



WHEN THE THREADS OF HER LIFE COMPLETELY UNRAVEL,
EARLY MCGRATH MUST RELY ON GOD FOR A SOFT PLACE TO FALL.

liz
flaherty

A Soft Place
to Fall a novel

A Soft Place to Fall

Liz Flaherty

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A Soft Place to Fall

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Dedication

For Duane, who's been my soft place to fall since that lovely day in May in 1971. You're still my hero.

1

Springtime

Freedom.

Earline McGrath didn't know whether to laugh or cry, so she went into the garden and planted carrots. Nash hated carrots.

This morning they'd met oh-so-civilly in his brother's law office to finalize the division of thirty years' accumulation of things like DVD players and Christmas tree ornaments with "Logan, Fist Graid" written on them in glitter glue. Now it seemed important to her to do something her husband disliked. Planting carrots made more sense than rearranging furniture and was easier on the back even if it was hard on the knees.

Somewhere in the nightmare that was the three-car garage built to look like a wing on their pseudo-Victorian house, there were some kneepads from when the girls played high school volleyball. Early needed to find them. Only thing was, she'd find other stuff, too. Baby sleepers with spit-up stains, old diaries she should have burned years ago, and early marriage melamine dishes that would make her eyes sting and turn her heart into skip-a-beat mush.

They'd married the day after Nash graduated, when Early was barely sixteen, just finishing up her sophomore year at the tiny high school in the middle

of nowhere, Kentucky. She'd been eight weeks pregnant, but hardly anyone had known except Early's friends Mary Brad, Lou Ann, and Emily. Even when she gave birth to Evan seven months later and he weighed in at nearly nine pounds, she'd scarcely looked pregnant.

But, regardless of how she looked, her water broke in the produce department of Waylon's Supersaver, where Nash was peeling outer leaves off heads of cabbage for minimum wage. Patty Waylon had taken one look at the mess in aisle three and hollered, "Nash McGrath, put down those cabbages and get her to the hospital now!"

Nash hurried, but a train blocked their path and Evan Davis McGrath was born at the corner of Evans and Market with only his father and Mike Davis from the Marathon filling station in attendance. Mike said it was a quite a way to become someone's godfather.

Sitting in the loamy soil of her garden remembering the day Evan was born, Early decided she might as well laugh. In all truth, she'd laughed more in her thirty years with Nash than she'd cried, so it came naturally enough. Besides, it wasn't as though they were mad at each other or their feelings were hurt. That was part of their problem; their feelings for each other didn't seem to go deep enough anymore to be hurt.

"Girl, you look a little mindless sitting there in the radishes and the green onions laughing at nothing."

"Not the first time, now, is it?" She slanted a smile at her father-in-law. "Did you want something, Ben?"

"Thought maybe you'd feel like a walk." He grinned, the expression crooked and irresistible and exactly like the ones his sons turned on people at the

slightest provocation. "If you can make it as far as Donna's Diamond Dairy, I might be coerced into springing for an ice cream."

"Two dips?"

His nod propelled her to her feet with an inward sigh. The knees that had supported her unflinchingly for forty-six years, through learning to ride a bicycle and roller skate, and lots of praying and repenting, tired a lot more quickly than they used to. That was all there was to it. She might have to break down and move furniture after all, unless she was willing to find those kneepads. She would put Nash's recliner in the garage, just set it smack in the middle of the spot where he used to park his SUV, and while she was at it, she'd shove the big flat-screen television he was so fond of out there, too. Then she could rent the garage to someone whose life had caught a change-up and left him bereft of a remote control and his own oversized chair. He could use the melamine dishes, too, and keep soft drinks and sliced cheese in the little refrigerator the kids had used at college.

"You sure this is what you want?" Ben waited until they were closer to Donna's than to the house to ask.

Only the promise of two dips of strawberry cheesecake ice cream kept her from turning on her heel and heading back toward the gated entry of Canterbury Crossing. She walked in silence for a few minutes, not sure what to say to this man she'd loved all these many years.

"I'm not the one who left," she said evenly.

And all of a sudden, standing in line at an ice cream stand with her father-in-law, the pain overwhelmed her, and Early was in tears. Not quiet,

dignified weeping that would befit the soon-to-be ex-wife of a prominent doctor, but great, gulping sobs that left her face splotchy and the front of Ben's shirt a wet mess.

