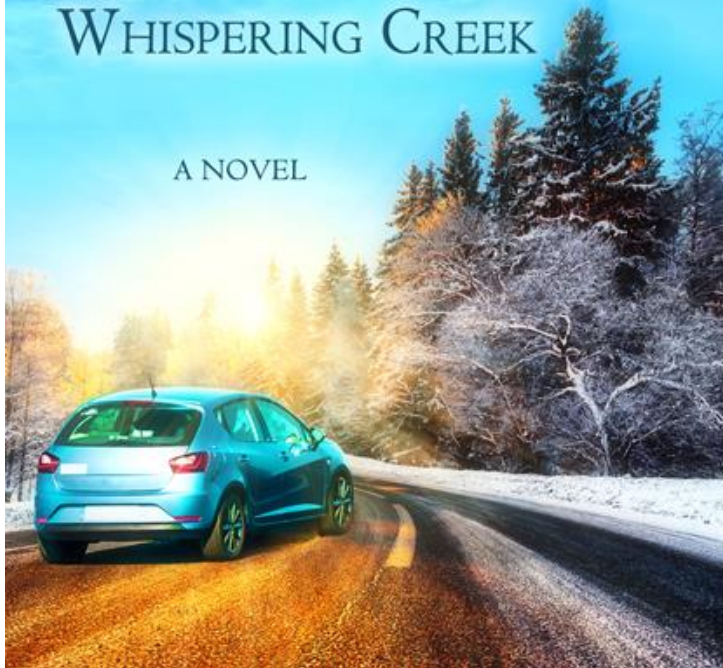


BARBARA M.
BRITTON

ESCAPE TO
WHISPERING CREEK

A NOVEL



Escape to
Whispering
Creek

Barbara M. Britton

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Escape to Whispering Creek
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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my dear late brother-in-law, Bob Gardner. Bob handled life, and the adversity of a debilitating illness, with grace and love. He held the hand of Jesus each day and told every caregiver, "I love my Jesus."

What People are Saying

...Barbara M. Britton has crafted a delightful novel with familiar characters. Emma and Wade take center stage in *Escape to Whispering Creek*...Britton has a gift for using figurative language that adds color and often a touch of humor. I thoroughly enjoyed reading this novel. ~**Kathleen Neely, multi-published author of contemporary Christian fiction**

Rarely is there a book that gives you a beautiful love story and a beautiful Christian message. “*Escape to Whispering Creek*” does both. Barbara M. Britton is a master storyteller. This book is a must-read and a keeper on your bookshelf. ~**Olivia Rae, award-winning author of the *Sword and the Cross* series**

If you smell the lingering scent of candles while you read *Escape to Whispering Creek*, it’s no mistake. That’s the lively prose and vivid imagery of Barbara M. Britton’s sweet romance. Her similes pop and crackle, as do the witty dialog and chemistry between Wade and Emma. You’ll find yourself rooting for them while wondering how it’s ever going to work out in the web of job complications, danger, confusion, and self-doubt. Additionally, if you like a strong faith thread, you’ll find it here. ~**Laura DeNooyer, author of *All That Is Hidden***

1

Emma Uranova raced into a parking spot near the entrance to The Runyard Group. She had two minutes before she was officially late. There should be a law that the low tire pressure light cannot appear on a Friday or before noon. The interruption was a predictable hazard from a Wisconsin winter.

As she exited her car, a man waved from beside his gray luxury sedan. Mr. Van Wenkle, the mayor of a neighboring village, rushed toward the investment office. The man reminded her of a wind socket used for advertising: tall, thin, and constantly fluttering. The last thing she needed was a ticker tape of gossip this morning.

She grabbed her backpack, locked the door to her car, and carefully navigated January's ice and snow pods covering the asphalt.

"Morning, Mayor. You're up early on a Friday." She opened the door to the office, stomped clinging snow off of her boots, and switched on all the lights. The lingering sweet scent of a holly jolly candle she had burned the day before filled the suite. A small perk of having parents in the candle business.

