grade did. I recently found out that I’m the only teen in the entire diocese going through RCIA—Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults. The misfit kid—the story of my life.

Father Dominic thought it would be good for me to go. Earlier in the week, when I confided my sudden concerns with him, he didn't seem overly concerned. He patted my hand and replied, "Ah, then, even more reason to go. Liz, you need time to pray and discern. And remember, there is no pressure." He went on to assure me that if I returned from the weekend and still didn't feel comfortable going through with the enormous, life-changing decision, I could continue my studies and join the Church next year.

Josie nudges me. "I'm serious. I'll be praying that you'll experience exactly what you need this weekend."

"Thanks." I know she'll always support me—that's what best friends do. But if I tell her that I've changed my mind, she'll be disappointed and feel like she failed as my sponsor. So, instead of saying anything, I plaster on a smile. "Time to get this show on the road."

Between having to drive slow in the rain and taking a wrong turn down the wrong secluded road through the woods, I end up pulling up to the retreat center a half-hour late. The nearly empty parking lot causes me to re-read the information letter. Did I mix up the day or time? No. This is right.

If I had arrived on time, I'd have had a chance to take my things to my room and settle in before the opening service, but instead, I find myself sliding into one of the back pews in the little chapel while the retreat coordinator gives her welcome speech. A glance around at my fellow retreat participants, and I realize why the parking lot is so empty. Besides the speaker, I'm the only person present old enough to drive.

I slump back and squeeze my eyes shut. Just perfect. I should have anticipated this—Josie had been confirmed several years ago. But since this particular retreat is for teens that

missed their confirmation requirements for some reason, I assumed there would be at least a few older teens present. Riddle me this, Father Dominic—how is being surrounded by a bunch of middle-schoolers all weekend going to help me discern anything besides the fact that I'm thankful I'm about to graduate high school and will be leaving the drama of teen angst behind?

The middle-aged woman finishes introducing herself and sharing a long list of rules, then welcomes everyone with a huge smile. "You'll find plenty of reflection opportunities during this retreat. So often in our daily lives, we are unable to spend time in prayer and quiet solitude so we can hear God and His guidance. This weekend, we'll also listen to a few talks by Father Nate, attend Mass, Adoration, and enjoy time in fellowship through music and games. Oh, and I hope you all brought your rosaries. Besides praying the Rosary together, Father Nate will also lead us in the Divine Mercy Chaplet."

Panic surges through me. What's the Divine Mercy Chaplet? I spent a year figuring out the Rosary. Josie might have mentioned there were other important prayers to know. I glance around. Even though I'm mostly looking at people's backs, no one else seems particularly confused. Why am I the only one who never knows what's going on?

The woman shares a few logistics, then announces that since it's a Friday during Lent, we will start with Stations of the Cross. I breathe a sigh of relief—at least that's something I'm familiar with.

I pick up one of the ready-made plates of fried fish, coleslaw, and French fries, then scan the tables. Where to sit? With the chatty group of girls who seem to all know each other? Perhaps at the mixed table of guys and girls who are slyly sneaking glances at one another? Should I find a table where I can be alone? Or, how about running as fast as I can to my car and

leaving this place in a spray of rainwater? Instead, I choose option number five and sit at the half-empty table with three girls.

“Hi, mind if I join you?” They stare at me with wide eyes like I’m a teacher who just caught them passing notes.

I take their silence as an invitation and settle in. Two boys end up joining our table as well. The awkward silence threatens to smother me.

I spread my napkin across my lap. “Shall we introduce ourselves? My name is Liz.”

“Are you a counselor or something?” the petite girl to my right asks.

“No. I’m here for the retreat, just like all of you.”

“Really?” Across the table, a boy’s jaw drops in astonishment, revealing a mouthful of braces.

“Why?” asks another of my young tablemates.

“I’m going through the RCIA program, and my priest thought it would be a good idea to attend a retreat.”

From the various glances around the table, I can tell they don’t quite understand. But my wish to end the uncomfortable silence is granted, suddenly broken by a barrage of questions.

“RCIA? My aunt went through that. Isn’t that just for old people?”

