

A woman in a white, strapless, floor-length dress stands on a grassy hill under a blue sky with light clouds. In the foreground, a colorful snake with yellow, orange, and green scales is coiled on a rocky surface. The word "BELOVED" is written in large, white, distressed, serif capital letters across the middle of the image.

BELOVED

Some fairy tales
are true.

BRAD HUEBERT

Beloved

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Introduction

If you've ever flipped through the Bible—witnessing the creation account, traipsing through the garden of Eden, slugging through the era of the kings, marking the time of Jesus, wondering at the book of Acts, and beyond—you've probably had a thought like, "There's something bigger going on here." And you were right. But what's that larger thing? What's the big picture?

Well, for one thing, the Bible has been described as God's love letter to humanity. John Eldredge goes further, calling the Bible a love story—the most beautiful love story ever told. That thought captured me, inspiring me to write the story you're about to read.

True, others have transposed the Bible into a pure story form—but *Beloved* is my best attempt at recasting it using the inimitable pomp and spunk of a particular kind of story: a fairy tale. Fairy tales endure because they resonate with our truest longings and desires, which is what God wants his story to do to us, too. As Frederick Buechner reminds us, this is...

“a world of magic and mystery, of deep darkness and flickering starlight. It is a world where terrible things happen and wonderful things too. It is a world where goodness is pitted against evil, love against hate, order against chaos, in a great struggle where it is often hard to be sure who belongs to which side because appearances are endlessly deceptive. Yet for all its confusion and wildness, it is a world where the battle goes

ultimately to the good, who live happily ever after, and where in the long run everybody, good and evil alike, becomes known by his true name... that is the fairy tale of the Gospel with, of course, one crucial difference from all other fairy tales, which is that the claim made for it is that it is true, that it not only happened once upon a time but has kept on happening ever since and is happening still.” (Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth*).

Beloved is that kind of fairy tale, a simple story of God’s love affair with people, with humanity. That’s good news. You’re a person, I take it, so it’s also about his love affair with you. That alone should keep you smiling—and praying—long after you put down this book.

Thanks and kudos to John Eldredge, Søren Kierkegaard, and C.S. Lewis for their delightful inspiration. I pray your heart will react like mine has—wide-eyed and grateful for the grand adventure of the gospel and the heroic King who gave his life to love us like this.

I’ll let my brothers in the faith, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Malachi, and John set the stage before we begin.

“I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me... What fault did you find in me that you strayed so far from me? I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness... I will answer you according to your idols, in order to capture your heart... Re-

turn to me, and I will return to you... As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so your God will rejoice over you... Let us rejoice and be glad, and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.”

Now we're ready.

Brad Huebert, 2009

Chapter One

Beloved

Long, long ago, in an age of mystery and magic there lived a great and glorious King. He ruled a wonderful kingdom from a grand castle high in the clouds, hidden just beyond the wings of the wind. His castle and the kingdom grounds were splendid, but the world below him was dark, dry, and altogether empty.

He was a good King, the kind all loyal citizens want to follow—which is why every time he peered down into the blankness his ancient heart beat with a longing for love and adventure.

One day he closed his eyes and thought, “I want someone to love.” Then he thought, “I want the one I love to live in a beautiful garden.” Then he thought again, and through his magic his thoughts became real things. Just like that.

Far down below him on the dark, dry and empty world a garden began to grow—bright, cool, warm, and lovely. Flowers smiled, grasses waved, and trees stretched their arms toward the King, praising him for making them just as they were. The King smiled too, because everything he’d made was beautiful.

But he wasn’t finished yet. He saw the garden and thought, “Bigger.” And so the garden spread its fingers and grew larger—even more grand and beautiful. But it was still not enough. He thought, “Before I put someone to love in the garden, I must make wonderful creatures to roam there.” And his ideas became real again. The garden was filled with creatures of every kind, yipping and chirping and cooing and wagging.

Then the King stepped onto the wings of the wind, descending into his new garden. He found a patch of rich dirt and bent down to inspect it. A perfect spot. Next, he pushed his fingers into the soft earth, clawing and scooping until he had made a large pile of clay and dirt beside him. It smelled rich and alive—full of the life of the garden.

The creatures of the garden noticed the King's digging and gathered around him, curious about his mysterious pile of clay. After wiping his brow, he got to work on the mound. They could tell that all his love and magic was soaking into that lump of earth as he touched it.

First he formed what looked like a ball, then a big rock with two thick branches growing from it. Then he stretched out the branches. Legs! Next he made two feet at the end of them. Then ten curious little toes. Moving upward, he gathered up two knees, two thighs, two hips, and one smooth and rounded middle. Then a chest, arms, fingers, shoulders, and a long, graceful neck.

