

PRAISE FOR *STARS IN THE GRASS*

“Ann Marie Stewart writes with immeasurable spirit as she probes the deep currents of faith and love. Abby McAndrews tells her compelling tale of family grief with truth and admirable humor. *Stars in the Grass* is a powerful novel that will light your way.”

—Alyson Hagy, author of *Boleto* and *Ghosts of Wyoming*

“In this remarkable novel, Ann Marie Stewart explores the aftermath of tragedy with intelligence, grace, and subtle humor. *Stars in the Grass* is a story of great loss, but also of great hope. A beautiful, haunting tale, it is one I won’t soon forget.

—Ann Tatlock, award-winning author of *Once Beyond a Time*

“*Stars in the Grass* reminds us that even when we think God has forgotten us, we’re forever on His mind. Ann Marie Stewart’s writing is outstanding and her voice captivating. I fell in love with this intriguing novel from the first page.”

—Bestselling novelist Kate Lloyd, author of *Leaving Lancaster*, *Pennsylvania Patchwork*, and *Forever Amish*

“Ann Marie Stewart’s beautifully crafted prose depicts a family in deep turmoil as they walk through a dark valley. . . . Told in first-person narrative by nine-year-old Abby, Stewart gets her voice just right as a precocious child thrust into the world of grief. A thought-provoking and sensitive look into the different paths each family member travels in the aftermath of tragedy, the role of God and faith along the path, and the way time wraps its way around this family until they each can embrace the truth and move forward.”

—Elizabeth Musser, bestselling author of *The Long Highway Home* and *The Swan Hour*

Stars
in the
Grass

a novel

ANN MARIE
STEWART

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to Julia Marie Stewart

No matter how far you travel you'll always be close to my heart

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My heavenly Father who carries me now and forever

PROLOGUE

I spent the better part of my childhood sitting on a pew in the balcony of Bethel Springs First Presbyterian Church, listening to my dad's long vowels as he preached on predestination. Sandwiched between my older brother, Matt, and my little brother, Joel, I counted bald heads, doodled on church bulletins, and studied the stained-glass Jesus.

Reverend McAndrews was godlike and mysterious. Definitely not the same man who read to us from Dr. Seuss, ran through the sprinkler on steamy Ohio summer afternoons, or smiled as we played hide-and-go-seek in his Father's house.

Though I can't remember many of his three-point sermons, I have other good memories. One Sunday during a hymn, Matt and I sang loudly, changing the words to our liking, "Gladly, the Cross-Eyed Bear," and crossing our eyes for added effect. When we sat back down, I rested the hymnal on the railing and fanned myself by riffling through the pages. Then it happened. Onto one of the fifty-one shining bald heads below, I dropped the hymnal.

It clapped to the floor, and then in the congregational hush, Mr. Ludema winced in surprised pain. I only looked down long enough to see necks craning up toward the balcony and then turning toward my father and then back to the balcony. Dad squinted to see Mrs. Ludema as she nursed her husband's head and then looked up at the cause of the disruption. Me.

Dad stared at me for fifteen seconds. I know because I counted every one of them. I did not look away; instead I memorized his thick sandy hair fringed with gray streaks. I couldn't see his eyes

because the sun was reflecting on the lenses of his glasses. His mouth was closed, his thick jaw tense. The congregation waited for the Reverend McAndrews, and so did I. At last he said, with a nod to the balcony and a sigh, “And the Word has come down from on high.”

During responsive reading, his voice rose and fell so predictably, I was nearly lulled to sleep unless I pulled out a pencil to sketch the hills and valleys. “O give *thanks* to the LORD, for he is *gooood*,” Reverend McAndrews read from Psalm 136. His voice grew louder and the pitch higher until the word *Lord*, where he paused and let it fall off to a low, soft, long, concluding *gooood*. We echoed, “For his steadfast love endures for ever.” After repeating it twenty-six times, what I thought everlasting was the psalm itself.

