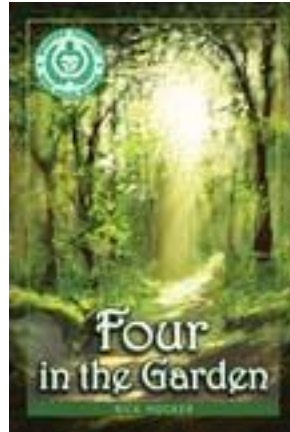


Sample Chapters

Four in the Garden By Rick Hocker



Chapter 1: Birth

The warm sunlight touched my skin for the first time. With tender care for their precious cargo, the three Teachers laid my lifeless body on the soft grass in a forest meadow. Scattered clover stirred in the breeze that caused the nearby cypress trees to shiver. My mature body had firm limbs and shoulder-length hair. Creator had readied it to receive my soul.

The slender, human-like Teachers knelt around me and waited for me to awaken to life. Each Teacher possessed a pair of giant, feathered wings in addition to a pair of arms. Each wingtip connected to the nearest wingtip of the others by single hooked fingers, creating a circular enclosure around the four of us, a ring of feathers with me at its center. Their eyes twinkling, they gazed at me and smiled with loving adoration.

Creator had given the Teachers charge over me. He had appointed them to teach me about Him. They would soon discover that I was slow to learn and trust.

My first thoughts emerged like bubbles that surfaced from deep, secret waters, then popped, releasing their contents for me to ponder. My awareness focused on my self, alone. I explored the inner space I inhabited, a whole universe of being.

I gasped, sucking my first draft of air with greediness. Afterward, I felt the rhythmic rise and fall of my chest with each breath. Warmth penetrated the front of my body. Something soft and cool pressed my back. Soothing sighs whispered into my ears. Each sensation intrigued me and gave structure to my world.

When I opened my eyes, the overwhelming light caused me to squeeze them shut. Then I squinted and looked away from the brilliant light above me, allowing my eyes to adjust to the

brightness. My breathing quickened as I beheld a dazzling display of colors, patterns, and movement.

I sat up to survey my surroundings, but I couldn't distinguish distinct forms from the visual information inundating me. After practicing to focus, I could discern shapes, though I didn't understand them. I couldn't yet comprehend that I was sitting within a forest clearing, encircled by three kneeling creatures who I thought were nothing more than scenery.

Beneath me, a dense layer of green, flexible blades cushioned my body. I brushed my hand over their soft texture and watched the blades snap back into place. Driven by curiosity, I extended my hand to touch a large shape, not knowing I was touching one of the winged creatures. They had no gender, but I refer to them as male in this story.

The creature responded by placing his hand atop my head, startling me. Iridescent emerald feathers on his throat gleamed in the sunlight. The tips of his wings and his large eyes were also emerald green. His massive nose curved like a beak toward the top of his feather-capped head. The feathers of his wings and head were gray-brown, speckled with dark chevron-shaped flecks. His body had smooth skin the color of tawny sandstone.

In a melodious and cheerful voice, he said, "Blessed are you, formed by Creator's wisdom and power, gifted with life by His abundant grace. You are Creator's handiwork, made from love and for love. He rejoices at your birth and delights in your being. Because He cherishes you, you shall be called Cherished. My name is Manna. I express the words of Creator."

The other two creatures swept past me to position themselves in front of Manna. With flapping sounds, they reconfigured their wings as they dropped into a kneeling position facing me, all the while keeping their wings linked.

The creature on the left placed both hands on his chest and spread his massive wings. He had the same form as Manna, but with ruby eyes, throat, and wingtips. He was the largest of the three, with a broad chest. "My name is Ennoia. I fathom the mind of Creator," he said with a commanding, orotund voice. "Manna isn't the only one who speaks for Him. I speak when Creator discloses His innermost thoughts." Ennoia contracted his wings and became silent.