The King was breathing hard now. Something exciting flashed in his eyes—like a storm, but joyful. The animals crept in closer to see what he was doing.

The King stopped, turning to face them. He waved them off, adding a playful smile. "I want to finish this alone," he said, pretending to scold. "Just me and my clay." The creatures looked disappointed.

"It's a surprise," he told them. "You can see it when I'm finished." The King had spoken, so one by one the creatures of the garden left him, skittering off to explore the rest of the garden (which, you will remember, was very large).

Then the King took that head of clay in his hands and formed a noble face, the most glorious face in the garden (second only to his face, which of course was unmatched in its glory). Not only that, but as he laid the finishing touches, the face looked more and more like his own. But it was not a he. It was a she. Everything

else he had created until now looked flat and comely compared to this new shape before him, this godlike thing made from clay.

Next, he gracefully strung out long cords of her hair, sculpting her cheeks, her eyes, and a delightful nose that made him chuckle. He bent down close to her, just inches away, drawing out the beautiful lines of her mouth and lips. And then, looking about to make sure none of the creatures of the garden were watching, he reached down, and took her clay hand in his own. He paused, taking a very deep, grave breath.

“I will love this clay,” he said. “And more than anything else in my entire kingdom, I want her to love me in return.”

The King paused then, watching as a long, shiny serpent slithered out from the shadows. It was the only creature that was already on the earth before he created the garden. The serpent spoke.

“To truly love you, she must choose you.”

The King sighed. “I know that.”

“And if she can choose you, she can reject you.”

“That is true,” said the King. “She must choose. It’s what will make her so very special to me. You see, I want to be chosen.”

“Finally,” said the serpent, hissing through its ribbon tongue.

“Finally?”

“Finally something I can steal from you. I will be watching.”

“That is your choice too,” said the King. “Now leave us alone.”

The serpent obeyed. Turning his back to ignore it, the King bent down, face to face with her, with the clay. He smiled. Taking a deep breath, he gave her a long, passionate kiss. And as the King’s breath caressed her lips, something wondrous happened. She—that body formed out of clay—rippled to life. She opened her eyes, gasping for breath. When she found it, she gazed up at the King and smiled at him. The first thing she knew in the world was his beautiful face, his loving embrace.

And she chose him, returning the kiss, reflecting the love. The King's chest swelled with joy. It felt like swimming in a sunrise (which he would know, since he was the King). His heart beat fiercely, filled with a pure love for his Beloved.

Chapter 2

The Serpent

Every day the King floated his way down from his castle in the clouds to spend his time with Beloved. Often they would enjoy long walks together in the garden he had made for her. Sometimes they talked late into the night. They never stopped loving each other.

Then one day the King took her by the hand. "I must tell you something important," he said, leaning over to kiss her cheek. She giggled.

"I'm listening."

"I have made you to live forever, to love you and to be loved by you," he explained. "But loving me is your choice. You may choose not to love me if you like."

"Who else would I love?" Beloved scrunched up her face. "I only have eyes for you."

The King smiled. "Thank you. But you must remember this: Because you were made to love me and be loved by me, if you ever choose not to love me, you will not live forever. Your heart will begin to die."

"What does 'die' mean?"

"To die means sadness. It means being apart. It means having pain," explained the King. "And death can only be undone by another death."

Beloved struggled to understand. "What is 'sadness'? Or 'apart'? Or 'pain'? I don't know what you mean."

"Just love me," he finally said, giving her shoulder a squeeze. And she did love him.

The King got up to return to his castle for the night. Beloved did not notice the sadness in the King's eyes as he left a tender kiss on her cheek. In a flash, he was gone until the next morning.

Nor did Beloved notice the serpent hanging in the leaves of a tree above her head. It had overheard the whole conversation with the King. Waiting until just the right moment, it slithered down from among the leaves, dangling like a vine in front of her face.

"Oh, hello," she said, cocking her head to one side. "I have not seen you in the garden before."

"I am from before the garden," the serpent told her.

"Before the garden?" Her eyes sparkled.

"Yes, before the garden. I know the King from long ago, before there was a garden. Even before he made you."

Beloved smiled. "That must be wonderful, to have known the King for as long as you have."

"Yes, I suppose."

"What do you mean, you *suppose*?" Beloved asked. "Do you not love the King like I do?"

"I mean that you do not know the King like I know him. He is not all that he seems to be. For instance, he didn't tell you there were things made outside of the garden, did he? And he didn't even tell you about me."

"There is so much to tell," Beloved said. "He will tell me when he wishes to tell me."

"Ah, but he does not wish to tell you, or he surely would have already," the serpent said.