I did not question the psalmist’s message until I was nine and Matt was fifteen and we crossed a crevasse of pain. It took struggling through that jagged blackness of doubt and fear for the girl in the balcony to finally consider the words, and to really connect with the man in the pulpit and the woman at the organ.

My mother looked just like Jackie Kennedy. I don’t know if our former First Lady could play the organ, but my mother could *not*, despite the expectations of the elders of BS Pres. (Such an unfortunate acronym, but one this preacher’s kid enjoyed flaunting.) The organ faced forward, so my mother’s back was toward the congregation, which could have been symbolic considering her reluctance to play the role. Though my mother’s keyboard technique lacked beauty and grace, her speech did not. My mother’s voice was soft and gentle, full of intricate words she shared, always believing in expanding her children’s vocabulary at every opportunity. Nothing about her projected strength, but I would learn she had enough for all of us.

The summer before I turned ten was *idyllic*—until August 3, 1970. At the time I didn’t know what that word meant, not having

heard it in a sermon or one of Mom's vocabulary lessons. But it perfectly describes a time when I thought the world was safe and good things lasted forever. What I couldn't know then, but try to remember now, is how fragile and delicate are the moments we most treasure, and if they break into pieces, repairing means seeing anew.

ONE

We rushed upward into the night sky, lifted by an unseen force. The higher we climbed, the cooler the air, the fainter the smell of hot dogs and cotton candy, and the softer the music from the merry-go-round below. With my arms outstretched, I traced a wide curve, embracing a crescent of beach fires, twinkling lights, and dimming pink sunset. Birch Bay was black, nearly invisible, the people now dots on the landscape. I leaned against Dad's shoulder and stared up at the stars. Then we crested the top and plunged downward.

After a dizzying return up, the Ferris wheel slowed and then stopped, leaving us hanging in the sky.

"What happened?" I asked.

"They're letting people off at the bottom. The ride's over."

Now with each lurch we measured time; my stomach sagged in disappointment. I could see my brothers swinging below at ten o'clock. Kicking my legs up and down, I tried to make our carriage rock back and forth. Was it really over? Each time the wheel stopped, more riders dismounted. And then it was our turn, and the man unlocked our lap bar. As we left the amusement park, I turned to see the carriages filled and beginning another circle, like hands on a clock.

"Joel rode the Ferris wheel," I told my mom as we returned to our campfire.

"I rode with Matt," Joel burst out, looking up proudly. Joel's "wiff" instead of "with" always made me smile. But not Mom, who turned to Dad and gave him a scolding look.

"I'm *fifteen*, Mom," Matt reminded her, his arm around Joel.

"But *he's* only three," Mom answered.

"It's safe, Renee. There was a safety bar across his waist," Dad explained. "You worry too much."

I gazed back at the Ferris wheel spinning in the distance, a moving spiderweb in the sky. Mom dug into the grocery bag and pulled out marshmallows, Hershey's chocolate, and graham crackers.

After s'mores and storytelling, Joel fell asleep, cradled in Dad's arms at our campfire on the beach. We lay in a circle, our feet to the fire like spokes, our heads pillowed against beached driftwood, the sound of the waves lapping the shore. The air was warm and still, and I wished we could stay there forever. Washington felt so far from Ohio and yet so familiar beneath the same canopy of stars.

"Vega, Antares, Altair, Arcturus. And there's Polaris—the North Star," Dad said, outlining the dotted sky. "He determines the number of the stars, he gives to all of them their names," Dad added gently, not in his minister voice. Poking the fire with his stick, Matt kicked up a hot flame. Sparks sputtered and crackled.

"Cygnus is the swan." Dad traced his fingers along a band of dots, connecting stars into shapes. I blurred my eyes, trying to see a swan, though it looked more like an umbrella. "And that is Pegasus, the winged horse." He drew what looked like a hairy spider. I could only find the Big Dipper.

The warmth from the fire made me blissfully drowsy and I closed my eyes. Mom played with my hair, running her fingers through it before letting it trickle downward, just how I liked it.

"Gossamer," she said softly.