The third creature smiled and gazed at me with expressive sapphire-blue eyes that matched his throat and wingtips. He had the smallest frame and a few feathers sticking out of place atop his head. "I'm Aable." The sound of his voice was high and crisp. "I'm not a talker like those two," he said, glancing at the other creatures. "I do the works of Creator. My specialty is works, not words."

I lost track of myself as I watched this captivating activity play out before me. My ability to understand them amazed me. I listened, trying to grasp every word.

Manna shuffled forward and placed his hand on my leg. "Creator has given you the knowledge of language and the capacity for speech so you can understand us and communicate with us. Ask questions and speak freely. We will teach you everything you need to know. We are your servants."

The three beings bowed as they draped their wings on the ground.

I interpreted this gesture to signify that I was the dominant being in this foursome. As such, I took initiative and spoke my first words.

Chapter 2: Firsts

“Who is Creator?” I marveled to hear the words emerge from my mouth and to feel my tongue flap on its own accord.

The creatures looked at each other.

Ennoia said, “Creator is the maker of everything that is, has been, and will be. He is the source and destination of all things, the One Life of which you are now a part, the One who—”

With growing curiosity, I touched Ennoia’s mouth, trying to understand the connection between its movements and the sounds emanating from it. The sounds stopped when my fingers landed on Ennoia’s lips.

“That’s enough explanation for now,” Aable said to Ennoia.

Aable fixed his vivid blue eyes on me. “Stand up, Cherished.”

The three winged beings stood in unison.

Wanting to imitate them, I stood, also. When I looked down and saw the ground far below me, I became light-headed. I wobbled, then fell backwards and landed on my butt. Bewildered, I stared up at Aable, wondering why I had failed at my first task.

“I’ll help you,” Aable said. He pulled me to my feet without breaking his links to Manna and Ennoia. After I got my balance, I let go of Aable. This time, standing unaided, I felt secure, not unsteady or dizzy as before.

“When you fall, we’ll help you,” Aable said.

Ennoia made a gravelly sound in his throat. “What Aable meant to say,” he glanced at Aable and touched his arm, and then looked at me, “is that the source of all help is Creator alone. Whenever help is needed, He will help you. Our roles are as teachers and guides, but Creator is the One in whom to place your full trust.”

I squeezed my brows together. “What is trust?”

“Trust means to encharge one’s Wellbeing to another,” Ennoia said.

“That won’t do,” Aable said, waving his hands at Ennoia. “Your words are too profound for the newling to grasp. And you, Manna, your flowery language makes it difficult for the newling to understand you. I say simple words are best.”

“Simple words are often best,” Manna said, “but, as you know, we must speak to provoke the mind to ponder, entice the heart to open, inspire the spirit to worship, and coax the soul to discover the treasures hidden within the words.”

“You’re right,” Aable said. “Words must be chosen according to their effect. But this time, let’s make things easier for the newling.” Aable turned toward me. “Cherished, trust means to confidently depend on someone.”

“I think I understand,” I said. “But why should I trust Creator if I don’t know Him?”

“You come to know Him by choosing to trust in Him,” Ennoia said. “We will teach you how to trust Creator.”

I wanted to know Creator, but this method sounded too complicated. “Why can’t you show me Creator?”

“You don’t yet know how to perceive Him,” Manna said.

I didn't understand what Manna meant. Did my eyes need more practice at focusing? Did I have other senses that needed developing? I did figure out that the answer was no.

More confident now at being upright, I leaned on one foot and tested my weight. Then I shifted my weight onto my other foot. Drawing from knowledge imparted at birth, I knew that "walking" meant to move one's feet forward in an alternating manner. I took a step with one foot, then the other, and repeated the sequence. I tottered across the meadow away from the Teachers.

"Wait. Where are you going?" Manna called after me.

They intercepted me before I gained much distance. Manna grasped my hand and said, "You can't go wandering off. Come with us. We have many things to show you."