Beloved rolled her eyes. "You are speaking in riddles. Why would he keep that from me?"

"He does not want to tell you because he does not want you to know that there are things outside the garden." The serpent paused. "Things outside of his love."

"Outside of his love?" Beloved asked, curious.

“Things to love other than the King. He is a jealous lover, and he wants to keep you from loving other good things. And he wants to keep Others from loving you.”

“Others? Silly serpent. There are no Others.” Beloved laughed out loud.

“That’s my point.”

Beloved thought hard. It was true. There were no Others. She began to wonder about what Others might be like. What it might be like to be loved by Others besides the King.

“But there are no Others.”

“Ah, but if the King truly loves you, he will want Others to love you too,” the snake said. “Is it really love if there is no one else for you to choose, no one else to love other than him?”

Beloved’s mind was spinning. “I suppose not. But the King said that if I choose to love another, I will not live forever. I will begin to die.”

“What do you know of death?” asked the serpent.

“I don’t understand it,” Beloved confessed. “But I don’t like the idea of it.”

“It is nothing to fear,” the serpent explained. “I thought the King would have told you that.”

“What do you think I should do?”

“Ask the King if you can have Others,” the serpent suggested. “And not just one or two. Ask him for a whole crowd of them. Then you can see for yourself that it is the King you want to love. Of course, you can choose him like you always have, and so you will not die. And then you will both be happy. Even happier than you are right now. He told me himself that he wanted to be chosen.”

Beloved thought about that. It made sense. She could still choose the King. But this way she could be absolutely sure of her love for him. Surely he would want this. It had to be this way. She made up her mind to take the advice of the serpent.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes. I will ask him.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow, when he comes to me.”

“Good girl,” said the serpent. “A wise choice. A very wise choice.”

And with that, he slithered back into the bushes in the garden, just out of sight.

As the sun set, Beloved lay her head on the soft moss of the garden and fell asleep. But this night, for the first time, she did not dream of the King. Instead her mind was filled with thoughts about her new friend the serpent, the mysterious Others, and what it would be like if the King made them for her.

Chapter 3

Beloved's Choice

When morning came, Beloved awoke early. She wanted to be ready for the King when he arrived for their day together. But something felt different, even strange. Something she had never felt before.

She felt anxious. Anxious and guilty. It was like a handful of the pink worms that lived under the garden stones were writhing around in her stomach.

“How odd,” she muttered.

“Odd?” The King’s voice sounded from behind her, startling her and making her jump. When Beloved turned to greet him, something in his kindly eyes made her look away. For the very first time, she found herself feeling uncomfortable being near him.

“What is odd?” the King asked gently. Beloved noticed something else that was different. She wanted to hide from him. She didn’t want to tell him about her conversation with the serpent. She looked down at her feet.

“It’s nothing.” Beloved’s face turned red as more guilt churned within her. More worms. All the new feelings wriggling inside her made her feel weak and sick.

“I was thinking,” Beloved finally said, changing the subject, “That I would like to have more company here in the garden.” She forced herself to look up at him again.

“Company?”

“Yes.” Beloved moved closer, trying very hard to sound pleasant. “I was thinking that perhaps you could create Others for me to be with—when you are not here with me, of course.” She

glanced up at the face of the King and noticed tears welling up in his eyes. The sight made her look away from him again.

“Others?” His voice sounded hoarse.

“Yes, Others,” she said firmly, remembering how the serpent had made so much sense the night before. “You said that I could choose to love you.”

“Yes, I said that. And I meant it.”

“Well, then, make me some Others. Lots of them. So I can really choose for myself.”

“You’ve already chosen,” the King whispered. But Beloved didn’t hear him. She was too excited.

“Then I want many Others. Different kinds. So that I can choose.” Finally noticing the sadness of the King, she reached out and took his hand. “Don’t worry. I will still choose You.”

“That’s your choice,” the King replied, heavy with sorrow. He turned his face away as tears flowed down his great cheeks.

“Thank you, thank you!” Beloved wrapped the King in a hug, then dashed into the garden to tell the serpent the good news.

The King wept bitterly.

The next morning Beloved awoke early again, more excited than she could stand. Today was the day the King had promised the Others would arrive. Padding her way over to a clear pond in the middle of the garden, she peered at her reflection in the water. She was beautiful, and she knew it. The King had made her wonderful. She was ready to meet the Others.

Even so, an hour went by, then another. Still the Others were nowhere to be seen. Had the King changed his mind? No, she could trust him. So she waited. And chewed a fingernail. And waited. After three hours and four fingernails, Beloved heard a faint noise so distant that she wondered if she was imagining it.