“Um, well, it’s for people who haven’t grown up in the Catholic Church who want to join.”

“So, are you doing it with your family?”

“Nope. Just me.”

“Is someone, like, forcing you?”

“No.”

“How long is the program?”

“I started it about a year ago and will get baptized at the Easter Vigil.”

“Like, in front of everyone, at that crazy long service?”

“Yep.”

“Why would you do all that if no one’s making you?”

At the moment, I’m not really sure, but I answer anyway. “Because I want to.”

“Huh. Weird.”

After all their questions are answered, they are comfortable enough to begin introducing themselves, sharing where they go to school and church, and how they ended up at this particular retreat. The reasons are similar—they missed their parish retreats due to being sick, traveling, or extracurricular activities. Now in order to get Confirmed in the spring, they need to fulfill the retreat requirement of the program. Not one of them mentions that they want to learn more about Confirmation or are discerning if they should even be joining the Church. Once again, I’m on my own.

After an evening spent playing goofy get-to-know-you games, followed by several praise songs, we scatter to our rooms. The solitude that I’ve longed for all evening fails to comfort me. Instead, I’m suddenly without distraction and alone with my inner turmoil.

When I unzip my bag to pull out my pajamas, the white envelope greets me, daring me to open it. How had I forgotten about my grandmother’s letter? With trepidation, I unseal the envelope and smooth out the folded hand-written note.

*Liz,*

*Your father told me about your misguided judgment. I blame him for not being the role model you needed. However, you must know that we are not a Catholic family. I believe you are aware that I most graciously help pay for my grandchildren's college education. This is a gift, not an obligation. As I do not feel it appropriate to support your decision, I regret to inform you that if you continue on this errant pathway in your faith, I will have no choice but to hold back my portion of your college education. I expect a phone call or letter from you to discuss this further.*

*Grandmother*

My hands begin to shake as I stare at the letter. She's serious? There are strings attached to her monetary gift? Did Dad know about this? A little heads-up would've been nice. While I've never had much of a relationship with her, I have been counting on her generous assistance for college. My promising future suddenly looks bleak. I've received a few college acceptances with some offers of scholarship assistance, but tuition remains ridiculously high.

My mind reels. Dad will help, but the additional financial strain on Mom would still be difficult. She's already constantly stressed about money. Loans are an option, but I'm thinking of becoming a teacher or counselor, and from what I hear, on those salaries, paying back loans will take forever. Do I need to kiss my dream of going to school out of state goodbye and settle on living at home while attending community college?

I flop back on my bed and stare at the plain white ceiling. Why is life so hard? Why am I constantly feeling alone? The white tiles above me blur as tears fill my eyes. Time to stop daydreaming about living a fantasy life and finally face reality—the stark, cold truth. As much as I wish I belonged to Josie's family—or any normal family—I don't. I have a single mom who

struggles. While things are better lately with my dad, for most of my life, he's not been there for me. My one living grandparent is as warm as an iceberg.

Did I somehow think joining the Church would change things for me? That I'd suddenly feel like I belonged somewhere? What a joke. Instead, this decision will actually alienate me further from my family and make life infinitely harder.

Time to be honest with myself. I've been working toward my goal of joining the Church for a year now, and in some ways, I feel even more distant—like an outsider trying to join a secret club. I'm so pathetic I can't even remember when to stand and kneel at Mass. A year ago, I thought I figured out what I needed. It all seemed so clear to me. So, what happened? Had I fooled myself into believing a lie—something that I could never attain?

Sleep eludes me for most of the night as I try to make sense of my thoughts. All my concerns seem to boil down to one question—as my baptism day inches closer, shouldn't I be excited and full of peace about finally joining the Church? Doubts and sadness can't be a good sign. I should quietly bow out and wait a few years until I'm older and then decide, when life is easier. My college would be paid for. I wouldn't have a mountain of debt. And I wouldn't need to constantly seek my family's support or permission.

As painful as it was, Grandmother's letter may have been the needed proof that I'm making the wrong decision. In a few years, when my life is in order, if I still want to join the Church, there will be nothing holding me back. Yep. Putting the kibosh on this decision makes sense. It will be hard to break the news to Josie, but it will be for the best. And I need to do what is right for me.