"I hope Ron isn't running late." Mayor Van Wenkle followed her inside and headed to the display

of K-cups. "I wanted to talk with him before meeting with my zoning committee."

Over the mayor's head, an elevated screen flashed images of villa floor plans and a golf course. Pictures of the Runyard Group's future retirement community in Elm Brook, a nearby suburb. One day she'd be helping direct activities at the Greener Groves independent living complex. Hopefully soon.

"Ron should be arriving any minute." She hurried to stash her coat, gloves, and the backpack with her personal laptop in her office cubicle.

She stopped cold when her prickly cactus, Herbie, was the only item on her desk. Where was her office computer? Had Ron or his assistant taken it for repairs? She glanced over the short partition to the prestigious reception desk where Annette usually greeted investors. No computer graced the polished wood. Strange. Neither Ron nor Annette mentioned computer issues. A weird sensation as if she were jumping in a bouncy house overtook her body and made her doubt the sturdiness of her boots. She sprinted toward Ron's office and opened the door. His computer had vanished along with his books and pictures. The room had been stripped clean of objects. What was going on?

Her heartbeat reverberated in her ears. Had they been robbed? She power-walked toward the back door to check the lock. She gripped the brass handle and gave a shoulder shove to the door. Secure as always. No criminal had entered from the rear.

Doubling back, she strode over by the mayor who

casually removed a Runyard Group mug from the coffee machine. Caffeine seemed to be his focus, not the stripped-down office.

“This is strange. The computers are gone. Wires, routers, everything.” Her voice rose as her heart fluttered in her chest. Something wasn’t right. “I think we’ve been robbed.” She grabbed hold of her silver necklace and rubbed the tiny tortoise charm. Fingering the smooth metal gave her a sense of calm.

“Robbed?” The mayor gulped his coffee before scanning the office space. “If the place was cleaned out, why is the flat screen still here?” He gave a nonchalant flap of his hand in the direction of the front door. “I heard the bolt click when you opened the office. No one smashed the windows.”

He made good points. “That’s right.” The business had been locked. Nothing else was missing besides the computers and Ron’s effects. Her worry eased. No sense jumping to the lowest common denominator. “I’ll ask Ron about it when he gets here.” She checked her watch. A few minutes after eight. Her boss would arrive soon. Should she call him? Confirm about the computers and let him know the mayor waited? Ron may be leisurely running an errand before coming into the office. A polite nudge might hurry him along.

She retrieved her phone from her backpack and pulled up Ron in her contacts. An obnoxious tone screeched through the phone. “I’m sorry, but the number you have reached has been disconnected.” She ended the call. Her boss was incommunicado. Why had he changed his number? A January chill settled

over her shoulders. There had to be an explanation. She'd worked for Ron for six months, and he always remained accessible. His admin Annette would have his new number. She slumped into the office chair in her cubicle and dialed Annette.

"I'm sorry, but the number—"

Her finger trembled as she ended the call. She stared at her cactus. At one time you could see a rock at Herbie's base, but his greenness had engorged the stone. On the back of the rock, it read, *The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer*. She had won the cactus in Sunday school over fourteen years ago when she was ten. She rubbed her temples. A slight caffeine headache settled in her forehead. *Lord, I think I need a deliverer.*

Embodying every ounce of her five-foot five-inch frame, she strolled toward the mayor. He glanced from the local magazine grabbing his attention and shifted in his comfy chair.

"You get a hold of Ron?" The mayor flipped a page, but his gaze swept to her face and hovered like a laser.

A bead of sweat fled her armpit and trickled down her side under her navy blue sweater. Time to confess she was a fish out of water, except her fish was already buried under ice in a busy marketplace.

"His line is disconnected." She swallowed, but saliva stuck in her throat. A sickening burnt toast taste filled her mouth "Annette's too."

The mayor threw the magazine on the carpet. He whipped out his phone and tapped on the screen like

he played a mini-whack-a-mole game. The same screech declaring the number was no longer in service filtered into the room.

“I want to see my account.” He jumped to his feet. “Now,” he shouted.