She became very quiet. The noise was definitely real. It sounded like someone calling.

Beloved strode forward, weaving her way through the garden to figure out where the noise was coming from. Slowly but surely, she followed the elusive sound until she was sure that she was chasing a voice. Several voices, in fact. Her heart began to pound.

The Others! Beloved picked up her pace at the thought, scrambling hard through the foliage. Eventually she came to the very edge of the garden, a place she had never been before. She gasped, for just past the lush edges of the garden was a horrible wasteland. As far as she could see, black and twisted rock littered the landscape.

Beloved had never seen something that was not beautiful before. It stirred up another feeling she did not like: Disgust, and a knot in her stomach to join the worms. But just before she turned to leave the edge of the garden, she noticed movement out on the craggy wasteland. The Others were lounging out on the rock, waving to her and calling her name. They were calling her Beloved, too.

They looked thin, almost shimmery—like they were transparent. But as they called to her, something inside of her called back, making her heartbeat quicken. The Others slid off the rocks, strutting a little closer, still far off but near enough that she could see them all. Some were handsome and noble. Others weren't as outwardly attractive but seemed to draw her to themselves, almost like when the night sky embraced the dawn each morning. Each one had its own unique character. They seemed to become more solid and real the longer she looked at them.

“Come to me,” Beloved called out, not moving an inch closer. “Come here, into the King’s garden. It’s a wonderful place.”

“We’re not allowed,” the Others replied, not moving either. “We can’t come a step closer. Just walk out here. Why don’t you come to us?”

Beloved’s heart dropped like a falling star. She did not want to leave the beauty of the garden. It was then that she noticed the serpent beside her in the grass.

“Why won’t they come to you?”

“They want to, but they can’t,” Beloved replied, her brow furrowed. “I suppose the King has forbidden them to enter his garden.”

“That’s true. Do you not see? He does not want you to know true happiness. Why would he withhold the Others from you if he truly loved you?”

“I don’t know.” Beloved stared at the Others and bit her lip, feeling more drawn to them every minute.

“All is not lost,” the serpent said, reassuring her. “If they will not come to you, then why don’t you go to them? This is what you asked for. This is how you will know true love.”

Beloved turned pale. “Go to them? Leave the garden?” She felt her voice trembling. “No. I couldn’t.”

“Oh, but you could,” said the serpent. “Not forever. Just for a little while. Then, when you know true love, you can come back.”

Beloved felt so confused. “I can? Really?”

“Of course,” the serpent hissed. “Why else would the King keep the Others from coming into his garden? He must want you to go to them. Otherwise you will never meet them and you will never know true love.”

Beloved felt something tearing up her insides, another sensation she had never felt before. But every minute her attraction to the Others was growing. She found she could hardly resist them a moment longer. They seemed larger and more attractive the longer she stood looking at them.

“Well, maybe just for a while,” she said finally. Clenching her jaw tight, Beloved took a deep breath and stepped onto the stony plain. She felt no different than she had a moment before.

“You see?” the serpent said. “You shall not die.”

“Yes. You’re right. I’m still alive. This won’t kill me. I’ll only be gone for a short while, and then I will return.”

With that, she began walking towards the Others, who reached for her with open arms. As she made her way through the jagged rock, she occasionally looked back at the serpent, who kept encouraging her to press on. When she had reached the Others and was out of earshot, the serpent spoke.

“She has rejected you, King.”

“I can see that,” the King replied, for he had been watching everything happen from the shadows in the garden.

“You saw me deceive her then. Will you destroy me for it?”

“Yes.”

The serpent tensed, coiling up in fear.

The King sighed deeply. “It was she who made the choice, and that choice rests on her shoulders. But you are hereby banished from the garden and my vengeance on you will come in due time.”

“We shall see, King.” The serpent hissed, then slithered obediently out from the cool grass of the garden onto the hot blackened stones, following Beloved’s path toward the Others. The King stood alone in the garden for a long time, staring out into the wasteland until his tears dried on his cheeks.

“I will always love you, Beloved,” he whispered, even as the hot wind muffled his words. “Even though you betray me.”

Chapter 4

The Others

Beloved found herself welcomed so heartily by the Others that she quickly forgot about the ugliness of the wasteland. She soon learned that they didn't call themselves "Others," but rather "Loves." She liked the new name better. It felt good to have so many Loves around her, doting on her, complimenting her. Her eyes danced from one to the next flirtatiously. She certainly had choice now.

"Now I will truly understand love and happiness," Beloved told herself. One of the Loves in particular caught her eye, and her heart raced within her. She felt herself strangely drawn to it. Sweet talk flowed freely from its lips, catching her up in a romance that vaguely reminded her of the King.