Father Dominic was wise. He knew I needed this weekend to discern and realize I'd rushed into something that I'm not ready for. I throw back the covers. Better to leave now and not waste any more time.

To avoid any confrontation, I write a note explaining why I have decided to leave. Then, in the wee hours of the morning, I gather my items, place my note on the registration desk, and quietly exit.

The incessant rain matches my gloomy mood as I trudge to the car. My sleeping bag and duffle get tossed in the back seat, then I slide in behind the wheel and start the car. I should leave before someone comes running out to stop me. But as I stare at the retreat center, something holds me back. Not indecision. More like frustration that I wasted so much time and resources chasing my misguided dream. I push away the sadness and remind myself that joining the Church can still be in my future, but right now, I need to focus on what's best for me and for Mom—college being paid for and peace in the family. With one last look at the large crucifix on the building, I finally pull out of the parking lot.

The limited visibility keeps me focused on the road, but I do manage a quick glance at the clock on the dashboard. If all goes smoothly, I'll make it home around lunchtime. Mom will be happy to see me, probably relieved at my decision. Explaining to Josie will be much more difficult—but since she's not expecting me to be home this weekend, I can probably avoid that conversation until Sunday evening or even Monday. No need to worry about that now. I turn up my music, to silence the thoughts circulating in my brain.

As the overcast sky lightens to a slightly less depressing shade of gray, I slowly make my way down the winding road—the only car journeying at this hour through the remote woods. After about an hour, I finally spot another vehicle. Up ahead, an old pickup truck pulls out from

a narrow side road and onto the road in front of me. *Please don't be some pokey driver.* Now that I've decided, I'm anxious to get home to a hot shower—simultaneously ridding myself of this chill and the disastrous weekend.

The road curves, and around a bend, rocky cliffs come into view. I've always liked these cliffs. On sunny days, light reflects off the pyrite, causing them to shimmer and making me daydream of medieval castles. Today though, they appear dark and foreboding, more like an evil fortress. I sing a little louder to one of my favorite tunes, the windshield wipers moving in syncopation to the beat, when I hear a weird rumble. The pickup truck in front of me suddenly swerves across the yellow line. I tap on my brake, searching the road for what he's trying to avoid—a fallen branch, an animal? Out of the corner of my eye, movement draws my attention. A gasp escapes as I watch part of the rocky cliff break away and crumble onto the road. I slam on the brakes, hoping I'll stop before being pummeled by rocks.

Debris pelts my motionless car with sickening pings, then quiet descends. My worry about any damage vanishes as my gaze focuses on the giant boulder resting on the road in front of me. The entire road is now impassible, covered in mud, rocks, and even a small tree. *Whoa.* I tear my gaze from what's left of the road in search of the pickup—but it's nowhere in sight. While the truck swerved in the nick of time, avoiding the massive boulder, it couldn't have completely avoided the rockslide. Moving like a lava flow, the loosened dirt probably pushed the pickup off the far edge of the road, rolling it down the embankment.

I sit there frozen. *Oh, my gosh.* What do I do? *Think.* The driver may need help. With shaking hands, I grab my phone. My call to 911 doesn't go through. Did I push the wrong buttons? I try again before realizing there's no service. *Seriously?* Now what?

I should check on the driver. But, what if there's another rockslide? Do I turn around and drive back to the retreat center? I squeeze my eyes shut, forcing the panic away. *Dear Lord.*

*What should I do?*

It takes me three tries to unfasten my seatbelt with my useless, quavering hands. I pull up the hood of my rain jacket, ready to face the weather but am still surprised by the cold, wet raindrops that pummel me as I exit the car. I squint at the cliff, surveying the area as if I'd be able to tell if another slide was imminent. Then I remember the odd rumble—there had been warning. If I'm observant, I should be able to tell if another slide is about to happen. That should give me time to get out of the way. Hopefully.

Inching toward the edge of the road, I send up another quick prayer.