Ennoia took the lead, his wings relaxed at mid-body. Manna and Aable traveled behind him, their outer wings curved forward to link with his wings. They positioned me between Manna and Aable, each holding one of my hands, their inner wings forming an arch over my head. The three beings walked with synchronized strides, gliding on their bony legs like three stalking herons. With an awkward gait, I tried to keep up, conscious of each step, fascinated by this form of travel.

I wanted to touch the nearby cypress trees, so I pulled my hands free and ran toward them. When I reached the nearest tree, I brushed my fingers across its flattened, lacy leaves. The Teachers caught up with me. Manna said, "You need to stay with us."

The Teachers surrounded me. Manna and Aable grabbed my hands, and the three guided me back to the spot where I had run off. We resumed our original route and steady pace. Without warning, the overhead winged arch dropped to become a feathered barrier behind me, boxing me in. I disliked the confinement. Whenever I slowed, Manna and Aable pressed their wings against my back to nudge me forward. After a few forceful prods, I began seeking an opportunity to escape.

Manna, who escorted me on the right, lectured. "Everything you see has been made by Creator. The ground beneath you is the world. The vast space above you is the sky. The bright object in the sky is the sun that provides light to the world . . ."

With these first steps, I began my journey of life, unaware of how little I could influence its course.

Chapter 33: Consequence

I considered those fingertips running through my hair, those fingertips that had sculpted my body. That same strong hand had spread out the sky above me and gathered the ground beneath me. When it struck me that the creator of the universe was my headrest, I opened my eyes with a start and stared at the clouds with awe. In light of that recognition, I expected to feel insignificant, but I felt important, instead. I knew I wasn't more important than Creator, but They made me feel valued. Without regard to my ability or maturity, They had assigned importance to me.

For the first time, I understood what love meant.

He whispered. "Yes, Cherished, you're loved. You have immense value to Us. We take great delight in you."

As I allowed those words to penetrate, gratitude billowed within me. I yearned to give Creator the same pleasure They had given me, and I wondered if it were possible. As I pondered the workings of love, my thoughts faded as sleep washed over me.

When I woke up, I said, "I'm going in the water." Without waiting for a response, I sprinted into the lake and swam laps.

Creator sat on the shore and watched me.

I swam to one of the tall pine trees that stood in the water. The tree was long dead and bleached by the sun. I climbed the tree. "Creator, watch me jump," I yelled and continued to climb higher.

"You shouldn't climb that high," He shouted back.

"I know what I'm doing. Watch me make a big splash."

I grabbed a branch that snapped off, and I lost my balance. Grasping another branch to catch myself, it broke off as well. Plummeting from the treetop, I flailed my arms in a futile attempt to break my fall. When I struck the surface of the lake, it hardened itself to resist my entry. The impact stunned me. I clambered to shore and limped back to Creator.

My body stinging and sore, I plopped myself down next to Creator and closed my eyes, allowing the warm sun to dry my skin. I kept my eyes shut to signal my unwillingness for conversation. We sat without speaking for some time, and I savored the tranquility. I worked my toes and fingers into the sand, enjoying the cool and crunchy sensation.

After a while, I stood and said, "I'm hungry. I'm going to find some food. Will You come with me?"

"Yes," Creator said, getting to His feet.

I headed into the trees with Creator trailing behind me. He caught up and walked alongside. I waited for Him to say something about my foolish fall, but He said nothing. When I could no longer endure the suspense, I said, "I know. I know. I was stupid to climb so high."

"If you say so."

"What? You don't have an opinion?"

"What matters is what you've learned. For every act, there is a consequence and a boundary. The further you risk, the greater the consequence, be it reward or pain. A boundary is a limit that when crossed will produce an adverse consequence. Climbing too high was a boundary for you today. By the way, you did make a big splash." Creator smiled. "Just as you said you would."

I smiled, but only on the outside.

We came to a pear tree, and I stood on my toes to reach a ripe pear. After I had plucked it, I sensed movement. I turned toward the movement and saw tiger eyes locked on me as padded feet struck the ground in swift attack. I had no time to react.

My vision blurred into flashes of fur and claws and blood and dust. I cried out in fear.

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