"The King!"

"Who?"

"The King. The great and glorious King who made us. I cannot stay long, for I must be getting back to him."

"Back?" the Loves asked her, confused. "What do you mean, 'back'? Back to what?"

Beloved scampered up a rocky outcropping and pointed to where she had come from. "There," she said, pointing to the delightful clump of green. "To the garden."

"What garden? There is only the wasteland."

"It's right there," she replied, still pointing.

"Whatever you say. But come, let's enjoy each other's love, because we are all we have."

When Beloved glanced out over the wasteland a second time she panicked. For where the garden had been, there was now only desert. “It’s gone!” she cried out. “The garden, where is it?”

“There is no garden,” the Loves said in unison. “There is no King. Only us. Come, let’s enjoy each other. Give yourself to us. Let us give ourselves to you.”

“No.” Beloved found herself screaming, gripped by a sweaty terror. “I am Beloved. I must go back to the garden and find the King.”

“You are not Beloved,” said the Love she had been drawn to at first. “Your name is Belaboured. What are you talking about?”

Beloved burst into tears. “I am Beloved. I belong to the King.”

Sensing her anger, the Loves spoke gently. “Then go, Belaboured. Go and find your King. You will see. You will see that there is no garden and no King to love you.”

Beloved backed out of the outcropping of rock and ran as hard as she could back toward the garden. When she had run for a few minutes, she stopped, confused. There was still no garden. She’d now run farther than she’d ventured a few minutes earlier, but the garden was nowhere to be found.

Thinking that perhaps she’d gotten turned around, Beloved ran in a wide circle around the outcropping several times, looking for hints of the garden, trying to spy even a single familiar tree sticking its neck up out of the wasteland. She lifted up her nose to the air and tried to smell the wondrous smells of the garden. But there was nothing. The garden was totally gone. Beloved collapsed in a sobbing heap, crumpling up on the hot sand and rock.

“Belaboured, we’re all here,” the Loves called, coming alongside her. At first she ignored them in her grief. But the more she thought about the idea of being alone in the wasteland the more she gave in to their pleading. Eventually she answered their call.

Belaboured was helped to her feet by the most handsome of the Loves, who tried to console her. “I am here,” it told her. “We all are. Even if there were a King, you wouldn’t need him as you once did. We will love you now.”

Beloved felt utterly lost and dried up like the wasteland. “Then I want a Love who will tell me everything will be all right,” she said.

“I’m here,” rang a voice from behind her. A Love she hadn’t noticed before stood ready to embrace her, arms outstretched in earnest. She looked into its eyes and saw only a fraction of the life and glory she had seen in the face of the King, but it was all she had now, for her true love, her King, was gone. Overcome with loneliness and shame, she fell into its arms.

Before Belaboured knew it, many long years had passed by and she had all but forgotten about the garden and the King. She forgot the wonderful sights, smells, and the beautiful flowers and trees. She even forgot that her real name was Beloved. The only place she remembered any of it was in her dreams, which had begun to fade too.

Belaboured scraped out her existence from the Loves of the wasteland, haunted by a vague idea that she was missing something important, that her existence there was utterly futile. And every year that passed, something deeper inside Belaboured died.

One morning Belaboured awoke to a curious murmuring. Groaning her way out of bed, she hobbled stiffly into the sharp sunlight. A large gaggle of Loves had gathered around something. She couldn’t quite see what it was because their backs were turned to her.

“What is it?” she asked.

A Love with an enormous chin turned to greet her. “He arrived this morning,” it said, nodding grimly.

Pushing her way through the crowd, Belaboured finally set eyes on what had caused such a stir among her loves. It was a man.

Not a Love, a real live person. Or at least, he looked like a man. His skin seemed to glow, almost like he’d inhaled a lungful of gold that was now seeping through his pores. He looked injured.

“Who are you? Where are you from?”

When he saw her, the man smiled. “I am a servant of the King.”

Beloved blinked, then furrowed her brow. “The King?”

“Yes. He told me to tell you that he loves you. That he still wants you to be his.”

Beloved felt a knot of emotion swelling in her throat.

The most handsome Love in the circle put its hand on her shoulder. “How can we know he speaks for the King? Or that there even is a King?”

“He said the King loves me.”

“We are your loves, Belaboured. And even if there is a King, how can this man say the King loves you when we are here and this King is not?”

It was true. Where was this King, if he truly loved her? Belaboured set her jaw as anger simmered in her chest.

“You’re a liar, stranger. There is no King. And even if there was, I don’t believe he loves me.”

“You must choose him, Beloved,” the man said slowly, and the kindness in his eyes caused her anger to boil within her.

