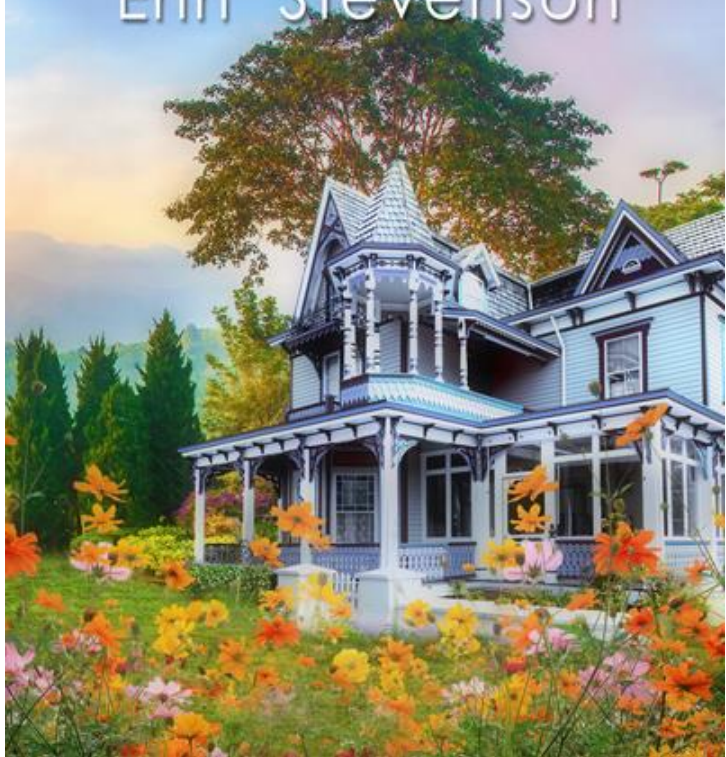


Meet me
ON THE *Porch*

Erin Stevenson



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1

Nothing said *home* like the aroma of homemade bread. Brynne Lockwood didn't even realize she was hungry until she came through the kitchen door of her grandparents' Vermont farmhouse. Sure enough, four golden-brown loaves sat cooling on the kitchen counter. If she couldn't have blueberry crumble, Gramma's fresh-baked bread was the next best thing.

"Mmmm," she said as she drew in a deep breath.

Gramps followed her in. When the train had pulled into the station, it had been easy to spot him in the small crowd gathered on the platform. Douglas Lockwood hadn't bowed to age. He still stood head and shoulders above the rest. "I know." He laughed. "I never get tired of that smell." He headed up the back stairs with her luggage.

Brynne just had to have some bread but knew better than to disturb the fresh loaves. She spied the breadbasket with its terrycloth covering. There was half a loaf, already sliced. She dumped her things on the floor, lifted a thick piece, dipped the spreader into the blue crock, and slathered a thick layer of apple butter onto the bread. She closed her lips around the heavenly treat and moaned.

Why had she stayed away for almost three years?

She took another bite, and the soft, sweet, creamy

butter oozed out of her lips on both sides and dripped down her chin onto her hand. Brynne giggled. This was the only way to eat homemade bread.

The back door opened, and she crammed the rest of the piece into her mouth. What made her do that? It wasn't like Gramma would care.

Oh, no. Gramma wasn't alone. She was accompanied by a tall man with dark hair and glasses holding a baby girl who had a cloud of white-blond curls.

Merciful heavens, but he was gorgeous, with a capital-G. And Brynne's cheeks were stuffed full of bread, and she had apple butter all over her face. She looked down at a stain on her comfiest jeans. They were faded almost to the point of being threadbare, but perfect for a travel day, paired with a plain gray t-shirt and an oversized maroon hoodie she'd had for years.

So much for first impressions.

"Brynne! You're home!" Gramma held out her arms.

Brynne swallowed as quickly as she could and swiped at her greasy face. Where was a napkin when she needed one? "Hi, Gramma." The words came out kind of croaky. She tried to ignore Adonis and turned her head to avoid getting butter on Gramma's jacket.

"How was your trip? This is our new pastor, Adam Johnston, and his daughter, Lace. This is my granddaughter, Brynne."

"Nice to meet you, Brynne."

