Jack Zavada

Mary's Christmas Gift

An inspirational novel

My Christmas gift to you…

Christmas is a difficult time for many of us. If you're single and not involved with someone, the holidays can be especially trying.

Mary's Christmas Gift is my personal Christmas present to you. It's a short novel filled with inspiration, hope, and the heart-stopping truth that sometimes God answers prayer in the most unexpected way possible.

I hope you'll share this gift with your friends as well. Please send them to www.inspiration-for-singles.com/mary.html, where they can download their own copy, or print this out and give a hard copy to them.

My prayer for you is that God will bless you abundantly in the coming year, and that you will feel his unconditional love in your heart, now and for the rest of your life.

Jack Zavada
Author, Mary's Christmas Gift
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Chapter One

Mary Chapman stared in the mirror and was brokenhearted at what she saw.

Her eyes were red and puffy from crying. Her once-clear skin was sprinkled with blotches. Even her face revealed that she had gained twenty five pounds. She was thirty-four years old, unmarried, and nine months pregnant.

She was amazed that she had made it this far. She would be the first to admit that she was not an especially brave person. Only the encouragement from Pastor Don had carried her through. He was the most remarkable man she had ever met, even kinder and more compassionate than her father.

The radio newscast told her it was time to leave for work. She reached over to the bathroom shelf and switched off the radio. As she hurried through the living room, she grabbed her coat from the back of the sofa and tugged it on. A woman at church had loaned it to her. It was long, bright red and made her feel as big as a fire engine, but she had no choice. She had outgrown most of her own clothes months ago.

Before she turned off the lights and locked the door, she took one last glance through her apartment. She hadn't had the strength to go down to the basement storage area, lug her artificial Christmas tree to the elevator and set it up. The corner where it had sat the last six holidays looked lonely. A few ornaments and plastic Santa Claus figurines were the only signs that Christmas would arrive next week.

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The train ride into the city seemed endless. An elderly man had smiled, got up and gave her his seat. He was tall, thin, and had a kind face that was reddened from the cold December winds. He wore a long camel hair overcoat and an old style black homburg hat. When Mary had settled into the seat, a woman across the aisle noticed she wore no wedding ring and gave her a disapproving scowl. Even though Mary had encountered that kind of judgment many times in the past several months, it still hurt.

When she finally got to the office, Mary found her friend Jill Novak already at her desk, typing on her computer keyboard so furiously that it sounded like a castanet concert.

"Whoa, Jill. That can't be *work* you're doing at that pace," Mary said.

"And good morning to you, too," Jill said back, doing a little dance with her shoulders. "I'm just shooting another email off to my latest prospect." Jill, two years younger than Mary, was practically addicted to an online dating service.

"You really think you're going to find somebody worthwhile with that?" Mary was extremely cautious in the city. It was Jill who had taught her that the same rules didn't apply here in Chicago as the ones in Lincoln, Nebraska. Mary had adapted quickly.

Jill paused just long enough to toss a reply over her shoulder. "Listen, Mary. The numbers are online. It's all about the numbers, right? I've got a bigger pool of frogs to kiss here, so therefore my odds are better of finding him."

"You want to find a frog?" Mary struggled out of her borrowed coat, hung it on the rack in the corner of the office and returned to her cubicle, about ten feet from Jill's.

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"I'm thinking a frog wouldn't be so bad, y'know? Who wants a prince anyway? I wouldn't have to worry about cooking. Just give him a couple dead flies and he's happy. I'd get to do all the talking, pick what videos we watch, pick where we'd go on vacation."

Mary sat down and booted up her own computer. "Yeah, I can see the two of you walking on the beach now…or you walking and him hopping. Hand in…what? Paw? Flipper? What do frogs even have, anyway?"

"Did you sleep through high school biology? Don't they dissect frogs out in Nebraska? They have hands. Little teeny-weeny hands."

"What if, what if when you dissected that frog in high school, it was maybe his Uncle Leo? What if you dissected a relative of your new significant other?"