*God, please help the driver to be okay. Please, help me know what to do.*

I peer over the edge of the road. The vehicle, looking like a wounded animal, rests about twenty feet below me. Though it's facing the wrong way, it landed upright—the front end crumpled like a smashed soda can. The driver's door is wedged against the embankment, the front windshield a web of shattered glass. From its position and the amount of damage, I presume the truck not only spun but rolled. After another glance at the offending cliff, I make my way toward the vehicle, mud oozing up the sides of my sneakers. On my third step, my feet slip out from under me and, just like the giant boulder, I tumble down the rest of the little hill, coming to rest against a decaying log.

Landing with a jolt, I brush myself off, but my feeble attempt only smears mud everywhere. Continuing my cautious trek toward the truck, I focus on the passenger side door in front of me. The window is partially rolled down, and the bottom of the door panel looks like the Hulk used it as a punching bag—making opening the door impossible.

What if the driver is seriously injured, or worse? How am I going to help them? I take a deep breath, then lean close and peer into the vehicle.

There's only one passenger—a man slumped over the steering wheel, his face angled toward me. Blood trails down his cheek from his mostly brown hair to the white whiskers that color his beard. Is he conscious?

As I watch, his eyes peel open. *Thank goodness he's alive.*

He glances around at his predicament then pushes himself back—his face contorting in pain. Eventually, his gaze lands on me.

“Are you alright?” I manage to squeak out of my dry throat.

His eyes narrow in a squint. He's got the tanned, weathered face of an outdoorsy man, while the lines of wisdom (as my mom likes to call her wrinkles) hint at a long-lived life.

“Are you alright?” I ask again.

He shakes his head. “My legs are pinned.”

My gaze travels to his legs, but I can't see anything—they disappear into a dark, compacted mass. That can't be good.

“We need to get you some help.” My words, while true, sound ridiculous. No kidding.

He nods, then gives me a little grimace. “Seeing as I'm a little out of service at the moment, maybe you could help with that?”

“I tried to call 911, but there's no service.” I pull my phone from my pocket and hold it up as if to prove my failed attempt.

He lets out a strained sigh. “Was afraid of that. The cell coverage is spotty around here.”

“I came from a retreat center. I could drive back there and call for help.” I study his face. His coloring seems a little off. Is it just the dim lighting, or could he be going into shock? “It’s about an hour away, though.”

He gives a slight shake of his head. “No. That will take too long.”

“Do you live nearby? I could drive to your home and use your phone.”

He rubs his face. A gold wedding band adorns his leathery hand. “My hunting cabin is about a half-mile away—that’s where I was headed. It’s pretty rustic, but my wife insisted it needed a phone. You’ll have to walk though, as the road is on the other side of the slide—it’ll be the first one you’ll come to.” He pulls his keys from the ignition. They jangle as he hands them to me. “Use the dark gray one.”

I reach in and clasp the keys. “Don’t worry. I’ve got this.” Hopefully. I give him my most reassuring smile. “By the way, I’m Liz. What’s your name?”

“Glenn.”

Despite the slipping and sliding that thwarts my upward momentum, I finally make it back up the small ravine. The road that Glenn mentioned is easy enough to find, and soon I’m jogging down the isolated dirt lane, failing at my attempts to avoid puddles. While it’s technically spring, nothing has started to bloom or bud. The dreary day, desolate forest, and barren trees with their gnarled branches brings to mind every creepy movie I’ve ever watched. I pick up the pace.

Eventually, I spot a little wooden shack. He wasn’t kidding when he described it as rustic. The logs are weathered after years of intense winter weather, and the porch sags. I fumble with

the key but finally slide it into place. The door sticks, but an extra push with my hip jars it open with a groan—from both the door and myself.

The small space reminds me of one of those tiny homes, only instead of being simplistically chic, mismatched, worn pieces furnish the space. It's no warmer than outside, but at least it's dry. I spot the phone in the tiny kitchenette—an old-fashioned rotary dial. Even though I've never used one, it's not hard to figure out. But thank goodness 911 has only three numbers since the old dialing system takes forever. I quickly tell the operator about the accident and that they need to send help immediately.