"Come on, sugar. Sit down. Just wait there for me there."

They sat at a picnic table, dishes of ice cream between them. "He's feeling his age, Early," Ben said. "It happens to all of us, one time or another, in one way or another."

"Oh, really?" Her eyes felt as though someone had stuck lit matches into them. "You?"

He hesitated, sadness crossing his face in a wave. "Me."

"What did Rosie do?"

"Threw me out. Told me to come back when I was ready to be a grownup. Called me a couple of names she'd have washed the boys' mouths out with soap for using."

"I can see her doing that." Early smiled, the expression for once easy, not requiring conscious thought. "I've wished she was here so often lately, just for me. How's that for selfish?"

"I do it every day of my life."

By the time they'd finished their ice cream, Early felt soothed, certain she could survive another day. "Thank you." She slipped her hand into the crook of Ben's elbow as they stepped from cement sidewalks to the pseudo-antique cobblestone ones of the subdivision.

He gave her hand a pat and hugged it against his side. "You're my favorite daughter."

They stopped three doors down from Early's house, commenting on the colors of paint workmen

were applying to the tri-level across the street.

"They'd look grand on a Victorian," Ben observed, "but on that house, they just look like grape soda pop and baby poop." He eyed the residents of the house as they worked in the flowers that lined their driveway. "Can we sit just a minute? It's getting hot."

Something in his voice alerted Early, and she glanced sharply at him. He'd lost color, and the skin of his arm was turning clammy right under her hand.

It was seventy-one degrees and not the slightest bit humid. A mild spring day.

"Ben?"

"Ah, Rosie," he muttered. "My arm hurts."

When he collapsed, his weight nearly took Early to the ground with him. "Oh, please, God," she said, straining to lower him gently. "Sweet Jesus, please. Ben, no. Don't you die on me. Don't you do it."

Kneeling in the soft new grass of one of Canterbury Crossing's most manicured lawns, Early looked around wildly. Surely someone would see them. She thought of the cell phone Nash was always urging her to carry around with her. She'd finally consented to keeping it in her car, where it certainly didn't do any good right now.

"We called 911." The voice, breathless, came from above her. "Does he have a history of heart trouble?" One of the women who'd been working in her flowers knelt beside them, a trowel still in her hand.

"Only having it broken." Early hugged Ben's shoulders, as though he would be safe as long as her arms were around him. She prayed silently, desperately. She was out of practice, but the Lord still listened. Surely He did.

It seemed to take forever, but it was only minutes

later that the wailing ambulance pulled under the porte-cochere of the hospital's emergency room.

Nash approached, a lab coat over his jeans and cotton sweater. He stayed out of the way of emergency room personnel. His face was grim, his brown eyes dark behind his glasses. Behind him came Evan, the third doctor in his father's family practice, whose Dockers, white shirt, and tie had become as much a uniform as Nash's jeans.

"What was he doing, Mom?" asked Evan, skidding to a stop. "Did he say anything?"

Early repeated Ben's words, seeing Nash's flinch out of the corner of her eye. "He hasn't regained consciousness," she said.

Tell me he's going to wake up, or if he's not, tell me he's with Rosie at least in his mind. Don't leave me swinging out here thinking it's somehow all my fault.

But they didn't tell her anything. Nash didn't even meet her eyes before he pushed his way through the doors into the emergency room. Evan hesitated a moment, then waved Early toward the waiting room before following his father's flapping white coat.

Someone in a pink smock brought her a cup of coffee, and she sipped greedily, thinking that as the wife of one doctor and the mother of another, she should probably don a pink smock more often herself.

Except that she wasn't a doctor's wife any longer, she remembered, the coffee turning bitter on her tongue. Ben wasn't the nearest thing to a father she had. She was no longer entitled to that proprietary little twinge she felt when other women looked at her husband. Her children were grown, professionals all. No one needed Early McGrath for anything. She was free.

Freedom.

She'd dreamed of it often, while getting Nash through medical school, raising babies, and caring for Rosie through those dark last days, but dreaming of it and having it were two different things.

By the time Evan emerged from behind the swinging doors, Early was on her third cup of coffee and had straightened the magazine racks twice.