Her parents never yelled at her. Ever. Shouting caused the air to lose oxygen. A motherism. From the scowl on the mayor’s face, the oxygen level was free falling. She tapped her boot on the rug. Hadn’t she warned him something was wrong five minutes ago?

“I’m so sorry.” She cleared her throat. “I don’t have a company computer. I can’t get a hold of Ron or Annette. I can’t do anything.” She was rambling. Her lifelong default setting. “Something’s terribly wrong.” She rubbed the silver shell of her tortoise charm. If she kept this up, she’d have a flat coin by the end of the day.

“I’m calling the chief of police and my niece. She investigates scams for the local news.” The mayor paced in front of the windows. Morning light illuminated his coiffed blond hair. He stopped and jabbed a finger at her. “Don’t leave.”

Good thing she wore black pants because right now they were absorbing the wetness in her palms. What had she done wrong except show up for work? Did she have to stay? Mr. Van Wenkle wasn’t her boss. Though, if she left, the mayor could change his story and cast the blame on her.

The mayor’s face turned a troubling shade of crimson as he whisper-screamed into his phone under the screen of geriatric villas. She could almost see an

oxygen alert splayed on his forehead as he uttered words that might as well have been curses. "White-collar crime...scam...attorney general."

She perched in Annette's overstuffed black-leather chair, staring over the prominent desk at a surreal office space. Had Ron and Annette run off with the investors' money? Her money? She had given them a small nest egg from her late grandmother. How could they take her money knowing she would lose every cent? The poor mayor had over a hundred thousand reasons to hate her boss.

Red and blue flashing lights came into view. Two cruisers entered the parking lot. She rose and returned to her cubicle, fishing her key chain out of her backpack. She slid the office key from her ring. A metallic odor clung to her fingers. Whoever was responsible for the building now could lock the space when they were done.

She wrapped her arms around her middle. A strange ethereal sensation overtook her body like a melatonin-induced dream. Only it wasn't. She steadied herself by gripping the cubicle partition. Two police officers entered the office. *God give me wisdom.* The time had come to let the world know she wasn't a thief or a liar.

Too bad she didn't have her own police chief on speed dial.

~*~

The police detective in front of her clicked his pen

and set it on his pad of paper. “You don’t remember anything else that could help us contact or locate Mr. Runyard?”

She shrugged and held her shoulders high hoping the officer would see her ignorance. “I’ve only been here six months. I was hired to run the senior community once it opened. I worked on policies. I didn’t handle any of the money. We were all busy trying to break ground on the facility.” So, she thought. Apparently knowing Ron and Annette were football fans and that they both liked salty black licorice wasn’t pertinent information. She could give directions to the tanning booth Ron frequented, but his home address drew a blank. “Can I go? I’m in the dark as much as you.” Pitch dark. Plus, she needed food and caffeine to stave off a massive headache.

Poor detective. Emma was only doing this interview as a courtesy to the mayor. She had waited three hours answering questions and had tried to console a few investors who had wandered in, but it was time to leave her former workspace. The mayor had been busy pounding a wasp nest with a stick. Too bad he hadn’t gotten more pertinent information from Ron when they were playing eighteen holes of golf.

The detective glanced out the front windows where people from nearby businesses had gathered to hear the mayor rant. “Are you sure you can’t remember anyone who had a beef with your boss?”

“Everyone loved Ron.” If only they knew his personality was a façade. “In all my time here, we only had one visitor who got Ron upset. I was showing Ron

my customer service software and didn't get an introduction." One person out of dozens didn't seem important. The visitor interrupted one of the rare times she'd discussed her personnel program with Ron. "Ron seemed startled by the guy's appearance. He even dropped my flash drive under his desk."

"Could you describe him? Give a name?" The officer looked hopeful.

She shook her head. "Not really. Ron ushered me out of his office and closed the door." Maybe it was nothing. Ron had a steady stream of customers. Or should she say victims.

The officer handed her a business card. "If you think of anything else that might help us get in touch with Runyard, please give us a call."

"Thank you." She accepted the card and cast one last glance at the scrolling images of the senior community that would never break ground. Her dream job lay shattered on the speckled carpeting.