The telephone cord is so long that I'm able to walk around the entire cabin as she types in the information. While I describe the location as best I can, I check out the photos hanging on the wall. Each framed picture features Glenn with different kids enjoying some kind of outdoorsy activity—fishing, hiking, boating, and roasting marshmallows. Must be his grandchildren. My favorite photo features him and a girl side by side on separate alpine slides—like they are racing. Hard to tell who's winning. He appears to be the kind of grandpa I always longed for. But it wasn't meant to be—both of mine passed away when I was young.

When I'm done with the call, I leave the dry sanctuary of the cabin and hurry back to my car. Soon the accident scene comes into view. Seeing that massive rock lying in the middle of the road sends a shiver coursing down my spine—and not just from the wet, damp cold. If Glenn hadn't reacted so quickly and swerved out of the way, that rock would've landed on his truck.

I glance both ways down the desolate road. If I hadn't been here, how long until someone would've found him? How horrible to be trapped, injured, and by himself. My moments of feeling alone are nothing compared to that isolation. Well, thank goodness neither of us are alone

right now. I grab a few supplies from my car, then repeat the slip and slide routine down the embankment.

Proud of myself for making it down a little more smoothly this time, I once again peer into the truck window—not liking what I see. Glenn’s eyes are closed, and he definitely looks paler than before. I rap on the glass. *Please wake up.* His eyes slit open, and a slight grin forms on his face.

I smile—the only warmth I can offer at the moment. “Me again! Mind if I come in and join you while we wait for help?”

“Sure.” He gestures with his hand. “Welcome to my humble abode.”

I like this guy’s spirit.

“Fraid that’s as far down as the window goes, though. Been stuck like that for awhile.”

“No problem.” I shove my sleeping bag and a small grocery bag into the truck, then make the very ungraceful climb and shimmy through the partially lowered passenger window and plop onto the seat next to him.

He eyes the sleeping bag. “You plannin’ on staying a while?” An attempted joke seems like a good sign, despite the strain in his voice.

As I unroll the sleeping bag that will hopefully help keep him warm, I share what I learned. “Well, the good news is that help should be on the way.”

“And the bad news?”

“The 911 operator informed me that there have been numerous calls about rockslides. So, it might take a while for the emergency vehicles to arrive.”

Grim-faced, he nods at the news.

I tuck the sleeping bag around him, careful not to touch his legs. “I’ve got snacks and some first-aid supplies. But, before we eat, let me look at that head wound of yours.”

“You always so well-prepared?”

I laugh. “No. I’m supposed to be at a retreat for the weekend. Snacks and bedding were required. The first-aid kit stays in my car. My mom insisted that you never know when you may need one. So, thanks to you, I’ll have to hear her I-told-you-so.”

He grins. “What kind of retreat?”

I tuck a wet strand of hair behind my ear, then with supplies in hand, scooch closer to get a better look at his head. “Just a church thing. But I left early.” He’s not bleeding profusely, so it doesn’t appear to be a deep wound.

“Why? Not your thing?”

I pour some water from my water bottle onto the washcloth I packed for the retreat. I hand him the bottle to hold, then dab at the gash. “Something like that.” He winces. “Sorry. Are you in a lot of pain?”

He grunts. “I’ve felt worse.” He takes a swig of water.

“This isn’t the worst accident you’ve been in?” I gently push his hair away and place a band-aid on the cut. Next, I try to wipe the blood from his face.

A mischievous gleam lights his eyes. “Well, I did break my back once.”

*Ouch!*

Satisfied with my work, I settle back and pull the hand sanitizer from my bag. Time to clean myself up. “I think I got the bleeding to stop.”

He hands me the water bottle, then leans his head back against the headrest. “Thanks, but that was just a little scratch. Nothing like the time I cut my hand so badly it wouldn’t stop bleeding. Messed up my truck’s upholstery.”

“Dare I ask how it happened?”

“I was hunting and sliced my hand while field dressing an elk. None of my buddies could drive me from our campsite to town, which was a few hours away.”

“Are you saying that you drove yourself?” I shiver at the thought.

He gives me a sheepish little grin. “Yeah, my wife wasn’t too happy when I told her about that one.” His gaze drops to the grocery bag. “Did you say something about snacks?”