"You have a warped mind, Mary Chapman."

"Duh. Look who I hang around with."

"Did you get those cost projections done for Elizabeth?" Jill asked. "With the price of natural gas and diesel fuel going up so much, we're going to have to pass that on to our customers eventually."

Mary brought the spreadsheet up on her screen and checked it again before printing it out. "It doesn't look good, that's for sure. How can Midwest Milling keep underbidding our competition? The only thing saving us is that *their* fuel costs have gone up, too."

Midwest Milling, where Mary and Jill worked, produced store brand and generic breakfast cereal that tasted the same as the major national brands but sold for less than half because the company did absolutely no advertising. Most of Midwest's

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customers were grocery wholesalers, but the firm also dealt directly with some of the discount, you-bag-it supermarket chains.

"Well, you better make sure your numbers are solid, Mary. Elizabeth's been on a rip the past couple weeks. She chewed out Paul yesterday because he was five minutes late getting in. He's supposed to kill himself driving on these icy streets when he gets caught in a traffic jam?"

"Paul should leave home earlier," Mary replied. "Sometimes the holidays can be hard on people. Elizabeth may have problems we don't know about."

"Her *problem* is that she and Kevin can't have children and you're ready to deliver any day now. She's jealous of you, kiddo, and she's taking it out on the rest of us."

Jill finished and sent her email as the clock hit 8 a.m., then settled into her own work. She coordinated projects with freelance designers, oversaw the printing of the paperboard cereal cartons and made sure they and the plastic box liners were delivered to Midwest's plants on schedule.

She glanced up from her desk just in time to see Elizabeth McAllister walking toward them in the hall that led to other offices. Jill coughed twice, a secret signal to Mary that their boss was approaching.

Elizabeth had come up through the ranks at Midwest Milling and knew every phase of the business. She was tall, stylishly thin, and wore her dark brunette hair in a short, feathery cut. Jill thought she was in her late thirties but was unsure of her exact age. Lately something had been wearing on her. Elizabeth's once attractive face was drawn and tight, as if the normal stress of the workplace had gotten the better of her.

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"Do you have the cost projections done?" she asked Mary, without bothering to say good morning.

"They're printing out now."

"Okay. Bring them into my office as soon as they're done." Elizabeth turned and walked down another short hall to her office.

"Did somebody open a window?" Jill cracked, once the boss was out of earshot. "Awfully chilly in here."

"Why don't you cut her some slack?" Mary replied, irritation in her voice. She pulled the last page from the printer and headed for Elizabeth's office.

"Don't say I didn't warn you, Nebraska," Jill said, using her teasing nickname for Mary. "If you need help, just throw a paperweight through her office window."

Mary walked down the short, carpeted hall to Elizabeth McAllister's office. The director of Midwest Milling's Finance Department, Elizabeth supervised a staff of ten in the company's headquarters in Chicago, and had a half-dozen other staff members in the factories scattered across the country. She was an efficient, highly intelligent woman who rarely showed any sense of humor. Although she had been fair in the past, Mary sensed that she had some grudge against her now. Mary didn't want to believe that it was because she was pregnant. She tried to see the best in everyone, an attitude that Jill found naive.

As usual, Mary rapped on the office door, even though she had an appointment. Elizabeth told her to come in. Mary laid Elizabeth's copy of the financial projections on the desk and eased herself into a chair. She sometimes felt as if the baby would make her tip over if she bent the wrong way.

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"Let's see what you've got," Elizabeth said flatly, avoiding any small talk. She picked up her copy of the report and scanned the pages rapidly.

Mary had learned to cover herself several ways to prevent a critical lecture. Sometimes it approached paranoia, but she churned inside every time Elizabeth picked at her work.

"These are projections at best," Mary reminded. "Nobody can predict where some of these costs will go in the coming year."

"I did budget projections long before you came here. Our job is to come as close as possible so there are no surprises."

Mary kept her reply to herself. If she could accurately predict where costs would be a year from now, she'd be earning a hundred times her current salary. Budgeting always entailed an unavoidable degree of guesswork.