Oooh, he had a deep, yummy voice. Brynne's face flamed. What was wrong with her? This was a *pastor*, a

married dad-pastor. She wanted to jump away from Gramma in case God struck her dead with a bolt of lightning.

Brynne choked down the rest of the bread and reached for the pastor's outstretched hand when she realized hers was still all buttery. Could this get any more awkward?

She grabbed a towel, did her best to clean it off, and then offered a weak shake. "Nice to meet you, too," she mumbled. She managed a brief glance at him and saw unmistakable mirth in his eyes. No wonder. A glob of apple butter had dripped from her chin onto her sweatshirt.

Great.

Gramma set her things on the counter. "Adam just arrived today. The stone house has a plumbing issue, and there's no water, so he and Lace are staying here for a while." She went to the stove and lifted the lid of the big stewpot. "That's good and done."

Brynne caught a whiff of beef stew that she hadn't noticed due to the bread. "The stone house always has some issue."

Gramma smiled. "Well, it's an old house. But for now, we'll put them in the cabin with the crib."

"I'm sure it will be fine, Mrs. Lockwood."

Gramma tilted her head at him. Brynne couldn't believe it. Gramma was already giving the pastor *the look*?

"Libby." Adam smiled, and deep laugh lines bracketed his mouth.

Brynne's heart tripped.

Gramps entered the kitchen from the back stairs and grinned. "This the new pastor?" He stuck out his hand. "Doug Lockwood. Welcome!"

"I'm Adam, and this is Lace."

"What a little cutie!" Gramps beamed at the baby. "How old is she?"

A flash of an expression crossed Adam's face. His vivid blue eyes held a hint of something behind his rectangular, black frames.

Gramma took flour and sugar from the pantry. "Lace is a year old today! And she needs a birthday cake." She looked at Adam. "If that's OK with you, Adam. And you'll eat dinner with us? It will be just the family tonight. Unless you want some privacy. I could bring it to your cabin."

Brynne couldn't keep her gaze off him. Something was going on. Where was the baby's mother?

"Yes to both, Libby. Thank you," Adam replied and looked around. "I—ah, could someone point me to the bathroom?"

"Oh, sure, right through there. First door on the right," Gramps said.

Brynne's heart thumped. She should offer to hold the baby, but she just couldn't. The beautiful little girl was just about the age...no, she couldn't.

Gramma bustled over and held out her hands. "I'll take her, Adam."

Lace cooed and smiled at Gramma, the baby magnet.

Brynne let out a sigh of relief.

Gramps pointed down the hall and Adam left.

After the bathroom door closed, Gramps looked at Gramma. "Where's his wife?" he asked.

Gramma lifted a shoulder. "I didn't ask. Something told me not to. I'm sure he'll tell us."

Gramps frowned. "What if they sent a single man to us?"

"They wouldn't. But if they did, Tom will straighten it out. He's coming by tonight." Gramma bounced the baby on her hip.

Grampa shook his head. "The Ericksons will have a fit."

"Don't borrow trouble," Gramma hissed.

Footsteps came closer and Adam returned. He held his arms out for his daughter and her little face lit up.

"Let's get your things unloaded," Gramps said. "What time's supper, Lib?"

Gramma looked at the clock. "Stew's ready, but let me get cupcakes in the oven. Twenty minutes."

Gramps, Adam, and Lace left.

Gramma dried her hands on a towel, turned to Brynne, and opened her arms. "Come here, love."

Brynne went willingly. There was no comfort like one of Gramma's hugs, and her signature lavender scent filled Brynne with a sense of peace. Tears coursed down her cheeks as Gramma held her.

Gramma reached for a handful of tissues and handed them to Brynne. "Land sakes, girl, you're as skinny as a pole. I'm so glad you're home so I can put some good food in you." She ran her hand over Brynne's hair. Her voice softened. "How long you

staying?"

Brynne twisted the tissues in her hands. "I don't know. I'm between jobs now, as they say." She bit her lower lip. "Thank you for letting me come."

Gramma patted her cheek and turned back to her work. "This is always your home, Brynne. Say, would you mix this up?" She opened a cupboard and set out a cupcake tin. "Cupcakes will be quick. Let's do a half recipe of vanilla cake. Card's in the box, as always. And there's a container of buttercream frosting in the freezer, if you'd go ahead and get that out." She hurried out the door. "I want to find some extra blankets for Adam."

