

True North

Susan Diane Johnson

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Dedication

To my son, Kirk, who inspired this book with his dream of seeing orca whales in the sea instead of in an aquarium. To my mother, Barbara, who gave us the trip that made his dream happen. To my husband, Keith, for all the nights eating pizza so I can write. I love you all so much.

Praise

Under the title *Northern Lights* this novel won the following awards: The Maggie, The Lone Star, and The Beacon.

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“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

~2 Corinthians 4:16-18 (NIV)

Prologue

“Cody, are you almost ready?” Lisa Kendall glanced at the clock sitting on the entryway table. Shaped like a catcher’s mitt with a baseball in the center, it reflected most of the décor in their house. Baseball topped her nine-year-old son’s list of passions. Whales and anything to do with the ocean took a close second, so both themes ran throughout the Kendall household. Not that she minded one bit. There would be plenty of time to decorate the house *her* way when Cody grew up and went off to college.

“Your dad should be home any minute.” She glanced at the clock again then out at the driveway and tried to stem her rising tension level. Joe promised he wouldn’t let their son down today, of all days. Today Cody’s Little League team would play their final game of the season. Cody wanted his dad to be there for at least one of his games.

While Lisa would like to believe the sincerity of her husband’s promise, it looked like work would take precedence over family. Again.

“Just a sec, Mom. I’m getting my glove. Oops.”

A crash came from the direction of Cody’s room, followed by the slamming of the door and the sound of feet scrambling down the hall. Cody skidded to a halt in front of her.

“OK, I’m ready.” He looked up at her and beamed, proudly dressed in his red and white pinstriped

baseball uniform. His brown eyes and quirky smile were a miniature version of Joe's. Small in stature, like Lisa, he also had her blonde hair. But the smattering of freckles across Cody's face belonged to no one but Cody. Lisa felt the same catch in her heart she always did when her son smiled at her. She simply couldn't imagine life without this precious little boy.

"What fell over in your room?"

"Just my stack of whale books. Nothing got hurt, though. I'll pick 'em up when we get home."

Lisa bit back a smile. She'd been after Cody to put those books on a shelf for weeks. Nodding, she peered out the window. Still no sign of Joe.

"I don't think Dad's gonna come to my game."

Something inside Lisa wrenched at Cody's matter-of-fact tone. He seemed way too comfortable with Joe's long hours at work. More used to it than any little boy should ever have to be.

Which of Joe's divorce cases interfered with his family time today? Though tired of Joe's long hours at the law firm, she instantly regretted the direction of her thoughts. Joe worked hard in a demanding profession to provide the best life he could for them. Not only that, he agonized over his extra time at work as much as she did. "Forgive me, Lord." She took a deep breath and prayed for help with her attitude.

"Hey, Mom, you're wearing the shirt!"

"I sure am, sweetheart. It's my lucky shirt."

Cody grinned, and Lisa's heart filled with joy. The sweatshirt depicted an orca swimming on the ocean floor. Cody drew the picture when he was in the first grade, after a trip to the Vancouver Aquarium in British Columbia. At that time, they still had orcas in the aquarium.

Cody had fallen truly and madly in love.

Surprisingly though, the picture he'd drawn after the trip wasn't of an orca in an aquarium. Rather, the whale swam along the ocean floor, surrounded by seaweed, starfish, and shells. Cody declared all whales belonged in the ocean and not the aquarium.

Lisa loved the picture so much she made a copy, stenciled it onto two sweatshirts then painted one for her and one for Cody. She wore hers proudly, and Cody always seemed to get a kick out of it when she wore it in public.

"We'd better go. Otherwise the coach will make me sit out the first half." The anxiety in Cody's voice interrupted her thoughts.

Lisa's cell phone rang, and she dug through her purse, hoping to find it before it switched over to voice mail.

"I'll bet that's him. Can I answer it?"

"Sure, honey." Lisa's fingers finally connected with the phone. She scooped it from the bottom of her purse and held it out for her son.

Cody grabbed it and eagerly flipped it open. "Hey." He spoke quietly into the phone. "Yeah, OK."

Cody's chin trembled, indicating his disappointment. But his voice never hinted at it. She didn't need to hear the words to know exactly what Joe said to their son.

Lord, Joe's missing so much. Help him, please. Help him slow down and enjoy his son before it's too late. Cody will be grown and gone before he realizes it.

"I love you, too. See you tonight." Cody flipped the phone closed and handed it to Lisa, his eyes downcast. "Mr. Lee is making him work late. He won't be at the game."

His effort to rein in his emotions was a valiant one, and Lisa's heart went out to him. Hot anger tore through her. Her jaw tightened, and she fought to keep from clenching her teeth. Lucky for Joe, Cody had already hung up.