"Where'd you get these figures for diesel fuel?" Elizabeth inquired.

"I have end notes on my sources," Mary replied. "I used this year's figures and added the same rate of inflation as we had this year. I double checked with the Lundberg Survey, the Department of Energy, and twenty-two diesel wholesalers within one hundred mile radius circles of our plants. Of course, I can't project how the Iran situation might affect prices a year from now, and neither could any of my sources."

Elizabeth frowned. Mary knew she'd won that one. Nothing to pick apart there.

"I don't like these natural gas figures," Elizabeth countered. She produced a red pen and made four slashes and question marks at various points on the page. Then she handed the entire report back to Mary. "Do that part over. That's one

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of our largest production costs. If we lowball that, Miller will nail me to the wall."

Ted Miller, one of the vice presidents, had a reputation for being vengeful. He was not Elizabeth's boss but could make things difficult for her if costs ran over and dragged profits down.

"When do you need this back?" Mary glanced around but didn't see a calendar anywhere in the office. Elizabeth would have considered that tacky.

"This afternoon."

Mary's first reaction was to object, but she knew that would do her no good. Elizabeth was a demanding person to work for and had gotten worse in the past few months.
"I'll get right on it," Mary said, as she struggled out of the chair.

"If you're…in the hospital, life still goes on here," Elizabeth told her, by way of explanation. "I don't want to turn this over to anyone else, and I don't have time to do it myself."

"Okay. You'll have it before close of business today."

Mary retreated to her desk, feeling a dull headache coming on. Meetings with Elizabeth often produced some sort of malady.

"She emerges with no visible wounds and a back remarkably free of daggers," Jill commented. "What's the matter, Mary? She off her game today?"

"No. I have to redo the section on natural gas. She couldn't find anything wrong with the rest of it."

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Jill shook her head. "If I know you, kid, there's nothing wrong with the natural gas section either. She's playing head games with you."

"Yeah, well, she's the boss, so I've got to fix it and get it back to her today. I'll be doing the vending machine thing at lunch."

Jill frowned. "We were supposed to go out today. Besides, how's little Clementine going to like all those chemicals and preservatives?" Jill had named the baby Clementine Chapman when Mary learned she was carrying a girl.

"Oh, right. Like we would've been going to a health food restaurant for lunch anyway," Mary returned. "Your idea of the four food groups is burgers, fries, cookies and M&Ms."

"Don't forget Haagen-Dasz."

"I've got to get back to work." Mary's subtle hint let Jill know not to bother her again the rest of the day. Both women returned to their computers and phones.

Just before lunch time, Jill put on her coat and picked up her small purse. "I'm going out. You want me to bring you anything back?"

"No, thanks anyway. Maybe we can go tomorrow?"

"Sure. See you later."

Despite expanding her source information, Mary was unable to come up with different projections for natural gas costs than she had before. She put in a call to Mildred Stansky in the Omaha plant but found that she was out to lunch. Mary left a voice mail message and decided to take a break.

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A native of Nebraska, Mary had started her career at Midwest Milling in the Omaha plant, under Mildred's guidance. Mildred had been like a second mother to her, especially after Mary's mother and father had been killed in a traffic accident six years ago. The only photo Mary had on her desk was of Mildred, a plump, constantly laughing red-haired woman who had advised her against transferring to the company's headquarters in Chicago.

Mary was a small-town girl, reared on a farm just outside Wahoo, Nebraska, a town of only 4,000 people, about a forty minute drive from Omaha. Mildred had told Mary she wouldn't be happy in Chicago, and in some respects she'd been right. Other than Jill, Mary had few friends. She had met some kind people at her church but everyone seemed so busy that they never saw each other outside of church activities.

That her short-lived romance with Eric—and the one time they had had unprotected sex--had been mistakes was the understatement of her life. As soon as Mary told him she was pregnant, he moved without even saying goodbye. She made no attempt to track him down.