"Sure thing, Gramma." Brynne was glad to have something to keep her busy.

Gramma knew that. Libby Lockwood was one of the most intuitive, compassionate people on God's green earth, and Brynne was ever so thankful to be her granddaughter.

2

Adam was already captivated with Blue Barn Bed and Breakfast. The distinctive barn was visible from the road long before Libby turned off. The large white farmhouse had blue shutters and a wraparound porch complete with blue Adirondack chairs.

If they couldn't stay at the parsonage, the idea of a cabin was a good alternative. Adam wasn't sure a baby who sometimes woke up in the night would be a welcome guest at the main house.

He followed Doug along a stone path west of the farmhouse into a wooded area.

"We have four cabins back here," Doug explained. "Peacock, Ocean, Navy, and Sapphire."

They were all white clapboard with blue shutters, and quite spread out. Adam and Lace would have plenty of privacy.

Doug stopped at the one with a hand-painted sign that said *Ocean*. "Here we are." He opened the door, and Adam followed him in. There was a cozy main room with a comfortable couch, a padded rocking chair, a table, and a small woodburning stove. Blue gingham curtains framed the windows and a definite woman's touch—no doubt Libby's—dominated the blue-themed décor.

Doug led him through the single door. "Bedroom's through here, and a little bathroom with a stand-up shower." A queen-size bed with a beautiful blue and white quilt along with a tall wooden armoire and a crib in the corner filled the space.

"No kitchen here, but you don't want to miss Libby's cooking anyway," Doug said with a grin.

Adam smiled. "I'm sure we'll be very comfortable. Thank you so much."

Doug nodded. "I'll let you get settled, and we'll see you soon. Just come on in the kitchen door." He let himself out.

Adam put Lace in the crib with some toys, assured her he'd be right back, and did a quick reconnoiter of the cabin. All in all, it looked like a very safe space for his little daughter. Someone had even put protective coverings on all the outlets. She wasn't walking yet but would be any day now.

He went back and got Lace and then changed her and got out a frilly lavender dress with matching shoes that Jenna's parents had sent. "My Lace should look like a princess on her first birthday." Lace brightened at her name. He covered her with tickly kisses and reveled in the sound of her baby giggles. He didn't even mind when she grabbed his hair and pulled.

He sat her up, ran the baby brush through her silky blonde curls, and attempted to attach the matching bow. Between Lace's wiggling and the challenges of working the tiny accessory with his big, clumsy fingers, it took him a few tries, but he finally got it.

Oh, how Jenna would have loved their little girl. Adam clenched his jaw to fight the tears. At times he still couldn't reconcile why God allowed a young wife and mother to die, but Adam trusted in God's sovereignty, prayed every day for the strength to carry on, and for guidance to teach his daughter to love and follow Jesus.

He called Jenna's mother earlier to thank her for the dress but got her voicemail, and Adam suspected that she just didn't want to speak with him. He had prayed for his in-laws that morning as well as Jenna's sister, Candice, all of whom were surely grieving more than usual today.

Adam spread a blanket on the floor and sat Lace on it. Then he snapped a couple of photos of her in the little dress and sent it off to Amelia with a message saying they could call anytime if they wanted to wish their granddaughter a happy birthday.

He changed into a clean shirt and ran a comb through his hair, collected his daughter, all the things needed to care for her for the evening, and walked up to the house.

"Welcome, Adam and Lace!" Libby beamed at them. "When it's just family, we like to eat in the kitchen."

The words *just family* warmed Adam's heart.

Doug was seated at the round table and indicated a chair to his left. Adam planned to hold Lace on his lap when Brynne appeared with a plastic highchair and set it next to him.

Adam thanked her and got his daughter settled in.

Brynne and Libby brought bowls of stew and a big, covered basket that Adam hoped held the bread he smelled.

Libby sat next to Lace, which put Brynne directly across from Adam.

Doug held out his hands, and Adam took Lace's in his other one.

Libby gazed at Lace in her lavender finery. "Aren't you the prettiest birthday girl?"

Adam was glad he had accepted the kind invitation for dinner. This was a much better celebration for Lace than being alone with him in a tiny cabin.

Doug offered grace, for which Adam was relieved. Praying at meals and public events was at the top of everyone's version of a pastor's job description, but Adam didn't think he could have gotten a prayer out tonight without choking up.

