



## SEASONS UNDER HEAVEN

By Terri Blackstock

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Joseph Dodd was not one of those kids who feigned illness to get attention. His ten-year-old sister Rachel might have, since she was the one among the four children who leaned toward hypochondria. Leah, her twin, had been known to fake an occasional stomachache in the interest of competition. And Daniel, their twelve-year-old brother, often used a headache excuse to escape pre-algebra.

But not Joseph. Brenda, their mother, knew that the eight-going-on-nine-year-old was the kind of kid who harbored no deceit at all. His feelings and thoughts passed across his face like the Dow prices at the stock exchange, and Brenda could read them clearly.

That's why she knew something was wrong on the day before his ninth birthday. He'd gotten up with dark circles under his eyes, and his skin was as pale as the recycled paper on which they did their schoolwork. His red hair, which he took great pains to keep combed because he had three cowlicks, was disheveled, as if he hadn't given it a thought. On the way into the kitchen, he reached for the counter to steady himself and hung his head while he tried to catch his breath.

Brenda quickly abandoned the eggs she was scrambling and bent down to look into his eyes. "Joseph, what's the matter, honey?"

"I dunno," he said.

"Are you sick?" she asked, feeling his forehead.

"Sorta dizzy."

"It's his blood sugar," Daniel commented, before slurping his cereal. He wiped a drip from his chin. "Remember, I studied about the pancreas last week? The book said you could get dizzy if your pancreas didn't work right."

"What's a pancreas?" Joseph asked, frowning.

"Daniel, don't slurp," David, their father, said. "Brenda, what are you teaching him? Endocrinology?"

Brenda grinned. "More like he's teaching me. We're touching on anatomy in science. I got him some extra books."

"What's a pancreas?" Joseph asked again. He was still breathing hard and beginning to sweat.

David pushed aside his coffee, leaned across the table, and felt Joseph's forehead. "You okay, sport?"

Joseph didn't answer. He was still waiting for an answer to his question.

"The pancreas is a gland," Daniel mumbled around a mouthful of cereal. "It's near your kidney."

"Mom, Daniel's talking with his mouth full," Leah spouted.

"It is not near the kidney," Rachel said. "It's near the heart."

"How would you know? You aren't studying the human body."

"No, but I have one," Rachel said, tossing her nose up in the air as if that won the argument.

"I'm going to get my book," Daniel said. "I'll prove it to you."

"Sit back down, young man." Brenda turned back to the scrambled eggs and took the pan off the stove. She turned to the table – only a step from the stove in the small kitchen – and began scooping eggs onto their plates. Her blonde hair waved across her forehead, but she blew it back with her bottom lip. It was already getting hot in the house, and the sun hadn't even come all the way up. Despite the cost of electricity, she was going to have to lower the thermostat today or she'd never get the kids through their lessons.

She reached Joseph's plate and scooped out some eggs.

"I don't want any," Joseph said.

"Joseph, son, you've gotta eat," David said.

"I will later."

Brenda set the pan back on the stove and put her hands on her hips, gazing down at her son. "Rachel, will you go turn the thermostat down? Maybe if it gets cooler in here Joseph will feel better." As Rachel popped up to do as she was told, Brenda said, "I hope you're not getting sick again, Joseph."

"You can't be sick on your birthday," Leah said. "Mom, if he's sick, can we still have the party tomorrow?"

"Of course not. We'd just postpone it."

"But I don't want to postpone it," Joseph said, sitting straighter. "I'm fine. I changed my mind. I'll eat some eggs."

Brenda grinned and spooned some eggs onto his plate as she heard the air conditioner cut on. "He'll be fine. Probably just needs to eat something. Sometimes I wake up like that, Joseph. If I didn't eat much the night before, I get up and feel downright shaky until I eat."

"Blood sugar," Daniel observed.

"Of course, mostly I eat too much." She patted her slightly overweight hips. "Somehow my body can always convince me I'm starving." She ran her fingers through her hair and studied her youngest. "Joseph doesn't need to be worried about his pancreas, though. I'm sure it's working just fine. But I have to say, Daniel, that I'm bursting with pride over your interest in the pancreas. David, don't you think he's doctor material? I mean, he's practically ready for medical school."

David smiled and patted his oldest son on the back. "I think you're right. I've always said that Daniel had a sharp mind."

"Me, too, Daddy," Rachel said, coming back to the table.

"All of you. There's just no telling what you'll be," Brenda said. "I'm going to be one of those mothers who can't open her mouth without bragging about her important children. People will run when they see me." She fixed herself a plate and pulled out a chair. "Okay, now, before Daddy goes out to the shop, let's talk about this party. Nine years ago tomorrow, the doctor put that precious little bundle into my arms. Nine years, Joseph! Think of it! Bet it seems like a lifetime to you, huh?"

Joseph didn't answer. He propped his chin on his hand and moved the eggs around on his plate.

"It seems like nine long years to me," Daniel said.

David snickered under his breath, and Brenda shot him an amused look.

"I've already called all of our homeschooled friends," she told Joseph. "I told them to be here at two tomorrow.

We'll have it outside. We need to start making the cake this afternoon. Joseph, do you want white cake, yellow, or chocolate? You need to consider this very carefully, since you'll be licking the bowl."

He didn't answer.

Brenda's eyes met David's across the table again. "Joseph?" David asked, taking the boy's hand.

He looked up. "Sir?"

"Your mother asked you something. What kind of cake do you want?"

"Um . . . rectangle, I guess."

"What flavor?" Daniel prompted. "Mom, he really is sick."

Brenda frowned. "Baby, do you want to go back to bed?"

He nodded and pushed his plate away, got up, and headed back to his bedroom.

"I'm taking him to the doctor," Brenda told David, getting up and heading for the phone.  
"Something's not right."

"Yeah, you better."

"Tell 'em about his pancreas," Daniel said. "They might not think of it."

David laughed and messed up his son's hair as Brenda dialed the number.

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