In shame and humiliation she told the story to Pastor Don and cried her way through an entire box of tissues in an hour. Before she went to see him, she had already decided that abortion was out of the question. She wanted to give the baby up for adoption. She knew she didn't have the strength to raise a child on her own.

In his calm, fatherly manner, Pastor Don later spoke with the Women's Outreach Group in the church and by the time Mary went to the next meeting, she was met with hugs and unanimous words of support. It still brought tears to her eyes every time she thought of it.

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Right now, however, the task at hand was how to explain to Elizabeth that her first projections on natural gas had been correct and that try as she might, she couldn't make any changes.

Mary tried her hardest not to judge people, but Elizabeth could be unfair at times. The last thing she needed right now was to lose her job. Mary caught herself before she started to cry. Her nerves were as fragile as a Christmas ornament.

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Chapter Two

Mary Chapman stood in the break room, indecisive about what to get from the vending machine. All of the candy bars and snacks tasted delicious and all of them, without exception, were bad for her and the baby. The trail mix shouted "healthy" in orange letters at the top of the bag. Unfortunately, it tasted like ground-up pine cones. Mary wished she had asked Jill to bring a sandwich back for her.

"That stuff'll kill you, y'know," a man's voice said from behind her.

She turned. "Oh. Hi, Paul. I know it's bad, but I had to stay in today to finish next year's projections." Paul Angstrom, a tall gawky man in his mid-twenties, wore thick glasses and had a full head of unruly, curly blond hair. Even though he was socially inept, he could make a personal computer do anything his coworkers wanted. Jill had teased Mary that Paul had a crush on her, so Mary was always careful about what she said to him to avoid hurting his feelings. He truly was a sweet, bashful man.

"You can't please her, Mary."

"Who? Elizabeth?"

"Haven't you noticed that she's been in a rotten mood for months? She didn't used to be that way."

"I try to give her the benefit of the doubt," Mary answered. "I know she's under a lot of stress."

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"I was talking to Kevin at the company picnic last summer and he told me they'd found out that there was no possibility of them ever having children. Apparently they'd tried a lot of different things."

"And you think that's why she's been out of sorts?"

Paul shrugged. "Seems like that's about when it started. I feel sorry for her and all, but why does she have to take it out on us? And especially on you."

"Jill thinks the same thing." Mary didn't want to gossip, so she steered the conversation another way. "I suppose you'll be seeing your family on Christmas, Paul?"

He laughed and a bit of a snort came out. "Yep, the usual stuff-yourself -'til-food comes-out-your-ears meal, then watching football on TV while half the men conk out in their chairs and snore like a bunch of chainsaws."

"Well, it sounds nice, all the same."

"How about you, Mary? You know, you're welcome to come over to my aunt's if you'd like. I know she'd be thrilled to have you. Everybody's real friendly."

She gave a slight shake of her head. "To tell you the truth, my due date is right around Christmas, and I think they might be right. I want to stick close to home, so if I go into labor, I can have my regular obstetrician."

Paul pressed a little further. "You sure? 'Cause I'd be happy to pick you up and take you home."

"No, Jill will probably drop by. And there's a nice couple in my apartment building who've offered to drive me to the hospital whenever this business starts."

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He looked disappointed. "Well, I better get going. I've got one more Christmas present to buy, and if I'm lucky, I'll be able to get it and be back by one o'clock." He moved toward the door.

"G'bye, Paul. Thanks for asking."

Mary had only three relatives—cousins in Nebraska, but it would be too far to drive there and back, and she was exhausted much of the time anyway. Her aunts and uncles had died several years ago. She didn't look forward to spending Christmas home alone, but she knew she would have felt very out-of-place with Paul and his relatives, and besides, it might give him the wrong signal.

She sat down at one of the formica-topped tables and put her head down on her forearms. She could use a nap right now, and the day was only half over. She would get some coffee soon so the caffeine would keep her alert for the rest of the afternoon.

Mary offered a silent prayer, something she'd been doing more and more lately.