"This looks and smells fantastic, Libby," Adam said. She passed him the breadbasket, and he took a piece for himself and one for Lace.

"You'd better get another one now, before Gramps get the basket," Brynne said with a wink at Doug, and Adam took her advice.

"We have apple butter and regular butter," Libby said. She passed him two crocks, one blue and one white.

"Which one do you recommend, Brynne?" Adam couldn't resist. She had looked beyond adorable with her cheeks stuffed like a squirrel and apple butter running down her chin. Then he wished he could recall

the words. He didn't even know the woman, and she might think he was teasing her.

Which he was.

But Brynne Lockwood rose to the occasion. She lifted her chin a notch and met his stare head-on. "Well," she said breezily, "if you're trying to be elegant and refined, you'll choose a thin, sensible spread of the regular butter. But if you care more about savoring the flavor than what you look like, you'll go with the apple butter. In the blue crock."

He liked her spunk. "Apple butter it is." He dipped the spreader in and placed a dollop on his bread plate.

"That's not nearly enough." Brynne's eyes danced at him.

He laughed and took another, larger dollop. After his first bite, he nodded. "You were right."

Doug asked Adam some questions about his background but didn't bring up his marital status.

Libby got up and returned with a tureen. "More stew?"

"Yes, please," Adam said. "I enjoyed seeing a little bit of Brattleboro when I drove through." The historic, artsy town had a unique flair.

"It's a wonderful place to live, that's for sure," Libby said.

Adam wiped his mouth with a napkin. "The church building is beautiful. The photos on the website don't do it justice." It was the quintessential New England church, white with a tall spire that seemed to reach all the way to Heaven.

"It's the oldest church in Brattleboro," Doug said. "We've got a good, solid flock. A nice mix of older and middle-aged folks, and a lot of young families. They're dedicated to spreading the Gospel and want to evangelize this corner of Vermont."

Adam was glad to hear that.

Doug and Libby offered a good discussion about some of the current ministries.

"We need someone to pull it all together into a cohesive plan," Libby said. "Our former pastor was a good speaker, but not as good a leader. Right now, we have lots of things going on, but people are doing their own thing, going their own way."

"We've got the Donovan farm now and need to figure what to do with that," Doug said. "That's a priority."

Brynne's eyes went wide. "Did something happen to Cap?"

Libby squeezed her granddaughter's hand. "He passed, over a year ago. I'm sure I told you."

Brynne looked away and blinked. "Oh—I, yes, I remember."

"It's a gorgeous property, something like twenty-five acres," Libby said. "Some folks want to sell it and use the money to improve our current building and pay off some debt, but others think we should keep it."

Brynne stood and cleared the dishes. "Is that barn still there? I could think of a thousand things to do with that."

"Yup, sure is," Doug said. "I myself think we should hold on to Cap's farm." He slid a look at his

granddaughter. "I'll bet some talented event planner could help us figure out what to do with it."

Brynne flounced to the sink, her ponytail swinging. "Don't know anybody like that," she tossed over her shoulder.

They had cupcakes and sang, and Libby lit a candle for Lace, which Adam blew out. The baby made a mess with the frosting, and it was all very sweet. Adam had just finished cleaning her up when a man called from the back door.

"Knock, knock."

He was about fifty, tall and broad with salt-and-pepper hair, and warm brown eyes. He wore a quality navy pinstripe suit with a white dress shirt and a tie loosened at the neck. Adam's first impression was that he was a professional businessman of some kind.

"Tom, come on in," Libby said. "Have you eaten?"

"Sure have, Libby, thanks." His eyes brightened. "Brynne, it's good to have you home."

"Thanks, Tom. Good to be here."

He came to Adam and grasped his hand in a firm grip. "Pastor Johnson, I'm Tom Armstrong, the head elder. I'm sorry I couldn't meet you when you arrived at the church."

Adam wished he had a nickel for every time he'd been called *Johnson* rather than *Johnston*. He could take Lace and retire in the south of France at the ripe old age of thirty-two. Not that he'd ever been there, but he knew it was a ritzy place. And it was silly to contemplate because he didn't even like ritzy places. He smiled. "It was no problem. Libby met me and

explained everything. And our last name is Johnston, with a *t*. No problem, it happens all the time."