I hold up the bag. “Getting hungry?”

He nods. “I missed breakfast.”

“Me too, but all I have are chocolate-chip cookies—not exactly the ‘breakfast of champions,’ as my dad would say.” I offer for him to take the first one. He reaches into the bag which rattles due to his shaking hand. “So, do you have more such stories?”

He smirks. “Well, there was the time I was skiing and started having chest pains. I was pretty sure it was a heart attack.” He sinks his teeth into a cookie.

“Oh, gosh. Did they have to take you down on one of those toboggan things?” I reach into the bag.

He brushes away my suggestion. “Nah. I ended up skiing several more runs because the rain was so good. Then I went to the hospital.”

I cover my mouth, stopping myself from spewing my bite of cookie at the poor man as a laugh escapes. “Let me guess. Your wife wasn’t too thrilled with that decision either.”

“Sounds like you know her.” His grin quickly transforms into a grimace.

*Hurry up, ambulance.* Not only am I worried about him, but if I keep sitting in this cold truck in wet clothes, I may end up with hypothermia and also be in need of medical attention.

Maybe if I keep him talking, it will take his mind off the pain. “I must say, I was quite impressed with how quickly you reacted when that rockslide began. You handled it perfectly—so calm and cool.”

He slowly reaches for another cookie. “I’ve had a few scary driving moments in my life.”

“Now you’ve piqued my curiosity. Do tell—unless you have somewhere else you need to be.” I try to match his forced lightheartedness.

“Well, I was a truck driver for many years. Driving over the Rocky Mountains during a white-out blizzard will prepare anyone for what may happen.”

“That sounds terrifying. What did you deliver?”

“I hauled lots of things over the years. Groceries, steel, even ducklings.”

“Oh, sweet.” I rub my arms, attempting to create some warmth.

“The ducks were a long time ago. Back when I was sixteen.” His voice catches, from the memory or pain, I’m not sure.

“Wait. You were driving a delivery truck when you were sixteen?” I reach for a second cookie but keep my eye on him to gauge his well-being.

He slowly nods, then grasps the steering wheel, his knuckles white.

“Like around a farm?” Come on, Glenn, keep talking.

“I delivered them from a farm in Pennsylvania to upstate New York.”

“When you were younger than I am?” That’s crazy. I hate driving to new places that I’m not familiar with. I’m about to tell him that, but my chattering teeth prevent me.

Glenn raises an eyebrow, then lifts the edge of my sleeping bag, offering me a bit of the makeshift blanket. I acquiesce and nudge a little closer.

“Tell me more about this church retreat that you were escaping,” he says as I gratefully drape part of the warm sleeping bag around myself, making sure not to uncover my elderly patient.

“I wasn’t escaping.” Well, maybe I was.

“Your parents make you attend?”

“No. It was all my brilliant idea.” I watch the rain slide down the side window before trying to explain. “My parents never really attended church much. We only went on holidays and when we visited family. When my parents divorced, my friend Josie and her family started inviting me to go with them to their Catholic church. I never really thought about joining the Church until last year. Things with my dad went from bad to worse, and I found myself in a dark space. Josie gave me this Holy Family Novena to pray, and things miraculously started to improve. The more I thought about it, the more I realized the Church was my rock, so I decided to make it official. I was supposed to be baptized at the upcoming Easter Vigil.” Remembering back to that time when I was so sure about things causes my heart to plummet. *Why can’t I feel like that again?*

“What did your parents think about you joining the church?” His gravelly voice is barely over a whisper.

“Well, they always seemed fine with me going to church with Josie, but they were definitely surprised when I told them I wanted to become Catholic. While they haven’t tried to talk me out of the decision, they haven’t been overly excited either.”

“So, that’s why you didn’t stay at the retreat?”

I shake my head. “Not entirely.” Even though I barely know the man, it’s nice to have someone to confide in. “Lately, I feel like such an imposter, trying to fit in someplace where I’ll never belong. Everyone else always seems to know all the right prayers. They know about different saints. They know when to stand and kneel during Mass. I can never get the responses memorized. I still stumble over the Rosary. I don’t know. I just feel like I rushed into this decision.”