She slipped on her coat, pulled the hood over her messy brunette bob, and slung her backpack over her shoulder. She grabbed one last cup of free K-cup coffee and clutched Herbie's container as she exited her former place of employment. The Ron Runyard Scam Group. A blast of frigid air tingled on her face. She needed the Lord to be a fortress right now and shield her from curious eyes as she bee-lined it for her car. Today, she called into question the choice of sunflower yellow for her Bug.

She balanced her belongings and hopped into her car. Her software flash drive lay in the cup holder.

Good thing she didn't leave it in the office, or her custom senior citizen software would have vanished with her boss. Reaching for the backseat, she unzipped a small pocket on her backpack and placed the drive into a safe space. She put her coffee cup in the holder and wrapped her scarf around Herbie in the passenger seat. With a quick glance in the rearview mirror, she hit the gas pedal.

A black SUV pulled out of a parking space farther down the row. The vehicle matched every move she made from pulling out of the lot to turning on to a side street. Was she being trailed? This was insane! She sped toward the interstate to Milwaukee and made sure she didn't catch the attention of anymore police officers. The SUV followed her onto the ramp.

She gripped the cold steering wheel with trembling fingers. How was she going to lose the tail? The hospital complex flashed in her mind. Last year, shortly before she graduated college, her dad had suffered a heart attack. She knew the hospital grounds and could lose the suspicious vehicle among the numerous buildings and parking garages.

Exiting toward the hospital and medical college, she zigzagged through the massive complex and backed to a wall in an underground space near the specialty clinic. *Please Lord, don't have them find me.* She slid so her head couldn't be seen over the seat. How long did one wait to avoid a newsperson or stalker? Tears welled in her eyes. She wasn't a bad person. Her morning had turned into a Most Wanted show. Ron and Annette didn't seem like criminals. Were they

really scammers? Con artists? Had she missed the signs? She blew out a long breath to slow her unsteady heart rate. How could she have known they were crooks if deceit was their specialty? They acted completely normal and trustworthy, and she had soaked it up.

A car horn broke her concentration. Her heart boomed in her chest. She peeked. Someone had come around the parking garage corner and drifted toward an oncoming vehicle. Drifting. Perfect word for her life at the moment. No job. No paycheck. No savings. Possibly being followed. What a mess.

She huddled for an eternity until her toes became dreamsicles. No black SUV with a license plate starting with NI drove past her hideout. Straightening her crunched body, she started her car, drove out of the garage, and headed home toward Milwaukee, checking her mirrors constantly.

When she exited off of I-94 and approached her apartment complex, traffic slowed. Up ahead she glimpsed a news van. Not one, but two. A black SUV by the main building entrance caught her attention. Was it the same one that had followed her from work? "Lord, what is happening to me?" She prayed her Facebook picture wasn't plastered on television and that reporters weren't hounding her neighbors. Why did Ron have to ensnare the well-connected? Money, that's why. They had more than ten-thousand pennies to invest.

She swerved onto a side street and zigzagged down lesser traveled roads before finding an open

parking spot on a street about a mile from her home. She placed her Beetle in park, and rested her head against the seat, staring at the beige ceiling. Fortunately, no one had chased her this time, but her nerves were a frazzled mess. She should cry, but for whom? Herself? The investors she thought of as friends, until now? If Ron had disappeared with the investment funds, elderly people wouldn't have a new retirement community. Her hopes of managing an independent living facility had disintegrated. None of this made sense. Why had God allowed this to happen?

Digging her phone out of her backpack, she called her mom. Her parents would be at the fashion mall, logging inventory and helping customers at Home ScentSations. She could hide out in the stockroom all day. Her mom answered on the third ring.

"Slow day at the office?" Her mom's cheery voice brought a momentary sense of relief.

"I wish." A flood of emotion crashed her seconds of normalcy. A sob threatened to burst forth, but she coughed it away. "Mom, Ron and Annette are gone."

"Really. Did they go away for the weekend? Leave you in charge?"