God, I need to hang on for just a few more weeks until the baby is born, but I'm so, so tired. Would you help me get through this day and back home safely? Please make everything work out right. Forgive me for letting you down. Thank you for Pastor Don and all the women at church who have been so kind to me. Amen.

When she raised her head, a familiar voice greeted her. "Ah, there's nothing like a refreshing thirty second nap on a hard chair and a plastic tabletop."

"Jill! I didn't hear you come in."

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"I brought a sandwich back for you kiddo. I just went down to the deli. Roast beef okay?" She took two waxpaper-wrapped sandwiches out of a brown paper sack and put one down in front of Mary and the other by herself.

"You know roast beef is my favorite. What do I owe you?"

"Uh, a fiver will cover it." Jill got up, went to the soda machine and got a diet cola.

"Would you get me a cup of coffee while you're up, please?"

"Sure. Cream and sugar, right?" Jill laughed. The "cream" consisted of small foil packets of powdered coffee creamer, and Mary used the blue packets of artificial sweetener. Jill put the drinks on the table, opened her can of soda and poured it into a foam plastic coffee cup. She sat, picked Mary's five dollar bill off the table, and put it in her pocket.

"Mmmm, this is great," Mary mumbled over a mouthful of sandwich. "I'm so glad you did this."

"Well, actually, there's something I want to talk to you about."

Mary put her sandwich down and looked across her cup as she sipped her coffee. "This sounds serious."

"It is. More serious than any way I've ever fouled up before."

"What's wrong?"

"I…I'm not…going to be able to get you a Christmas present this year, Mary."

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"Why? We've always exchanged presents."

"I'm about three steps away from bankruptcy."

"What?"

"It happened gradually," Jill confessed, her face reddening. "I don't know how to explain it."

"You know I never repeat anything we talk about," Mary assured her. They were the only two people in the employee break room.

"No, it's not that. I've been stupid. Really stupid."

"Don't beat yourself up, Jill. Tell me what happened."

"I got into this buying thing a couple years ago. You know, I've been looking for a decent guy for most of my life. I've been very…unhappy, Mary. Lonely."

"How does that connect with the buying?"

"I don't know, maybe it was some way to try to smooth over the hurt, or cheer myself up. I don't know. It seemed to help sometimes, but then I started using it as a way to get myself out of depression, and I got out of control."

"So you're in debt?"

"Huh! Something over $12,000."

"Oh, Jill. What did you *buy* for that much money?"

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"Lots of small stuff. Clothes. Jewelry. Things for my apartment. Presents for my mom and my brother. Subscriptions to magazines I don't even read, you name it."

"But you make good money here."

"Not as much as you'd think. I don't know how I got in so deep, Mary. What savings I had are gone. The credit card companies are on my back, I'm getting nasty letters from lawyers. I don't want to declare bankruptcy, but I don't know what else to do."

"Have you tried one of those debt consolidation places? I've heard they can work some sort of deal with your creditors, then get your payments down lower."

Jill shook her head, tears forming in her eyes. "I just want to get out from under this. I don't know *what* to do."

"Maybe the company could give you an advance on your salary. Sort of a no-interest loan that you could pay off over time."

"I don't want to go to Elizabeth about this and have her gloat over me. Here I am working in Midwest's finance department and my own finances are messed up beyond repair." Tears were running down Jill's cheeks now.

Mary reached across the table and put her hand on her friend's arm. "I don't have a lot saved, but I can loan you some of it. A couple thousand."

"No, no, no! That's not why I told you. I'm not asking for a loan, and I won't take anything from you. I just wanted to tell you why I can't buy you a Christmas present this year." She picked up her paper napkin and dabbed at her eyes. "How much time have you got?"

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"I don't know. 'Til after the first of the year, I guess. It's a lot harder to declare bankruptcy, now that they've changed the laws."

"How about this…?" Mary asked. "How about after the holidays, you go to a lawyer and just see what your options are. They've seen all kinds of situations. He'll be able to approach it with a cool, logical head."