“Because you don’t know the prayers and responses yet?”

I feel the tears gather in my eyes. “Seeing the other kids at the retreat this weekend just made me sad and extremely jealous. None of them seem to understand how lucky they are. They get to go to church each week with their families. They’ve grown up with all these wonderful sacraments, yet most seem to take them for granted. They are all so blessed and don’t even know it. Sometimes during Mass, I watch the large extended families, and it makes me want to cry because I’ll never have what they have.” I bite my lip, forcing the threatening tears to stay away.

He pats my hand in amiable silence. What’s wrong with me? I’ve already made my decision to stop the RCIA process. It makes sense. Instead of spending Easter being baptized into the Church, Mom and I will enjoy a brunch somewhere by ourselves. And it’ll be nice—a relief. I won’t have to worry about how uncomfortable she is during the long Easter Vigil. I won’t have to feel guilty, knowing I gave up my college tuition. I won’t have to try and explain my decision to Dad once again. It’s good—the right decision.

So, why am I still trying to convince myself?

“When you think of Easter, what do you think of?” The question blurts out of my mouth.

“Colored chicks.”

“Colored chicks?” I shift to look at him. Is delirium setting in? His eyes droop a little, but otherwise, he seems okay.

He nods. “That farm I drove for as a teenager, dyed chicks for Easter. They’d color the newborn chicks blue, green, and pink—for the kid’s Easter baskets.”

My eyes narrow. “Live chicks?”

His shoulder raises ever so slightly. “Wouldn’t be allowed nowadays.”

No kidding. How was it ever allowed? Real-life Peeps? Hmm...maybe that’s how the colored marshmallowy treats came about. I find myself smiling, picturing a teenage Glenn with a truckful of pastel-colored chicks. I’d never really understood why Josie enjoyed chatting with military vets. But now I get it. The stories from a different generation are fascinating. His eyes shut, increasing my worry. *Keep him talking.*

“Okay, Mr. Glenn. You’ve obviously led an interesting life. Tell me five more things about yourself that you haven’t already shared.”

His eyes remain closed with no indication that he’s heard me. Did he lose consciousness?

I throw my head back in frustration. *Lord, You bring people together to help one another. Why not now? Glenn needs someone useful—someone with medical knowledge—not me.* I have no idea what to do. Let him rest? Try to wake him? Thankfully, before I make a decision, his eyes flutter open.

“Well, let’s see.” He lifts his hand and, accepting my challenge, raises his fingers one at a time as he rattles off his list. “I owned my own business. I’ve traveled around the world. I’ve met a president. I’ve attended Mass with a pope.” He pauses and clears his throat. “And I still think my bride of sixty-three years is the prettiest girl I’ve ever met.”

Aww... “That’s quite an amazing list.”

His right hand strokes his whiskery cheeks. “Mind if I share with you my philosophy of life?”

“Who wouldn’t want some advice from the Most Interesting Man in the World?”

That smirk of his returns, though not with as much gusto as before. “Life is a journey. The destination being heaven. I’ve lived my life with three founding principles—my work ethic, my family, and my faith. But the key to it all is faith.” His voice catches, and I realize that he’s having trouble breathing. “Faith should be the center of your life, guiding all your interactions. You see, working hard enabled me to always give generously. It provided the opportunity to travel to many different countries and meet President Carter through my volunteer work with Habitat for Humanity. I’ve had a lot of success, but you know what I consider my greatest accomplishment in life? My family. I wisely chose a wife who shared my faith, and together we passed on our values to our children and grandchildren. No matter what trials come along, such as this, I’m assured that God has everything under control.”

Wow. How amazing to have such a strong faith, to be at peace even when facing something so scary. I close my eyes and some of the crazy things I learned through RCIA come to mind—like some of the Eucharistic miracles and the unbelievable stories about the saints. Like, seriously, how can there be incorruptible bodies? Dead bodies that don’t decompose? That defies all logic. How can those things be explained except that they are miracles? Miracles that have happened in the Catholic Church—God’s little proofs that this is His Church. Am I really ready to turn my back on all that I’ve learned just to make my life a little easier?

