

Cracks in the Sidewalk

A Novel

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This is a work of fiction. While, as in all fiction, the literary perceptions and insights are based on life experiences and conclusions drawn from research, all names, characters, places and specific instances are products of the author's imagination and used fictitiously. No actual reference to any real person, living or dead, is intended or inferred.

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*This book is dedicated to
very special friends who
openly shared their stories
of life, love and loss.*

I wish to thank the people who contributed to the story development and beauty of this book. Michael Visconte and the Creative Team at FCEdge studied the synopsis and provided an array of cover designs that went beyond words and captured the absolute essence of the story. Fellow author Sunny Serafino has been a wellspring of information and guidance as well as a treasured friend. Lucille Schiavone is a delightfully astute reader who challenges me to stretch beyond myself, and then applauds when I do. I am also grateful to the wonderful women of The Analyze This Book Club, for their ability to explore life beyond the pages of a book and to the Scripteasers for being my partners in this wonderful world of fiction.

And, there are no words to adequately thank my husband Richard, he is the rock upon which my world is built and I could not imagine life without him. A story such as Cracks in the Sidewalk makes me realize all the more how very blessed I am to have him love me.

Also by Bette Lee Crosby

GIRL CHILD

2007 First Place Fiction Award Winner
National League of American Pen Women
Florida Biennial

*To read an excerpt from *Girl Child*,
visit the author's website at
www.betteleecrosby.com*

Cracks in the Sidewalk

*“To send a letter is a good way
to go somewhere
without moving anything
but your heart”*

Phyllis Theroux

2006

Claire McDermott

I'm an old woman now. Some might say too old to dream, too old to still believe in miracles. But a dream your heart has held onto for the better part of a lifetime doesn't disappear easily, it tucks itself behind the everyday worries that pick at you and waits—waits until the day you can again feel your heartbeat and know that hope is stirring inside your soul. The day I received the letter—that was the day my dream regained its hold on life. Hundreds of thousands of times I've prayed for just such a miracle, but I never expected it would show-up in a dog-eared gray envelope.

'Dear Mr. and Mrs. McDermott,' the letter began—addressing me as if I were a total stranger and not taking into account that my sweet Charlie had left this earth some five years ago. '*I don't know if you really remember me,*' it read, '*because my family left New Jersey when I was only two years old.*'

The moment I saw those words, my heart began pounding and I could feel myself collapsing under my own weight. I grabbed onto the arm of Charlie's old recliner and lowered myself into the seat. After all the years of waiting, there was no time to cry, so I continued reading even though it was through a waterfall of tears. '*Recently, I came across some information which leads me to believe that Elizabeth Caruthers,*

my birth mother, was your daughter. My mother passed away in 1986, and her maiden name was McDermott. Other than this, I know very few details. I'm contacting you in hope of finding my grandparents. I am anxious to learn more about my mother's life and the mystery surrounding her death. If we are in fact related, would you be willing to meet with me?

With my fingers locked onto that letter, I closed my eyes and whispered, "Thank you, Lord," then I repeated it to make sure He got the message. I had long ago given up praying for such a thing to happen. I'd allowed myself to settle into believing it simply wasn't part of God's plan for my life. Now here it was, the miracle I'd been asking for.

'My name is Christian Caruthers,' the letter went on, 'I live in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, have an older brother David who is married and a sister Kimberly...'

He asked if I would be willing to see him! Imagine that, willing to see him! For the past twenty years, I've wanted nothing more. There were days, weeks, months on end, when I'd do nothing but wonder what he'd grown to look like. Two decades back I spied a blue-eyed child at a playground in Westfield and convinced myself he was my Christian. I rushed over and asked the boy his name, but even before he spoke I could tell by the turn of his nose what the answer would be. Willing to see him? Why, I'd go to my grave a happy woman if I could have the chance to hug those children to my chest and tell them how much I love them.

Without a minute's hesitation, I sat down at Charlie's old desk and scratched out an answer to the boy's letter. 'Elizabeth most certainly was my daughter,' I wrote, 'and I was right there alongside of her the day she gave birth to you.' I went on to say nothing in the entire world would give me greater pleasure than a visit from him, David and Kimberly. I wanted to say Kimmie, which was what her mother called her, but since Christian had referred to her as Kimberly I was reluctant to say anything that might change his mind about coming for a visit. I signed the letter 'Your Loving Grandma, Claire McDermott.' I wrote my telephone number big and bold, the way people are inclined to do as they get on in years, then I drove to the post office and began waiting.