"What's that?" Matt asked.

"Something delicate." Mom closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. "Sort of how this night feels."

"Gossamer. . .," I whispered, trying it on for size.



The next day at Birch Bay, after digging for clams, building sand castles, and splashing in tide pools, we headed back to our car, strolling the remaining crescent of beach. Joel picked up a long piece of seaweed tethered to a rubbery ball and dragged it behind him, leaving a trail in the sand. He was slowing, the time for his afternoon nap long past. Now the tide was coming in and we were running out of beach, so we shifted to the narrow strip of sidewalk between the surf and the road, the tide pressing us on the right, cars inching along the road on our left. Whenever we strayed too close to the road, Mom gently nudged us back toward the beach.

“Go to Bossy Cow!” Joel whined.

“We’re not there, Joel,” Dad said. “We can’t stop now. Just keep walking, buddy.” The Bossy Cow, a diner at the tip of the crescent, served the best shakes. Thick, muddy chocolate milkshakes Joel could never finish.

We walked in slow motion, in no hurry to get anywhere, Joel’s pace becoming ours. Even now I wish we had stopped. Like an unwound clock. Time never ticking forward.

“Bossy Cow?” Joel asked again.

“No Bossy Cow, but how about some boats?” I looked to Mom, hoping she’d agree with my suggestion.

“Oh, all right,” she said, seeing Joel clap his hands in excitement. Joel and I had discovered the diamond-shaped caramels covered in white chocolate with an almond for a sail. We crossed the street to the Sea Shoppe to buy half a pound. Matt wanted to play in the game rooms, but Dad said it was time to get back to our campsite. I savored a boat, first licking off the white chocolate, then relishing and finally chewing the caramel.

“Carry me, Matt,” Joel asked, dropping his *r*’s but not his chocolate sailboat.

“C’mon, Joel, just a little farther.” I pulled him along by his wrist, avoiding the sticky candy in his fist. “Mom, Joel’s tired. He’s too slow.”

“Matt, please?” Joel begged, his polite “pwease” making his whining endearingly effective. “Mattie, Mattie.”

“Hop on board, little buddy.” Matt bent low so Joel could jump on his back. They looked like such a pair, Joel’s head resting on Matt’s shoulder, his arms around Matt’s neck.

“He’s going to fall asleep and let go,” Mom warned as Joel’s eyes closed.

Dad stepped forward. “I’d better carry him.”

“Me and Matt.” Joel yawned.

“C’mon, Dad, he wants *me*,” Matt argued. “I won’t let anything happen to him.”

“Mattie, Mattie,” Joel agreed sleepily.

But Dad pried him off Matt’s back and stretched out his arms to lift Joel high in the air, Joel’s back blocking the sun’s rays. Dad’s smile was warm and his eyes so tender. He lowered Joel as if he couldn’t resist giving him a hug. Joel’s legs wrapped around Dad and his arms circled his neck, his head nestled beneath Dad’s chin.

I’ve heard that people block out traumatic moments, but I remember it all. The line of cars was moving slowly, like a procession, until a blue Chevy lurched free and swerved off the road. In the filmy haze of that afternoon, it almost looked like the car was heading straight toward us in slow motion.

My mother screamed and pushed me out of the way and I stumbled backward, but with enough time to see the car hit Dad, tossing Joel into the windshield and away. Then all I could see was the car.

I remember the Washington license plate and the broken windshield with spidery veins across the glass.

I remember the driver, a woman who jumped out of the blue car, screaming, “I’m so sorry. I just don’t know what happened. I missed the brake. I’m so sorry. I’m *so* sorry!”

I remember my mother screaming, “Where is he?”

I remember people helping my dad up. I remember him walking, then wincing in pain as his leg buckled beneath him. He stood again and hobbled, searching for Joel.

I jumped up and ran for my dad.

“Abby!” Mom screamed as she crossed the line of cars now at a standstill. I caught up to Dad and followed him, gripping the back of his T-shirt. He staggered toward a group huddled around something on the road. Everybody was pushing Dad away until he yelled, “I’m a minister!”—his ticket to join the circle—and then they all just let him through.