"No, gone, gone. I can't get a hold of them, and an investor thinks they absconded with all the money." Her hand flailed as badly as the mayor's. "The police came, reporters are at my apartment, someone followed me —"

"Where are you? Tell me you're okay?" Her mom's cheerfulness had died.

"I'm hiding out on a side street." Grabbing hold of her silver necklace, she rubbed the tiny tortoise charm. Her grandmother had given her the necklace on her fifteenth birthday. At least she still had the jewelry. Too bad her inheritance money was in jeopardy. "I don't know what to do or where to go. If I come by the store, I don't want to cause a scene with reporters showing up. Some of the investors have ties to the government, police, and local television stations." A flash on the top of her phone showed an incoming call. Samantha, her best friend was calling from Tennessee. "Sam's beeping in."

"That might be a sign. You loved spending Christmas...there." Her mom whispered the last word as if someone listened to their call. "And it's so close and warm."

A warm location near Wisconsin in January was impossible. Mom was spooked.

"Thank you for returning my call." Her mom babbled in a stern voice. "We have two-hundred defective candles that won't burn. The wick is melted into the wax. Go and do something about it."

Emma's throat hurt. "I love you, Mom. Tell Dad."

"I expect the full amount by the end of the day."

The contact ended.

A tear banked around Emma's nose and settled on her lip. Salt sizzled on her tongue. "Please Lord, keep my mom and dad safe. They don't know You yet." She didn't want anyone harassing her parents.

She called Sam. God had provided a true friend in Sam and an eternal lifeline.

“Hey, I thought you were busy.” Hearing Sam’s voice eased Emma’s panic.

“Fluff some pillows. I’m coming back to Whispering Creek.” She glanced around to make sure the black SUV hadn’t found her. “And this time, I’ll need to buy underwear.”

2

Wade Donovan attempted to de-claw his left hand. Tingles traveled across his palm. He'd lost count on his physical therapy reps. If he were honest, he'd receive a D for deficient. He swiveled in his black leather office chair and glanced at the clock on the wall. One minute after five on a Friday evening. He doubted a service call would come in this late to Donovan and Sons Electric. With the weekend beginning, Nashville would be plugged-in and ready to serenade patrons. No customer would be worried about changing a tricky fuse. Even if a call came into the office, he was useless. The doctor hadn't released him to drive on his healing right leg, and his left arm had a twitchy mind of its own. Darn auto accident.

He rotated and faced his abnormally tidy desk. Would he ever get back to normal? Be the mover and shaker business owner and not the tragic accident victim. *Soon. Please, God, soon.* How embarrassing at thirty-two to be temporarily living with his parents and relying on them to drive him around the city. The cost of shared-ride companies had consumed too much of the medical allowance from his insurance company. His parents would have to suffice as chauffeurs for now. Limiting the amount of money the insurance paid

out was a top priority. He didn't want Donovan and Sons to be dropped because an uninsured motorist demolished their work van. Who was he kidding? The driver demolished him, too. Widening his palm, he fought the pull of his traitorous muscles to clamp his hand into a fist. Minimal nerve pain accompanied his success.

Francine appeared in the doorway to his office. "I'm heading out." His office manager tied the belt on her coat. "Mike should return soon. The Morgans decided to replace their panel." Sure, they did. Dad had a way of maximizing his service calls to save on repeat travel costs. Francine gripped her purse and forced a perky smile. "There's leftover subs in the mini fridge if you get hungry."

"Thanks. I appreciate it." He might check out the sandwiches later if his dad took too long finishing the wiring. His stomach rumbled at the thought. Eating was something he could do one-handed.

"I'll finish the work orders on Monday before I leave." She bit her lip. "You sure you'll be okay while I'm out for surgery?"

Whether he was or wasn't, he couldn't have Francine cancel her knee replacement. He'd handle her office duties until the doctor allowed him to go on service calls. He needed hand strength to grab a steering wheel and a flexible right foot to push a gas pedal. Maybe filing papers would rehab his stiff left hand. Even if a boat load of invoices buried his body, he wasn't going to let Francine worry about the business sinking in her absence.