That afternoon I tried to busy myself with housework, but it was useless. My brain couldn't focus on something as simple as folding laundry. I'd start sorting a basket of linens and before I knew what happened I'd find myself standing there, eyes closed and pictures of the children flashing through my mind. I'd stored up numerous images of David—a serious little boy with a crooked grin and a far too grown-up habit of knitting his brows together. And Kimberly, a child so sweet, the very thought of her was like sugar melting on my tongue. It was Christian who troubled me. Try as I might, the only image I could recall was a bundle of rompers crawling across the living room floor. Finally I settled myself in Charlie's recliner, which, although it's an eyesore, has always been a place of particular comfort for me. Weary of thinking, I leaned my head into the pillow and gave way to whatever might come. I won't say if I drifted off to sleep or was partly awake, but all of a sudden there it was, covering me like a warm comforter.

Some people might claim it's just an old woman's way of wishful thinking, whether or not that's true, I can't say. But I do know these images have been inside my head for as long as memory stretches back. It's always the same; I see myself as part of a family that never was—imaginary sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, cousins—we're all crowded elbow to elbow around a dining room table, everybody talking at once and no one minding. This was the family I grew up with. Huge, noisy, happy, filled with the love of each other and tied together for life. The sad thing is those people aren't real, they never were. They exist only inside my head. They were all born the year I had my ninth birthday.

Dreams have no limitations, so a person is free to create their own world of perfection. For a lonely little girl that world meant a big family. Not just big, but gigantic. Brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, and more kids than it's possible to count. It was my dream, but it was certainly not my life. I grew up an only child. All I had was Mama and Daddy, two loners who got married and had a single baby, me. I begged Mama for a baby sister or brother, but she'd squish her nose up like she was smelling something bad and answer, "Claire, I don't know where you get these crazy notions, certainly not from your father or me, we're practical people."

They were practical. Parents who believed children should be seen and not heard. So as they discussed the news of the day, I sat at the dinner table, silent. It was then I began creating my imaginary family. In no time at all, I could close my eyes and see every one of their faces. I knew all their secrets and what each of them would do in any given situation. First came my sister Nora; sensitive, gentle-hearted, with the soft brown eyes of a puppy dog. It got so that I could almost see Nora sitting in that empty chair at the far end of our table. After Nora it was an overly protective brother Paul, a lanky fellow with ears too big for his face. My immediate family was followed by a lengthy succession of cousins, aunts and uncles. In time, Charlie happened along. Fortunately, he was not a member of my imaginary family. He was a flesh and blood person who loved me as I did him, a man who agreed a dozen babies was just about the right number.

We were married in 1955 and one year later I gave birth to Elizabeth. She was barely three weeks old when I began to hemorrhage and woke up in the hospital with Doctor Kerrigan explaining how this was to be the only child I would ever have. But enough about me, Elizabeth is the one I should be telling about.

I know every mother claims their child is beautiful, but Elizabeth truly was. Lying there in her crib she looked like one of those paintings of golden-haired cherubs. Pink and dewy as a rosebud, with the tiniest, most perfect fingers I'd ever seen. Many a night I slipped out of my own bed to stand alongside her crib and watch the delicate whispers of breath rise and fall in her chest. "It's not fair," I told Charlie, "that she should be an only child." I suggested we consider adopting a few brothers and sisters for her, but somehow Charlie could never wrap his arms around that suggestion.

"You never know," he'd answer, "it could be that Doctor Kerrigan is wrong. Let's not rush into something. Give it time. Wait and see."

So we waited, and God knows we tried, but we never did have another baby. And, in the end, poor Elizabeth had to travel the same road I'd gone down. With a real understanding of how lonely that can be, I was determined to make it better for her. No matter how much love a mama tries to give her child they still need playmates, and my

little girl had plenty. When she was so tiny she had to stand on a stool to reach the counter, we began making cookies and inviting a bunch of neighborhood kids. After that it was Brownie Troop, then Girl Scout meetings, football parties, sleepovers, and almost anything else I could think of. Looking back, I can honestly say Elizabeth's face was never etched with the look of loneliness I had seen in my own.

Elizabeth had more friends than a person could count, not because of what I'd done, but because she was someone who was full of laughter and kindness. She had eyes the color of a summer sky and a smile that made other people quick to smile back. I'm not just bragging when I tell you Elizabeth was one of the most popular girls in Westfield High and could have dated any boy in town. But wouldn't you know, the one she liked was Jeffrey Caruthers—a lanky string bean with the personality of a footstool. He latched onto her like she was money in the bank and everywhere she went, he went.