Belaboured growled, then stepped forward and struck the man’s face as hard as she could. His head wobbled at the blow. “Take him away,” she commanded.

As Belaboured’s Loves dragged the man across the gravel, pain swelled in her knuckles. she dropped her head back as far as it would go and screamed into the stale morning air.

“Don’t ever come back,” she said, calling to the man. “Or we will kill you.”

After the visit from the strange man, Belaboured bounced often from Love to Love. One enticed her with lust until she had given her body and soul to it. Another lavished silver and gold on her until they had stolen the sparkle in her eyes and left her with a dead, dull expression. Still another encouraged her to pursue whatever her heart desired, until nothing gave her pleasure at all. She slowly settled for less and less until she lived in continual disappointment and shame.

Beloved’s once beautiful skin became leathered by the sun. Her face was full of scars from wasteland life and the beatings she received as she was ravished by all her Loves. Her hope had dried up like a cracked riverbed, and with it her dreams of true love and life. Her back was painfully stooped, and her limbs became twisted and deformed over the years, as though some terrible disease had gripped her. All hope of love and life had left her to die.

Chapter 5

The King

After Beloved left him, the King moved the garden to the grounds surrounding his castle in the clouds. Each morning he walked alone through the flowers and foliage, pierced with a sadness that refused to leave him. Even the animals saw that something was wrong.

His giant heart ached for his Beloved, and he knew what kind of treatment she was receiving from the Others. It hurt him terribly to recall the special time they had spent together, and he longed to be loved by her again. Even more, he longed to find her and once again pour out his love on her. But she had chosen. She had chosen to reject his love—not once, but twice.

One day while strolling through the garden, the King was so gripped by love for Beloved that he made up his mind to do something to rescue her once and for all. Knowing that appearing in all his glory would not be appropriate, he stripped off his kingly robes and put on a pile of rags instead. His Beloved had rejected him, which meant he would now have to come to her as one of the Others, hoping she would choose him again. No more servants sending messages. He would rescue her himself or die trying.

Sliding off his glorious throne, the King stepped out of the throne room and blew out the candle. The room went black. Striding to the edge of the grounds, he left his loyal subjects, stepped onto the wings of the wind, and descended to earth again—alighting on the hot black rock of the wasteland to stand among all the Others. None of them even noticed his arrival. He was now one of them.

And sitting among the pathetic gathering of the Others his eyes found his Beloved. She no longer resembled the woman he had created, but had become a twisted and putrid creature with no outward beauty to speak of. He stepped through the crowd of Others until he stood before her.

Belaboured would not or perhaps could not look up. She had sat there in that very spot beside the path year after year, letting her life pass her by in a river of tears. But the King swelled with true love for her.

“Beloved.”

Belaboured didn’t answer. She didn’t even budge. The King tried again.

“Beloved.”

This time Belaboured stirred slightly. The King was patient.

“Beloved.”

Belaboured looked up at the King. His heart pounded as Belaboured’s eyes flickered slightly. A moment later they glazed over again.

“That’s not my name. I am Belaboured.”

“No, you are my Beloved. Beloved from the garden.”

A hint of a tear formed in Belaboured’s eye, then vanished. “You must be mistaken. I am Belaboured, a pilgrim of the wasteland. The garden is a fairy tale that haunts us in our dreams and makes us miserable. Now go away and leave me to my misery.”

“Yes, that’s right, Belaboured.” The serpent hissed behind the King. “The garden is a fairy tale. The King is a fairy tale. The wasteland is all there is.”

The King did not take his eyes off Beloved. “I want her back.”

“You *want* her?” The serpent almost choked on his tongue. “Look at her. She’s wasted, spoiled, and dirty. She has given herself, *all* of herself, to many Loves. To every Love but you.”

“Yes. And I want her.”

“Then you know the rules. Death for death.”

The King nodded in grim understanding. He bent over and knelt at the feet of Belaboured. “I love you, Beloved. I will always love you.” He couldn’t hold back his tears.

Belaboured noticed one of the Loves behind the King motioning to her, asking her to distract him. The serpent inched closer to him—slippery with malice, his eyes unblinking.

“But I don’t love you back,” Belaboured said, her voice unnaturally cold. “I told your servant never to return, or we would kill him.”

“That’s why I decided to come myself,” the King said, his eyes beckoning.

The Love behind the King signaled her. The serpent was ready.

“Then we will kill you,” Belaboured said. The serpent reared up behind the King and struck, sinking its horrid fangs deep into the King’s heel, pumping deadly poison into the King’s bloodstream. The King reached for Belaboured, but the Others stepped in and grabbed his arms, keeping him from her. She closed her eyes.