"It was a bad one," he said. "It's a good thing he was with you. He probably wouldn't have made it if he'd been on his own. The cardiothoracic surgeon was here, thanks be to God. She'll do a five-vessel coronary artery bypass graft in the morning—that's five bypasses. He'll be comfortable through the night, though."

Early sighed a silent prayer of thanksgiving and pleading. "How's your dad doing?"

"Cranky as ever." Evan grinned at her and accepted a cup of coffee from the woman in the pink smock with a nod of thanks. "Between him and Granddad, the air was turning blue in there, what with all the complaining. The ER nurses were teasing Granddad, telling him they understood now why Dad was such a crab, so then naturally both of them set about being charming. By the time I came out here, the whole staff was in love with Granddad, and of course, they're already crazy about Dad."

He got to his feet. "I'm going to the office. Tell Dad he doesn't need to go back to work—I'll clear any paths with bumps left in them."

It was Thursday, Nash's half-day and Evan's day off. Early wondered why they even bothered with non-scheduled time, since the R and R never actually came to pass. She wished she had a dollar for every time

she'd been left waiting for Nash's promised timely arrival.

Left waiting. Must be the story of a doctor's wife, just as freedom was the story of the ex-wife.

The volunteer had made a fresh pot of coffee, and Early was on her second cup of it when Nash materialized in front of her. "Come on," he said. "I'll run you home."

"OK." She laid her hand in his, allowing him to help her to her feet.

At her behest, Nash stopped at a supermarket, and she bought a bouquet of roses for the neighbors who called 911 and sat with Early and Ben those desperate five minutes until the ambulance came. "Just stop and run in," she said. "Or I can."

"We both can," he said. "He may be my father, but he likes you better than he does me."

She didn't respond to the old joke. Her line was, "Sure, but I'm a better cook," and she'd said it a hundred times since it had ceased being funny. She didn't have the emotional strength to make it a hundred and one. She was angry, and it was taking all she had to stay that way.

"I'm worried about him." Nash pulled into what used to be their driveway. "He's always been healthy as a horse."

"He will be again." She looked over at him. "Won't he?"

"I hope so. He's been at loose ends without Mama. I thought moving him up here would give him something to live for, being close to us and the kids, but it hasn't. The ends are looser than ever, and I'm afraid he doesn't care if he lives or not."

"So let him move back home when he gets out of

the hospital," she said. "You and Joe can afford care for him until he gets back on his feet. For that matter, he can afford it for himself. You can go down on alternate weekends, especially since you're both single. The kids will always go to visit their grandfather, no matter where he is." She opened her door without looking at him again.

"I'll walk you in. The door's been standing open all day."

Don't! If he came in, he'd see her cry over his father and try to make her feel better. Then she'd end up offering to move down to the country with Ben because she had already been thinking that would be the easiest thing for everyone else. *And I'm tired of doing the easiest thing for everyone else. Tired! Do you hear me?*

Oh, good grief, of course he didn't hear her. Mind reading was the responsibility of the wife part of a marriage, not the husband one. The husband didn't even have to listen to the spoken word. He just had to grunt often enough to show he was still alive.

But Nash checked the house with all the impersonality of a bored police officer, told her he'd see her later and to take care now, and left.

Early dropped clothes all the way to the bathroom and stepped under a stinging shower.

And that was when she cried.

Nash released a relieved sigh. Early looked so sad that he was afraid she was going to cry. Even if he wasn't in love with his ex-wife anymore, even if he wasn't sure he'd ever been, he didn't like seeing her cry. She didn't cry pretty, for one thing, with glistening

eyes and tears hanging like diamonds from her lashes. No, Early cried noisy and splotchy.

For another thing, even if she was crying over his father today, Nash was fairly certain his departure from their marriage and their home was at the root of it. He felt guilty, and he didn't like the feeling a bit.

And then there was the third thing. Beyond fairly, he was *absolutely* certain if Early had cried, he'd have cried with her.

At the apartment complex where he rented a two-bedroom-two-bath in the same building that housed Joe, his thrice-divorced brother, and Evan, who enjoyed his bachelorhood to an extent that horrified Early, Nash left a message with his brother's secretary and stepped into the shower. He let the spray wash lukewarm over him and leaned against the wall.