Early in the morning, before we were fully awake, the telephone started ringing and it was generally Jeffrey calling to ask if he could walk her to school, or take her to a movie. They'd spend an entire day together but an hour after he brought her home, the telephone started ringing again. Some evenings we'd be fast asleep and he'd wake us simply because he had this desperate need to say good night. I tell you, Jeffrey went way beyond making a pest of himself and it's regrettable that we didn't do anything to squelch it. But Elizabeth was barely sixteen at the time and we figured he was little more than a passing fancy. "Don't worry," I told Charlie, "the likelihood is she'll have dozens of boyfriends before she's ready to settle down." Unfortunately, that wasn't what happened.

They continued to date all summer, throughout the fall and right into winter—Elizabeth not the least bit interested in any other boy and Jeffrey attached to her like a Siamese twin. Four or five nights a week he'd have dinner at our house and on the occasional night when he did stay home, he'd telephone every few hours. "Doesn't your family object to your not coming home for dinner?" I finally asked. "Not at all," he answered, then he and Elizabeth exchanged one of those lovesick puppy dog looks they'd begun to share. After a few years, Charlie and I came to realize that Jeffrey, who by now had

decided to call himself JT, was probably destined to be our son-in-law.

On Elizabeth's twentieth birthday they went out to dinner together; that night she came home wearing the happiest smile I've ever seen and a two-karat diamond ring. That was that—they were engaged and there was no looking back. Every time Elizabeth glanced at the ring on her finger, she'd start talking about what a wonderful husband Jeffrey was going to be. "Not just a wonderful husband," she'd sigh, "but, like Daddy, he'll be a wonderful father."

At the time I was inclined to agree, thinking only a man crazy in love would put such a sizeable diamond on his fiancé's finger. I didn't realize that's simply the way Jeffrey is—he's got an almost obsessive need to impress people with the razzle-dazzle of what he has or owns. And, that ring earmarked our beautiful daughter as something belonging to him. For someone with such an appetite for material possessions, it's hard to believe he could squander money the way he did. That's partly to blame for what happened. Money—or I should say his lack of it.

When Elizabeth married Jeffrey T. Caruthers, who by then answered only to JT, I trusted they'd live happily ever after. Why would I think otherwise? She was head-over-heels in love with him and he seemed just as crazy about her. I've never seen anyone act more devoted than that boy. He was always touching Elizabeth, wrapping his arm around her shoulder or twining his fingers through hers. And he'd tell anyone who'd listen how beautiful and smart she was. In my opinion, a man like that is simply not the sort you would have cause to doubt.

Charlie, given his masculine point-of-view felt otherwise—he had misgivings about a lad who seldom looked a person square in the eye and labeled himself with initials instead of using his given name. "You can't do a thing about it," I told him. "Elizabeth loves that boy as much as he loves her."

Of course, he grumbled and grouched a bit, but I figured it had a lot more to do with him losing a daughter rather than the shortcomings of Jeffrey himself. Once Charlie learned to live with the reality of their relationship, he treated JT as he would a son.

Three nights before the wedding, when we were all at their rehearsal dinner, Elizabeth announced, “JT and I are planning to have nine kids,” then she gave Jeffrey a beaming smile and said, “Right, JT?”

When he gave a nod of agreement, my heart was ready to explode with happiness—grandchildren, what could be sweeter! “See, you were wrong about the boy,” I whispered into Charlie’s ear, already settling into my Grandma role. Nine kids! Suddenly I was on the verge of having the big family I’d always dreamed of.

I assumed they were going to start right away, but week after week went by and there was no further mention of babies. Then eighteen months after the wedding, on an ordinary Tuesday evening when they’d come for a meatloaf dinner, I noticed something different about Liz—she was bubbly as a glass of champagne. After dinner she gave us the news that they were expecting their first child. “Isn’t it wonderful, Mom?” she said rubbing little circles around her still flat tummy.

I had dozens of questions; was she feeling alright? Any morning sickness? When was the baby due? Were they hoping for a boy or girl? “Boy or girl,” she laughed, “why, I’m hoping for twins!”

I expected at least a chuckle from Jeffrey, but he was busy watching an NBC newscaster tell about how some stock had gone up thirty-nine points in a single day.

“I knew I should have bought that,” he grumbled, “See Liz, I told you we ought to be putting our money where there’s *growth* potential!”

“There’s plenty of growth potential right here,” she answered, still rubbing those little circles around her stomach.

After that Elizabeth and I slipped off to the kitchen for some girl talk, that’s what they called it back then, *girl talk*. “I’ve started knitting a sweater for the baby,” she confided. “It’s white, with yellow edging. That way it will be okay for a boy or girl, although I’m certain this baby’s a boy.”

It’s been some twenty-seven years, but I remember that evening as if it took place yesterday. We talked for hours, talked about little things, such as how she’d decorate the nursery and what clothes a newborn baby might need. She was in the middle of writing a list