"Mom, please don't be mad at Dad. He has to work hard so he can pay for my birthday trip to Alaska next year. So we can go see the whales, remember?"

Lisa nodded, still trying to control her anger at Joe.

"Please say you won't be mad. Please? He's the best dad in the world."

How like Cody to forgive so easily. Why couldn't she do the same? Because it happened way too often, and she didn't like seeing her son repeatedly disappointed.

"I'll try, buddy. Come on. Let's go. We can't have you sitting on the bench."

"Hey, Mom, you're not paying attention," Cody complained a few minutes later as they headed down the winding road that made up Whidbey Island's highway. "I thought you wanted to sing the 'Cartoon Song.'"

"I do, honey. I'm sorry. I'm just—" Lisa shook her head. This situation was unfair to Cody. She shouldn't let her anger at Joe spoil his last baseball game. She glanced briefly at her son then quickly back at the road. He looked concerned, and she wanted to draw him into a hug but reached over and ruffled the top of his head instead.

"I'm just disappointed, honey. I wanted your dad to be there for your last game."

"I know, Mom. But it's Mr. Lee's fault, not his. And he said he'll show up if he can."

Yeah, right. Mike Lee would keep Joe until way

after Cody's bedtime if history was any indication. Joe worked so hard for the man, not only had he missed all of Cody's games, family dinners, and picnics in the park, he hadn't even been to church in months. Her anger sparked again, this time at Mike Lee.

But Cody shouldn't feel the obligation to play peacemaker between her, Joe, and Joe's boss. Not wanting to upset her son, she kept her opinion to herself. Lisa hit the gas a little harder than she should have as she pulled into the left-turn lane. Thankfully, the green arrow lit up just then, and she didn't need to hit the brake.

As she rounded into her turn, two things happened.

Cody burst into his mashed up version of the "Cartoon Song."

And Lisa realized with instant horror, the oncoming car failed to stop at the intersection.

With a mother's instinct, she threw her arm in front of Cody only to have it thrown against the dashboard when the other vehicle made impact with hers a split second later. The pain meant nothing to her, however, as she struggled against gravity to shield her son. She had to protect him, had to keep him safe.

"Cody! Cody!" She shouted his name repeatedly above the nightmarish sounds of skidding tires and crunching metal. "It'll be OK, honey. I promise."

Cody didn't answer. Desperate to touch her son, to reach out and comfort him, Lisa couldn't lift her arm no matter how hard she tried.

"Cody, stay awake for me, OK? Maybe we can sing the "Cartoon Song." Cody, can you hear me?"

Lisa struggled to stay conscious, afraid of closing her eyes, terrified she'd wake up to find her world

changed forever. But her vision dimmed and blackness swirled around her. She mustered all the energy she could and whispered, "Cody, I love you so much, sweetheart."

Why didn't he answer? Desperate to hear his voice, frantic because she couldn't, Lisa strained to see him but the darkness continued to envelop her.

Please, Lord, take care of my little boy. Please, let him be OK.

Tears trailed down her face, but Lisa couldn't lift her hand to wipe them away.

"Lord, please," she whispered just before darkness claimed her, "don't take my son away from me."

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Ten months later

The blinking light on the answering machine flickered, fast, furious, needy for attention. An unwelcome emotion tore at Joe Kendall's gut. *Ignore it. Just walk away.*

He should leave the room. Leave the voice mail unheard. Pretend he hadn't seen the annoying red light. Then the message wouldn't impact his heart. But he couldn't leave.

An inexplicable desperate need filled him, a need to hear the voice that would fill the room when he pressed the button.

Lisa. She called everyday like clockwork, and Joe found himself alternately looking forward to *and* dreading the calls.

The answering machine was a blessing. He didn't have to speak to her yet could listen to the sweet sound of her voice without her knowing how it affected him.

Easing behind the huge oak desk beneath the windows at the far end of his office, he settled into the chair of butter-plush leather—a gift from Lisa when he'd been offered a junior partnership in the firm.

Before he could push the button to listen to the message, someone rapped on the door. His boss, Mike Lee, walked into the room without waiting for a response.

"Joe, we need to talk."

"Hey, Mike. What's up?" He tried to sound pleasant, even though the interruption irritated him.

Mike rubbed his hand over the top of his short, thinning hair. Something was wrong. Not only did Mike not usually burst into his office, his head wasn't usually beet-red.

"It's the other senior partners." Mike sighed and rubbed his scalp again then sat in one of the chairs in front of Joe's desk. "Joe, there's no easy way to say this. A few of them are calling for your resignation."

"What?" Joe straightened in his chair. This couldn't be happening. "But I'm a partner."

"I know. That's why they've agreed to give you another chance."