This was probably what Early had done when he left; she always cried in the shower. It was, she informed him, how she'd survived raising four children and one husband.

"Every one of your kids was here," Ben grumbled. "Don't they have jobs?"

"Shoot, no. They think you're going to kick off and leave them a fortune." Early hoisted herself onto the edge of his bed and scowled at him. "Don't you even consider it. They need to work for a living."

"Jessie did ask me if my will was up to date. Offered to change it free of charge if I'd make it worth her while in the long run." In the tired face that seemed more lined than it had been at the ice cream stand earlier in the day, Ben's brown eyes still laughed.

"That's Joe's fault. He's the one who talked her into law school and hired her as soon as she graduated. Has he been here?"

"Yeah, he came with Jess. Always on the run, that boy is. Soon as he figures out what he's running from, he might settle down. Don't think I'll hold my breath for that to happen, though, seeing as how he's forty-five and no closer than he was twenty years and three wives ago."

"I know Logan and Anna came by." Early named her second son and his wife. "I watched the kids, and they helped me plant carrots. Whole pack of seeds went in one little spot. It'll look like a big fern growing there."

"Sarah had a black eye when she came," Ben reported. "One of her kids didn't take kindly to something. Never knew special education would be such a violent field."

"She was prepared, being the youngest in the house. She fought for everything, whether she needed to or not." Early looked at her watch. "I think I better go and let you get some rest. It'll be a big day tomorrow, and you're going to feel lousy for most of it." *Besides, I know Nash will stop in, and I can't see him again today. I just can't. Yesterday was just too long and too hard.*

Ben caught her hand. "I don't like to be a baby, especially at the ripe old age of seventy," he said, "but would you stay awhile?" His chuckle caught in his throat. "I'm afraid Jessie will come in and force the issue about my will."

"Sure." She didn't have to think about it. Ben McGrath seldom asked her for so much as the time of her day. When he did ask, she was going to respond.

She kissed his cheek. "Rest, handsome. I'll be right here."

Early had missed enough sleep during the time of having four teenagers in the house that she still felt as though she was catching up; therefore, if it was dark and she was even close to lying down, she fell asleep. This night, with her hand resting lightly on her father-in-law's, was no exception.

Her eyes opened once when a blanket floated over her. "Sh," Nash whispered. "Just sleep."

She woke at five, as she usually did. Nash was asleep in a chair on the other side of the bed. His hair was a dark brown mess, his glasses still on his face but askew. She had, she realized, slept better in a fake leather recliner with him in the room than she had since he'd left home.

How many nights had they spent together in hospital rooms in thirty years? Every time a child was hospitalized. When Early had a miscarriage early on, a hysterectomy just a few years ago. When Nash had his gall bladder removed in his thirties. His angioplasty last year. They'd always been relieved to get back home and into their own bed. Somehow, she thought that relief would escape her this time.

"Are you going to observe?" she asked Nash later, after kissing Ben and watching the gurney roll onto the elevator.

"No. Evan is, so he'll keep us posted." Nash yawned widely. "Let's go get some coffee."

She went home after having coffee with Nash, reflecting that the house in Canterbury Crossing got lonelier every time she walked into it. She went out back to plant the flats of flowers that had been waiting patiently beside the door.

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While she was at it, she dug up the carrots. She didn't like them either.

2

“He just wants to go home, back to the Ridge. Early, has he been that unhappy up here?” Joe looked at her.

Early refilled the iced tea glasses that sat on the table and went back around the counter to sit on a barstool and rip stitches out of an appliquéd quilt block. If she separated herself from those who had been born as or were still married to McGraths, surely they wouldn’t expect her to do the things they didn’t want to, would they?

“He’s been lonely, Joe. You know that.” Nash’s voice was impatient, as it usually was when he spoke to his younger brother. “Good heavens, he and Mama were closer than two coats of paint for forty years. I don’t think he realizes he’d have been lonely on the Ridge, too.”

“Well, he can’t go back there and live by himself,” said Evan. “He’ll come back from this surgery, but he’ll still bear watching. If he’s left on his own, he’ll be living on a diet comprised mainly of trans-fats and carbohydrates and smoking his pipe all day long. His idea of exercise will be thumbing the remote control.” His grin was wicked and familiar when he looked at his father. “Kind of like yours, Dad.”