Weakened by the poison, the King did not resist. Emboldened by the serpent, the Others spun the King flat on his back, wrenching his arms out to his sides. They held him there until the poison had seeped through his entire body. He was pale, and coughed up blood with every shudder.

“I love you, Beloved,” he said, choking. “I love you. And I forgive you.”

A moment later, the King’s head twisted to one side as he let out a deep sigh. The grand and glorious King was dead.

The next day Belaboured was speaking to one of the Loves as they were burying the King. “Do you think he really was the King?”

“Of course not,” it answered. “There is no King. We are all you need.”

“But there was something familiar about him. Something beautiful and more wonderful than anything else in this wasteland. When he spoke to me, I found that I could almost believe in a kind of garden again.”

“The garden is a fairy tale, just like the serpent said. A haunting dream. Nothing more. And anyway, you betrayed him. He’s dead because of you, and now he’s buried in the sand. It’s all over.”

Belaboured kept silent after that, not wanting to offend her Other Loves. But for the first time in many years, in her heart of hearts she wondered whether fairy tales might hold a grain of truth after all. That night, she even thought she caught a faint whiff of a garden somewhere on the evening breeze.

Chapter 6

The Rescue

“Beloved.”

Belaboured woke with a start. There was someone standing above her, speaking to her.

“Beloved.”

Belaboured blinked several times, trying to clear the fog from her head. She sat up. “Who is it?”

“It’s the King. Your true Love.”

“I am Belaboured. I have many Loves.”

He stepped from the shadows into the moonlight so that Belaboured could see him. She gasped in fear.

“The serpent bit you. I saw you die.”

“Don’t be afraid, Beloved. I left my castle in the clouds and the garden we love to rescue you from the Others and the wasteland. I have overcome the serpent’s poison by letting it kill me, which means his poison can no longer kill you either, if you come with me. It’s time to go home.”

Belaboured’s mind began dancing with memories of her old life: The garden, the romance, the beauty, the adventurous love. The love she was made for. Then she pulled back.

“No.”

“No? Why not?”

Belaboured shook violently. Her voice cracked with emotion. “I betrayed you in the garden. I rejected your servant. I distracted you so the serpent could bite you.”

“No one took my life, Beloved. I laid it down on purpose.”

“But look at me,” Belaboured said, wailing. “I’m hideous. I’m dirty and dying. I’m not worth anything to you anymore. You deserve someone better. The Loves are all I have. I deserve all they give.”

“Yes, but you are my Beloved.”

Belaboured jumped to her feet, tears streaming down her face. “How could you still want me? How can you even help me? I’m dying.”

“Death for death, life for life.”

“What?”

“Death for death, life for life. My death paid for yours, and my life can be yours if you leave the Others. Give yourself to me alone, as you once did. Come and live again.”

Belaboured was quiet for a while. “I will have to think about it. I don’t know if I can do it.”

“Very well,” said the King. “But if you want me, I’ll be waiting back in the garden at dawn.”

“But how? The garden...”

“Trust me.” With that, The King left Beloved to her choice.

Belaboured couldn’t sleep that night. She tossed and turned in her bed, trying to figure out what to do with the King’s invitation. Could she really give up her Loves? *All* of them? Some of them she still enjoyed. Some of them still had power. The wasteland life wasn’t all that bad. It had become all she knew. Could she really give all that up for the memory of a King she hardly remembered?

On the other hand, how could she refuse? The love, the forgiveness, the chance of a new start? She realized anew that the ache in her soul was satisfied whenever he was near, and she knew she would die eventually if she did not accept his offer.

But the sun was rising. What had the King said? To come meet him at the garden at dawn? Leaping to her feet, she ran in the direction he had disappeared in the night before. The noise woke up her many Loves, who began calling to her.

“Belaboured, is that you? Where are you going?”

“There is no garden, you fool,” the snake said, mocking.

But Belaboured kept running. Now the Loves were sprinting in pursuit. They were much faster than her now, lessening the gap with every stride. Belaboured panicked and almost quit running. She couldn’t see even a trace of the garden ahead of her. There was nothing. All she had fueling her was the promise of the King the night before. Had it only been a dream? Should she turn back?

“NO!” she screamed back at the Loves. “I don’t want you anymore. No Others. No other Loves. I will follow the King. I love him and only him.”

“There is no King. Come back.”

The crowd of Others was on top of her now, a sea of arms yanking and clutching at her rags, trying to pull her back. A dozen hands clamped onto her body like talons, finally stopping her in her tracks. Belaboured’s hot face streamed with tears as the Loves dragged her back toward the blackened rocks.

“Please, King,” she sobbed. “If you are there, if you love me, if you ever loved me, then save me now.” It was all she had left.

