

THE
EDGE *of*
BELONGING

A M A N D A C O X



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2020 by Amanda Cox

Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Cox, Amanda, 1984— author.

Title: The edge of belonging / Amanda Cox.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2020]

Identifiers: LCCN 2020005248 | ISBN 9780800737405 (paperback) | ISBN 9780800739188 (hardcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Adoption—Fiction

Classification: LCC PS3603.O88948 E34 2020 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020005248>

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Most Scripture used in this book, whether quoted or paraphrased by the characters, is taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Some Scripture used in this book, whether quoted or paraphrased by the characters, is taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Mom and Dad.
Thanks for not getting too mad all the times I stayed up
reading way past my bedtime.

And for Lily.
When I started writing this story, I wrote simply
from a love for family and a heart for adoption.
I had no idea that before this book made it into print,
adoption would transform my own family
in such a twirly, sunshiny, smiley way.
Aunt Manda loves you.
Forever and always.

• CHAPTER •

ONE

SEPTEMBER 8, 1994

People considered him homeless because he didn't have an address of his own, but Harvey James would've been homeless even if he owned the turreted mansion off State Route 460. To have a home, you'd have to feel as though you belonged. The edge of the highway was the closest he'd ever been.

Unending blasts of headlights and rushes of wind from passing cars on the bypass glanced off the brush he scoured for bits of other people's lives. Things not missed. Some flung out of car windows in anger. Others, accidental losses from poorly secured luggage racks. He brushed his humidity-damp mop back from his eyes, detaching the sprigs plastered to his forehead.

Straining to decipher shapes out of step with the wild tangle of weeds, Harvey walked the line—the boundary between what the state groomed to maintain the road's scenic status and the places left untouched and feral. He raised the

flashlight he'd found last week. The beam cut through the descending darkness.

A suitcase lay on its side, scarred by road rash. He knelt and fumbled with the zipper. He groaned. More Hawaiian-print shirts and swim trunks. It'd be nice if someone lost normal clothes for a change.

He grabbed the stack of shirts and three miniature bottles of hotel shampoo and crammed them into his bag.

A break in the swift-moving traffic swathed the shoulder in an eerie silence. An odd sound reached his ears—soft but jarring in its inconsistency with the road noise. Mewling. An abandoned kitten?

Harvey's heart dropped three inches in his chest. In all his scavenging, nothing horrified him more than living things discarded.

He'd tried to keep an abandoned dog once. Poor old fella. Deaf and half blind he'd suspected. The dog didn't last long. Highways were places for rush and madness. Not living things.

With a lingering sigh, he turned back toward his camp. It was an ugly truth, but the creature would be better off if he let nature take its course instead of nursing an animal along, only delaying the inevitable.

Three cars raced past, each vying to overtake the other. They torpedoed the silence with the harsh roar of their removed mufflers, sending a jolt down his spine.

As the sound trailed away, Harvey's ears retained a ring. He massaged the hinge of his jaw to rub out the sound. The tiny cry sounded in the stillness. This time stronger, angry. Harvey froze.

Human.

Making a slow turn, Harvey raised his flashlight to scour the brush in search of the source.

Traffic resumed, and the rushes of wind threw sound. He opened his mouth to call out, to let the little thing know he was coming, but the ridiculousness of the impulse resealed his lips.

The flashlight in his trembling hand sent a jittering stream of light along the scrub. He walked on, straining his ears.

Finally, another break in traffic. In the silent interlude, the cry sounded, coming from deeper in the brush than he'd originally thought.

There. A trail tramped down where someone had gone before him. He slapped away the limbs hanging across his path, sweeping the flashlight from side to side. The pounding of his heart mirrored the urgency of the feeble wail.

Harvey stopped midstep. Five feet ahead, a bunch of fabric squirmed on the ground. He sucked in his breath and crept forward.

He knelt, and the undergrowth pricked his knees. A funny smell hung in the air, both sweet and sharp. Harvey laid the flashlight on the ground, aiming the light, then reached for a corner of the fabric to uncover this foreign being whose squall had receded to feeble grunts and whimpers.

He recoiled. The tiny thing with squinched-tight eyes was covered in drying blood and a white cheesy substance. Taking the corner of the fabric, he wiped the baby's face, crouching close as he inspected for injury. The baby stilled at his touch and gave a languid blink. Their gazes locked for a fleeting moment.

Everything faded. No sound of road noise. No buzz of mosquitos by his ear. A tiny fist raised. He brushed the baby's palm, and it wound its pink fingers around Harvey's thumb.

Warmth exploded in his chest, then traveled all the way through him. He swept the bundle into his arms and with a spare shirt rubbed until the child's perfect pink skin was cleared of blood. An injury-free baby girl. Naked. Wrapped in a man's flannel shirt.

Harvey stood and turned a slow circle, babe pressed close. Where had she come from? Who left her behind?

He undid the top two buttons of his large shirt and tucked the baby inside to share his heat. Would the wild pounding of his heart hurt her ears?

She had a full head of dark, downy hair. Now dried, it stood up in fuzzy curls that tickled his chest. He stroked her cheek, and she jerked her head toward his touch, searching. Faint grunts. She bobbed her open mouth against his skin. "Sorry, little one. I don't have anything for you. Let's get back to camp, and we'll figure something out." He had boxes of things stored for the day he found a use for them, but none contained bottles and infant formula.

Baby girl, finally convinced food wasn't available, ceased her fretting, nuzzled, and fell asleep, lulled by the sway of his long stride. Harvey pressed his lips in a line.

Should he pack her in a basket and deposit her on the doorstep of a nice suburban home? A hospital? A shudder ran through him, and she squirmed against the movement. No. He wouldn't leave her. He'd spent his own childhood tossed about at the whims of others, and he didn't want that life for this little one, who was no more than a few hours old and had already been abandoned.

Back at camp, a clearing in the middle of a circle of towering pines, he entered the lean-to he'd built over the past few years from lost lumber, cinder blocks, and a tarp

and settled the baby on the pallet so he could dig through his supplies.

His supply bins were overflowing with boxes and boxes of noodles in Styrofoam cups. After cleaning up an overturned eighteen-wheeler last spring, a road crew had left hundreds of cups of noodles behind as trash. He'd be eating lost noodles for years.

Harvey might be labeled homeless, but he didn't beg. In thirty years of walking this earth, he'd never asked anything from anyone. Didn't need to. People abandoned and lost enough for him to live on, but since newborns couldn't eat noodles or the fish he caught from the creek, it was time to deviate from his well-oiled life plan.

He couldn't wait for a diaper bag to fall off a luggage rack.