Matt was already there with the group, his fists balled up against his sides. He was shaking his head.

“Let me through! Let me through!” I could hear my mother scream. I turned to see someone holding her back. There was something we weren’t supposed to see. Something Matt had already seen.

Joel lay on his back. He looked asleep but so different from the way he slept on the beanbag chair in our family room at home. There was blood on the road. Was it Joel’s? I knelt down as my dad touched Joel’s damp forehead and whispered to him. I wanted Dad to make Joel open his eyes.

“He’s bleeding,” Mom moaned as she burst through. “Where’s he bleeding? Where’s he hurt?”

I studied the growing pool of blood and realized it was coming from Joel’s ear. Matt stared as if straight through Joel to the pavement below.

“Somebody call an ambulance! He’s bleeding!” Mom cried as she stood to plead with the growing audience. And then Mom saw the woman from the blue car. “You hit my son! It was *you!* *You* hit my son!”

Dad grabbed Mom’s arm to keep her close, away from this woman who stood crying, clutching the hand of her little girl. Maybe it was the sight of the little girl holding her mother’s leg, sobbing in fear. Mom turned and knelt back down.

“He needs a doctor,” she whispered.

“Don’t touch him!” Dad warned and Mom gasped. “Not yet,” he said more gently. “Just don’t move him right now.” Dad put his hand on her shoulder.

Mom caressed Joel’s arm and brushed the hair from his forehead. “Oh Joel,” she said, crying. “It’s all right. Mommy’s here. It’s going to be all right. Open your eyes, Joel.” As she pulled her stained hand away, I saw the blood she couldn’t feel.

The strap on Joel’s overalls had slipped off his shoulder, and I pushed it back up. Then I remembered I wasn’t supposed to touch him. Where was the ambulance? Dad took off his T-shirt and put it over Joel, as if he needed it on that warm summer day.

Right then I knew something was very wrong. “He’ll be okay, won’t he, Dad?” I asked.

“He’s my son,” Dad said to someone hovering over us. But not to me. Still, I was satisfied with the answer. Dad had always taken care of everything. “We have to do something,” Dad said, his voice hazy, as if a cloud had suddenly covered the warmth of that day. He looked around at the growing congregation. “We have to get him to a hospital.”

“He’s not breathing, John. I don’t think he’s breathing!” Mom exclaimed as Dad bent over and listened.

“Is there a doctor?” Matt yelled and then ran through the

growing crowd, even stopping at the cars stalled in the train of traffic. “We need a doctor! Are you a doctor?” Matt banged on car windows as he ran farther and farther away from us.

“Heal him, God,” Dad said softly. I thought Dad should remind God that He had a Son, too. I really wanted to pray with him, but the only thing I could remember from Sunday school was the Twenty-Third Psalm, which began with “The Lord is my shepherd” and had that scary line about the valley of the shadow of death.

A fire truck, the sheriff, then finally an ambulance arrived in quick succession. A woman with red hair kept repeating, “He was in his dad’s arms.” One officer took her aside to question her while another officer talked to the woman from the blue car. The men from the white ambulance broke our circle and dispersed the crowd, then huddled over Joel, blocking our view. Not a minute later, one man stepped back and announced, “He’s got to go *now*.”

“I want to go with him,” Dad said as a man in a uniform placed Joel on a cot in the back of the wagon.

“Don’t leave me, Dad!” I cried, choking on the forgotten melting caramel.

“I’ve got to go,” Dad said as he released my grip.

“I’m going, too,” Mom cried.

“Your husband’s been hit,” one officer said, pointing to Dad, who stood with his weight on one leg. “He needs to go with your son, ma’am,” the man explained. “You can ride in the sheriff’s car with her.” He pointed at me. Mom stood, slack-mouthed, as they helped Dad into the ambulance.