Relieved, Joe let his shoulders relax. "Thank you," he whispered.

"Don't get too comfortable. There's a stipulation."

Joe tensed again.

"They want you to take a leave of absence. You have the rest of the week to get your cases cleared up or reassigned. After that, you're on a mandatory leave of absence."

"But—"

"Don't even try to talk your way around it. They won't consider anything less. It was the best I could do."

Joe rose from behind his desk and walked over to the window that faced Penn Cove. A few houses stood on the bluff across the water. One of those houses belonged to him and Lisa. If he lost his job, they'd lose the house. He couldn't let Lisa lose one more thing. He cleared his throat in order to hide his emotion. "For how long?"

"Two weeks."

Two weeks? Joe had no idea how to fill two weeks' worth of time. Not without work. It was the only thing that kept him going. Unsure what to say, he stared out the window. A boat with a faded red sail bobbed around in the choppy water.

"Joe, there's something else we need to talk about." Joe tensed at Mike's tone. "Friend to friend," Mike added quickly. "Why don't you sit back down?"

"I think I'll stand. Thanks." Joe continued to look out at the window.

"You should seriously consider filing for a divorce."

Joe turned around so fast he bumped into the potted fig and knocked several of the dry leaves loose. They fluttered to the ground and crunched into bits on the carpet beneath Joe's feet as he stepped toward Mike. "File for divorce? Are you for real?"

Mike stood and joined Joe at the window. He stared across the water as if looking at Joe and Lisa's house. "When was the last time you saw her?"

Joe blew out a heavy breath, not wanting to have this conversation. He clenched and unclenched his fists. "Don't, Mike," he warned in a low voice.

"Come on, Joe. I'm not trying to fight with you."

"It sure sounds like it. How would you like it if I made the same suggestion to you?"

"It's not the same thing. I go home to my wife every night." Mike stared at him, a challenge in his light blue eyes.

"Yeah, well, things are different for me, and you know it."

"What's it been? Three months?"

"Two," Joe answered, feeling ashamed. Why did

Mike have to bring up this subject? "It really isn't your business."

"I feel like it is. You're my friend. You're my co-worker. I just went to bat for you in a room full of men who want you gone. You owe me."

"And I'm supposed to repay you by divorcing my wife?"

"No. Not to repay me. To let her go. You haven't seen her in two months. Before that, you were always mentally absent. You're wallowing in guilt so heavy you can't even see what you're doing to her."

"I know what I'm doing to her," Joe snapped. "Do you think this is easy for me?" The guilt swallowed him a little more each day. He certainly didn't need any reminders from Mike.

"You need to find closure, Joe."

"Closure? I'm so sick of you throwing that word in my face. What I need is—" *My wife and my son.* "Get out, Mike. Go home to *your* wife."

Mike nodded and clapped him on the shoulder in what was probably meant to be a show of support. Joe shrugged Mike's hand off and turned back to the window. "I said get out."

"Fine. But think about it. Until you find a way to deal with your grief, you're no good for Lisa, and you're no good for yourself." Mike started out the door but stopped and turned back for one last parting shot. "If you truly love her, which I'm beginning to doubt, you'd let her get on with her life, Joe. Give her a chance to find a little bit of happiness."

Fists clenched, Joe started toward the door but stopped as Mike closed it behind him. He struggled for self-control. Fighting with Mike wasn't worth losing his job. Still, what did Mike know about it? Joe loved

Lisa more than anything. That's why he stayed away from her.

With a resigned sigh, he went back to his desk and pushed the button on the machine. Settling into his chair, he leaned back and listened.

"Hi, Joe. It's me." The soft gentle tones were Lisa's usual manner. Letting his eyes drift shut, he could picture her standing there, blue eyes sparkling with joy and excitement as they used to, her touch light on his arm.

"We haven't talked in a while." Her birthday. Two months almost to the day. He knew exactly how long it had been, just like he remembered every detail of his last-ditch effort to try and repair things.

"I know you're avoiding me, Joe. Please come home." If possible, her voice had softened even more. Lady-like, never demanding or whiny.

With a groan, he buried his face in his hands wishing he could go home, knowing he couldn't go there, couldn't face Lisa day after day, where he would be met with the hurt in her eyes—hurt he'd caused.

He'd hoped the specially planned birthday weekend would erase the deep sadness from her eyes. But it hadn't. If anything, it made things worse. For whatever reason, he didn't know. But he'd stayed away after that.

It was better this way, better for both of them.

"You have to be tired of sleeping in your office."

Though he'd never admit it to her or anyone else, he was. He had a persistent ache in his back and a crick in his neck from tossing and turning and trying to get comfortable on the small couch.

"Joe, I want you to take the trip."

The trip. Something deep in his gut froze, and his