The glorious faint sounds of a siren cut through the silence. Help has arrived!

I squeeze Glenn’s hand. “Hey, are you okay? I hear sirens. It shouldn’t be much longer.”

His head bobs, and his eyes slit open. “Hey, if I’m able, and you change your mind, I would be honored to attend this Easter Vigil thing of yours. I don’t mind being a fill-in grandpa if you need one.”

I lean against him, breathing in his scent of rugged masculinity, wisdom, and comfort. “Thank you.”

The first responders shoo me away and quickly take charge—finally someone who can help him. At some point, the rain has stopped, leaving a cold, wet dreariness in its wake. I watch them work for a while, then decide there’s a better way to help. Pulling the sleeping bag around myself, I perch on a large rock on the side of the road. Too weary to search for my Rosary cheat-sheet, I skip the opening prayer and dive right into the parts I know.

Eventually, my new friend is extracted from the vehicle and brought up to the road. As the stretcher moves toward the ambulance, I scurry over and clasp his hand.

“I’m praying for you,” I tell him. He gently squeezes my hand in reply.

While he’s loaded in, I plead for some reassurance that he’ll be okay. The paramedics only say that he’s in good hands now.

After the emergency vehicle pulls away, the siren now diminishing, I’m left staring at the boulder that smashed into the road. If it hadn’t been for Glenn’s defensive driving skills, this could have ended quite differently. A jolt of realization hits me—that had almost been me. If I hadn’t sat in the parking lot at the retreat center for those few extra moments, I would’ve been ahead of Glenn on the road and the rock might’ve landed on my small car. Possibly ending it all. What a sobering thought. Life really is precious. None of us are guaranteed tomorrow.

A new thought comes to me. I pleaded for God to bring someone to Glenn's aid, but maybe our chance meeting was actually for my sake—so I'd realize that putting my faith on the backburner is not the answer. My gaze lifts to the sky. *Thanks, God.*

Suddenly things align into sharp focus. Even though there may be stumbling blocks along the way—minor crosses to bear—faith has to be my main priority. Sure, I wasn't blessed with a family that passed down their religion to me, but a family's faith journey has to start somewhere—why not with me? And maybe my future won't be as easy as I'd always assumed, but paying back college loans or living at home certainly aren't the worst things in the world. Just like Glenn, I'm not afraid of a little hard work.

I offer another prayer of thanks to God for bringing that man into my life and helping me realize that as long as I focus on my faith, I'll never be alone. I turn toward my car. Time to head back to the retreat center and finish the journey I've begun.

A note from the author:

As a convert to Catholicism, I've always been impressed with teens who make the decision to go through the RCIA program to join the Church. Their dedication and commitment is inspiring. For this story, I thought it would be fun to explore that idea and Liz proved to be the perfect character to use. She and her best friend, Josie, can be found in my full-length novel, *Into the Spotlight* (formerly *An Unexpected Role*).

While I was writing this story, my father, Glenn, was very sick—in the last stages of life. He had always been a huge supporter of my writing—eagerly reading my stories as soon as they came out and sharing them with his friends. Making him a character in this story seemed like a wonderful way to honor him. He was not able to see this story in print, but I was able to share it with him. I hope you enjoy this glimpse into the life of a very special man.

Leslea Wahl

LESLEA WAHL is the author of the award-winning Catholic teen mysteries *The Perfect Blindside*, *eXtreme Blindside*, *Where You Lead*, and *Into the Spotlight*. Leslea's journey to become an author came through a search for value-based fiction for her own children. She now not only writes for teens but also has become a reviewer of Catholic teen fiction to help other families discover faith-based books. Leslea lives in beautiful Colorado with her husband and children. The furry, four-legged members of her family often make cameo appearances in her novels. Leslea has always loved mysteries and hopes to encourage teens to grow in their faith through these fun adventures. For more information about her faith-filled Young Adult mysteries, please visit [www.LesleaWahl.com](http://www.LesleaWahl.com).

When Liz's faith journey hits a roadblock, will an unexpected detour and chance encounter set her back on track?