“Where’s Matt?” I asked, suddenly feeling strangely alone. I looked across the faces and trail of cars. “Where’s Matt?” I repeated more urgently. “Wait for Matt!” I screamed, but nobody was listening.

“Where are they taking him?” Mom asked, and then I realized

we didn't know the way. We were strangers here. And where was *Matt*?

“St. Luke's,” the officer said, “Bellingham.” But where was that? They slammed shut the back of the ambulance.

As the siren screamed and the wheels turned, I saw Matt running to catch the ambulance, knowing he had been left behind.

And suddenly it was over and they were gone, leaving Mom and Matt and me standing there in the summer sun, by the side of the road, which was so very hot on our bare feet.

TWO

I've always wondered if Joel heard our prayers as we stood over him on that sidewalk.

When we arrived at the hospital, we ran into the emergency room looking for Dad. A nurse at the main desk took us to a waiting room, where we stood around until a doctor arrived. Mom studied his face and then slowly shook her head as she backed away from him.

"No, no, no!" she said, louder and louder, as if she could make it not true.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. McAndrews." And then the doctor turned to Matt and me. His eyes looked sad.

"No!" Mom cried out. "Don't say that. He was just here! He was fine! The car wasn't going that fast!" Her voice pleaded as she gasped for breath.

"His head struck the windshield and then the road," the doctor continued. "The brain injury was more than he could survive. He never suffered," he added, as if that would make us feel better.

Matt slipped out the door and I didn't know if I should go to him or stay with Mom. Mom sat down and began to sob so loudly I couldn't hear myself cry.

Joel is dead, Joel is dead, Joel is dead. I couldn't believe it. I started shivering, and I couldn't make myself stop. Was it my wet bathing suit or was the hospital so cold? I smelled like salt water. My hands tingled and I shook them back to life.

"Where's my husband?" Mom's voice was paper thin.

"They're treating his leg," the doctor answered.

Mom stood shakily and staggered. I rushed to steady her.

“Oh, Abby.” She wrapped her arms around me. I held her and she held on to me, and I never wanted to let go of her again.

The doctor waited and then escorted Mom into the second room down the hallway. He talked with Mom and Dad in Joel’s room while Matt and I sat outside the door on folding chairs. I could feel wet sand grind against smooth metal. When I took Matt’s hand, he didn’t pull away.

I watched the sterile black-and-white clock on the wall, the second hand circling and the minute hand shifting almost imperceptibly. I could anticipate each subtle movement. How long would they stay in there?

When the minute hand had moved more than seventy-two times and I had stopped counting, the door opened.

A doctor pushed a man in a wheelchair. It was my dad in a blue robe, but not really my dad because he didn’t seem to notice us. I don’t know what he was staring at. I started to say something, then closed my mouth.

“Dad,” Matt said as he slid his hand from mine and stood. But Dad didn’t turn. At last Matt put his hand on Dad’s shoulder and Dad turned to look. That face is the one I don’t want to remember. A rope of fear tightened across my chest. I could hold Mom’s sadness, but Dad’s grief was overwhelming. He seemed broken in a way I wasn’t sure could be fixed. The clock behind Dad now read 4:27, and then the hands blurred with my tears as I watched them wheel Dad down the hall.

I wanted the day to be over. But then again, if the day was over, my brother was really dead. Today Joel had been alive. If only we could go backward, our afternoon would be morning and we’d wake up and Joel would say, “Get up and play with me, Bee!” and this would not be happening.

When we returned to the cabin, Mom rummaged through our suitcases, laying out Joel's clothing on the bed. The little suit from the wedding, another pair of overalls, a few shirts and shorts.

"I don't know," she said. "I just don't know."

Neither did I. What was she doing?

"They asked what we wanted him to wear. . ." Her voice drifted off. I picked up the suit and threw it back in the suitcase. Definitely not that. Then Matt removed the shirt with the scratchy tag on the back. We were left with a T-shirt and Joel's blue overalls.