Tom frowned. "I'm sure the file we got said Johnson."

Oh, no, not again. A quiver of unease crawled up Adam's spine. "I can explain. There's another pastor in the denomination in the Northeast, Adam Johnson. He was a year ahead of me in seminary. We've been confused for one another more than once. I'm sure someone at the placement office just typed the wrong name or something."

Tom glanced at Lace, and two lines appeared on his forehead. "I thought the file said your daughter is four. And your wife's name is Paige." He looked past Adam. "Is she here?"

Adam's heart plummeted. This may have been more than a spelling error. "Well, no. Ah—I'm a widower. It's just Lace and me."

Silence blanketed the room, and Tom and Doug exchanged an uncomfortable glance.

"Why don't you men go into the living room?" Libby said. "I'll bring in coffee."

"I'll finish cleaning this up," Brynne said.

Adam settled on the couch with Lace on his lap and pulled a toy out of the diaper bag.

Tom and Doug sat in two wing chairs.

"Do you think I'm in the wrong place?" Adam asked. He surely hoped not. He'd been preparing his heart to minister in Brattleboro since he got the assignment.

"Well, I don't know," Tom replied. "I should

probably make a phone call. The thing is, we specifically asked for a pastoral couple.” He scratched his chin. “We, ah, a few years ago we had a single pastor, and things didn’t end well. I won’t go into detail. But since then, our church board has stipulated that our pastor must be married.”

“Oh.” Adam’s heart dropped. He had no idea what to say and couldn’t speak around the lump in his throat. He wasn’t married, and that wouldn’t change.

Lace began to fuss, and Libby held out her hands. “Would she come to me?”

“We can try,” Adam said. He handed his daughter over and picked up the diaper bag. “She might be ready for a bottle.”

Libby held out her hand. “Does it need to be warmed up?”

“No.”

She sat in a padded rocker with the baby.

Tom was deep in thought. “Adam, would you mind sharing about your—circumstance?”

Adam’s heart squeezed painfully, but he was used to it. He swallowed. “It—it was a year ago today. My wife—she died giving birth. There were complications.” He fought back tears.

Three sets of eyes oozed compassion.

“Oh, my. I’m so sorry,” Tom murmured. His eyes misted, and he rose and seated himself next to Adam. “Could I—could we pray for you?”

Adam could only nod. Tom’s gentle hand rested on his shoulder.

“Father in Heaven, I ask you to be with Your

servant, Adam, on this difficult day. He's suffered a terrible loss and needs Your strength. Please draw close and help him to feel Your presence. Thank You for bringing him and his daughter to Brattleboro. Our church family has been preparing and praying for him. We don't know what has caused the confusion with the other pastor, but we pray You'll help us to solve that quickly, and let Your will be done. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen."

"Amen," Adam whispered. He reached in his jacket pocket for the wad of tissues he'd been using sporadically all day and dabbed at his eyes.

"Amen," Doug and Libby echoed.

Adam was glad to see Lace resting comfortably in Libby's arms, holding her bottle. "You have the magic touch, Libby."

Tom smiled. "Libby is an honorary grandma to every child in our church family." He stood. "Well, Pastor *Johnston*, enjoy a restful night with your daughter. I'll find out what's going on and let you know as soon as I have an answer."

Adam stood and shook Tom's hand. He sincerely hoped he would be able to stay in Brattleboro.

3

Adam woke to the sound of Lace cooing in her crib. She rarely woke up cranky, for which he was grateful. Her sunny disposition was a blessing.

He knelt by the bed, folded his hands, and bowed his head. As he did every morning, he gave thanks for another day of life, another chance to serve the Kingdom, and asked God to direct his steps and to make him a blessing to all who crossed his path.

He waited in silence for a few moments, allowing God's Spirit to speak to him. "Lord, if it's Your will, please make it possible for me to stay here in Brattleboro. Fill me and pour me out where there is need. I'm Your instrument to do Your work wherever you send me."

Then he greeted his daughter and got them both ready for the day.

Libby had told him they could come up to the house for breakfast any time after six-thirty, and it was just seven. When he walked through the kitchen door, a mouthwatering array of aromas greeted him.

Libby was at the stove. "Good morning! How did you sleep? Did you have enough blankets? Our nights are still chilly in the spring."

Adam was already fond of this sweet, caring lady.