“He could stay with us,” said Logan, exchanging a silent message with his wife.

Early looked at her daughter-in-law and saw her wide smile of agreement and her nod.

"Of course he can," Anna said. "We could make him an apartment out of one side of the garage so he could have privacy and some respite from the kids' noise."

Anna, you can't. Logan will mean to help, but he won't. Jessie and Sarah will mean to stop by more often, but they won't. Say no, honey. But Anna couldn't hear her thoughts, couldn't know after six years of marriage what her mother-in-law had learned in thirty.

Early laid down the quilt block.

"I can come by more often, Anna, to give you a break," Jessie offered.

"Me, too," said Sarah, "especially after school's out."

Nash nodded thoughtfully. "It might work."

Early looked across the counter, over the children's heads, searching to meet his eyes. *No, it won't, Nash. What's wrong with you?*

"Excuse me." Oh, phooey. What was it with her that she couldn't manage to keep her mouth shut? "You're all talking as though Ben is unable to think or speak for himself. Is this some new development since I saw him yesterday, when he was flirting outrageously with the nurses and trying to talk his way into going home early?"

"He's not especially trustworthy at taking care of himself," Nash said. "That's how he got into this mess to start with."

"Oh?" She hiked an eyebrow at him. "So speaketh Dr. Angioplasty himself? Remember that, children, if your father has further problems with his heart. Just chuck him into a home and visit him once a week."

"Well, fine, Mrs. Knows-All," snapped Nash. "What do you suggest?"

"Make that *ex*-Mrs. Knows-More-Than-You-Think, if it's all the same to you," she said crisply. "I'm simply suggesting that you remember that Ben is a grownup and treat him with the dignity he's earned."

"That's not an answer."

"Well, then, why don't you and Joe go down to the Ridge and see what you can find? There's sure to be someone who would check on him on a daily basis. We grew up there. It's not as though he wants to move into a nest of rattlesnakes or strangers."

Her sensible inner voice interrupted. *Don't offer to do it for them. You're done taking care of people.*

"I'm going down to see Mother today. I can check around." So much for sensible inner voices. Early raised her eyebrow again. "Anyone who wants to is welcome to come along. I'm sure your grandmother would be delighted to see you."

"Excuse me, Mama, but I don't think Granny Fran has ever been delighted about anything in her whole life." Jessie got to her feet. "This has been just the most fun, but I need to stop by the office and then go home and try to look like a real girl." She fluttered her considerable eyelashes at her brothers. "I have a date."

"I have to go, too." Sarah threw Early an apologetic look. "I'm sorry I can't go to Gran's with you."

"It's all right, sweetie." Early kissed the girls as they left. "Drive carefully."

"Do everything carefully." Nash kissed them, too. He gave his brother a look of disgust that turned to a smile when his gaze moved on to Anna and Logan. "It's nice of you two, but as much as it grieves me to agree with your mother, she's right. Your granddad can't be pushed around like that, nor should he be."

And you two have enough on your plate, with the little ones and your job, Logan, and nursing school, Anna.”

Within ten minutes, everyone was gone but Nash. Early gathered sweaty glasses and tried to talk herself out of being pleased that he'd agreed with her about something of substance.

She wasn't pleased about everything, though. She frowned at him when he plucked her keys from her hand. “You don't have to go with me. And even if you do, you're not driving. My car doesn't like you, and I'm not all that fond of you these days myself.” Driving fifty-seven miles into the country with a backseat driver didn't thrill her at all—turning her keys over to him was untenable. Especially since the ink hadn't even dried on their divorce decree yet.

“I don't mind. I should check on Fran anyway and take her some samples.” He grinned cheerfully, though his eyes darkened. “Sides that, you know full well she's going to blame you up, down, and sideways for this divorce. I need to set her straight on that one.” He squirted dishwashing liquid into the sink and ran hot water into it.

Early got a dry dishtowel out of the drawer and stood for a minute, looking so hard at the apple-bedecked terrycloth that the colors blurred.

She had to ask. She didn't want to—she just had to.

“Are you happy, Nash, now that you're alone?” She corrected herself hurriedly. “Well, now that you're not with me, anyway. I don't know if you're alone or not.” *And I don't care.*

I don't. Really.

Which was good, because he didn't answer her question, just told her the window over the sink