That night we went to bed with our clothes on. Now there were just four of us. This was our family. I closed my eyes and then quickly opened them, staring at the ceiling for so long my eyes felt dry. My stomach growled. We hadn't eaten since the candy, but I wasn't hungry. My mind would not stop. Oh, to sleep and never wake up.

"You're having a nightmare!" Matt whispered as he shook me awake later that night. "No!" I cried out in a strange voice, the memory of yesterday rushing back. I had fallen asleep? I actually fell asleep even though my little brother had just died? How could I have fallen asleep?

In the other room my mother wept, a soft, haunting moan, accompanied by the unfamiliar sound of my dad's low, muffled sob. Whenever my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I could see Matt on the cot nearby, his eyes wide open, staring straight ahead. Somehow I wanted it to be a shared secret that we were all awake. As if that could be a secret.



Dad wouldn't leave Joel in Washington, so the congregation sent money to have Joel's body transported by train back to Ohio, and

Dad would ride with the body. Mom had to drive Matt and me all the way home. Our same bags were loaded into the same purple station wagon, ready to return on the same roads, yet nothing was the same.

I needed to say good-bye to Dad, but he'd left early that morning. It seemed Dad couldn't leave Washington fast enough, but how could he go without saying good-bye? Suddenly good-byes seemed so much more important. *Gossamer*. Life was so delicate.

Our car felt empty. Mom in the front, Matt in the middle, and me lying in the back. Matt never talked, and I had yet to see him cry. Mom was silent, too, her eyes locked on the road, occasionally blinking hard as if to stay awake, or sometimes to hold back the tears. If I could have read their thoughts, I wouldn't have. My sadness was enough for me alone.

"I feel sick," I said, after two hours on the highway.

"Crawl up here with me and look out the front window," Mom suggested.

The front seat was Joel's special place. Joel always sat on her lap or curled at her feet. That was not my place. I climbed into the middle seat and sat next to Matt, then cranked the window open and hung my head out like a dog.

I reached forward and flicked on the radio only to hear about a war I didn't understand. All those unfamiliar words and acronyms that didn't want to be explained, *Cambodia* and *Kent State* and *Tet Offensive* and *North and South Vietnam* and *POWs* and *MIA*. Those casualties were too far away to comprehend. Especially when my own battles seemed more real.

When we hit eastern Washington, the temperature soared to one hundred and four degrees, and we were so miserable we had to peel ourselves off the sticky vinyl seats. We rolled the windows up and sweated until we were wet, then rolled them down so the wind

cooled us. “It’s evaporation,” Matt explained dully. Was it this hot for Dad in the train with Joel’s casket?

We didn’t ask, “How much farther?” or “When are we going to get there?” After all, would getting home make anything better?

This was the end of our first family vacation. With Dad’s sister getting married and Grandpa’s heart attack, the timing was right for Dad to go home. I had looked forward to standing under the Peace Arch, where I could straddle the border of Canada and America and say I had stood on foreign soil. But life had turned from happy to sad as easily as heading west and returning east. We had left for a wedding and were returning home to a funeral.

I imagined how the journey would be if Joel were still with us. I considered his toes tickling the rear window as we lay in the back of the station wagon. In Montana, when we drove by a bear and a baby cub in the forest, I wondered what Joel would have said. I did a double take when I saw a small boy in overalls with a diaper-fattened bottom, thrown in the air and caught by his daddy. In the Dakotas, we stopped at a roadside park, but I didn’t want to play on the swing set. There were too many preschoolers. When we bought groceries in Wisconsin, I instinctively looked for Cap’n Crunch with Crunch Berries and Hostess CupCakes. But by the time we hit Ohio, when we returned to the car, I stopped counting to check if we were all there.

It was all about split seconds. One followed by another. And we couldn’t make them go backward. If we had known, we never would have gone. We would have unpacked the station wagon and said, “Not this year.” Or we could have played longer on the beach, or we could have skipped buying the candy. I could have stopped complaining for the length of a heartbeat. I could have held Joel’s wrist a split second longer.

I thought about that a lot, and it made me wonder about