Suddenly a voice boomed through the air so loudly that the Others took their hands off Belaboured and clamped them over their ears.

“Let her go. She’s mine!”

In that instant, Belaboured saw where she was standing: Just inside the ancient garden. The Others screamed in horror and pain as they saw the truth. Even the soft blades of grass cut through their feet and sent them howling back into the wasteland. But the

serpent was caught in the thick underbrush. He struggled but couldn't move an inch.

The King glared at the serpent with eyes like a wildfire. "I spared you many years ago and promised you that I would have my vengeance. And so your doom has come upon your own head." The King raised his foot in the air and brought it down on the snake with thunder, a blow so crippling that it crushed the creature's skull into many pieces. The impact ripped a gaping fissure right down the middle of the whole wasteland.

The quake rumbled in Beloved's bosom until her ribs rattled and she felt like she would explode. The impact seemed to dislodge something massive inside her, as if the real fissure was within her, radiating from her very core. In an instant her desire for the Others fell away. She whirled to face them, but they had fled back into the wasteland. She marveled at how horribly thin and hollow they looked again, and she could hardly believe that they had seemed so important to her just the day before.

Turning back to face the garden, Belaboured saw that the King was no longer dressed in his scraps and rags, but was wearing the most glorious robe imaginable. He held out his hand to her, and she reached out and kissed it with relief and joy.

"My King." Her whole body exploded with joy and warmth at his touch.

"My Beloved." He was smiling from ear to ear.

Chapter 7

Forever After

In a moment almost too wonderful to imagine, the King spoke a single word and the entire garden lifted off from the wasteland again. It rose steadily upward, nestling triumphantly back into the grounds around the King's castle just beyond the wings of the wind. Beloved thought the castle was even more beautiful than the garden, if that were possible—and she almost embraced it all. Almost. She glanced down and hated her rags, loathed her leathery skin, and mourned her unsightly scars.

“What’s wrong, Beloved?”

“I am not worthy of this place, or of you.” Beloved wept bitterly, and nearly crumpled to the shining ground. But the King stepped closer to her, face to face, until she could not help looking into his fierce and loyal eyes.

“I made you from the earth, and I will remake you from the same,” he said. And for a moment, everything went numb as she once again became earth. Even so, she somehow noticed the King lowering her to the ground until she was lying on her back.

Then he reached down, and took her hand in his. He paused, and took a very long, deep, grave breath.

“I will love this clay,” he said. “And more than anything else in my entire kingdom, I want her to love me in return.”

The King bent down low, face to face with her, with the clay. He smiled. Taking a deep breath, he gave her a long, passionate kiss. And as the King's breath caressed her lips, something wondrous happened. She—that body formed out of clay—rippled to life. She opened her eyes, gasping for breath. When she found it,

she gazed up at the King and smiled at him. The first thing she knew in the world was his beautiful face, his loving embrace.

And she chose him, returning the kiss, reflecting the love. The King's chest swelled with joy. It felt like swimming in a sunrise (which he would know, since he was the King). His heart beat fiercely, filled with a pure love for his Beloved.

"Wow." Beloved sighed. She couldn't pry her eyes from his. What she saw there ignited her boldness again, and she decided to ask him a question.

"My King, my true Love..."

"You are wondering why I created the Others if I knew they would torment and ruin you," said the King.

"Yes. Why would you do such a thing?"

"I didn't," replied the King.

"You didn't?" Beloved was confused. "But then where did they come from? Surely someone made them."

"That is true."

She furrowed her brow. "Who did such an evil thing? Was it the serpent then?"

"No, my love. It was not the serpent."

"Then who was it? Who made the Others?"

"You did, child."

"I did?" Beloved swallowed hard, but she found that she could no longer feel shame when she was with her true Love.

"On the day I made you I drew you out of my Great Heart, with the power to dream and make and create, just as I can. The Others and even the wasteland they live in came from your heart when you dreamed about them, and ruined your heart when you gave it up to them. Your heart is a most precious gift, Beloved. It is to be guarded at all costs. And it must be mine in order for it to live and breathe."

Beloved was quiet for a long time. She had to think hard about that.

“So to save me from the Others, you first had to save me from myself?”

“Precisely,” replied the King. “But enough of that. Let’s enjoy each other. You can now use your heart to dream and create wonderful things that make me smile. You see, once you give me your heart, we can share it with those who need it most without fear of deceit or death.”

Overwhelmed with joy, Beloved offered him her hand, and leaned over to kiss his cheek. A huge, kingly grin spread across his regal face.

After that the King and his Beloved lived—and ruled—and loved—happily ever after.