"That sounds good. Yeah, I'm too close to this thing. Every time I think about it, I start to panic."

"I've got a good lawyer, an older man from my church. Pastor Don recommended him. I'm planning to do a private adoption with the baby, and he'll be handling all the legal aspects. Why don't I ask him—without mentioning your name—and see if he'd want to advise you or if he knows of another lawyer who handles this kind of stuff?"

"Okay. Okay, that sounds good. Could you call him this week and see if he'll see me after the holidays?"

"Sure. I'll call him this afternoon."

"I'm sorry, Mary. I didn't want to burden you with this. You're the best friend I've got, but I was afraid of what you might think of me."

"Oh, *Jill*. You're my *friend*. I'll stick by you no matter what. And besides, this kind of thing happens to lots of people. I'll make you a deal. If you'll stick by me through the delivery and after the adoption, I'll do whatever I can to help you get through your thing too." She reached over and clasped Jill's hand.

Then Jill broke down in quiet sobs. "It's a deal," she managed to say.

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Chapter Three

The asphalt parking lot of the Stony Road Baptist Church had been well-cleared of snow and ice, a fact that Mary was grateful for as she checked the ground before getting out of her car.

She had learned as a Nebraska teenager that stepping out of a car in the middle of the winter on one foot could be dangerous business. If a person wasn't careful, they could slip on a patch of ice and go right down. Mary had become doubly cautious in the late months of her pregnancy.

The porch light on the parsonage illuminated the sidewalk and steps. Her wristwatch said seven o'clock. She was right on time for her appointment. As she moved slowly toward the house, Mary looked at the colored lights on the spruce trees near the church and smiled. *Jesus is coming*, she thought.

Tonight the church and the pastor's stone cottage next to it looked like a scene from a Thomas Kinkade painting. The house even had a round turret, capped by a steep conical roof.

When Mary rang the bell, she heard a muffled voice from inside, then the noisy clicking of the lock as someone opened the heavy front door. The short, elderly woman who greeted her with a radiant smile always made her feel as if she was her special, only child.

"Oh, it's so good to see you, Mary." Hilda Duncan said, warmly taking her hands and squeezing them lightly. "Come in and let me take your coat." She eased the red coat off Mary's shoulders, put it on a hanger, and hooked it on the oak hall

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tree in the corner. From down the hall, the luxurious smell of baking cookies filled the air.

Hilda, Pastor Don's wife, had been born in Sweden. Barely over four feet tall, she had a plain, honest face and hair that had turned from blonde to white decades ago. Mary guessed Hilda to be in her mid seventies.

"Oh, you know Don always insists that I bake cookies for the holidays, even though both of us shouldn't be eating them," she explained tilting her head toward the kitchen. "But if that's our biggest indulgence, I guess God's not going to fuss over that."

"If they'd had cookies in his day, I have a feeling Jesus would have eaten more than his share," Mary replied, smiling too.

"Don told me that same thing! He must be brainwashing you, Mary. Go on into the study. He's waiting for you. I'll bring warm cookies and some cocoa in a few minutes."

Mary gave a sharp rap on the study's open door before she entered. Don Duncan, seated at his oversized oak desk, stopped writing on a pad and got up to meet her.

The pastor of Stony Road Baptist Church was one of the strangest looking men Mary had ever seen. He was only a few inches taller than his diminutive wife, and was bent at the waist in an odd angle. His head was large, capped by a shock of coarse gray hair. The most riveting thing about him, though, was his eyes. They were deep set under his brow, a light brown color, and betrayed a kindness and gentleness that few human beings ever attain.

Don Duncan had been pastor at the church for more than 30 years. When Mary joined, one of the women told her his story. His father had been an American

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businessman in Sweden before World War II. Both of Don's parents were killed by the Nazis, and Don, barely a teenager, was taken prisoner. The Nazi doctors—butchers, really—had performed cruel, unspeakable experiments on him, leaving him bent and misshapen for the rest of his life. After the War, he had been adopted by a Swedish couple, and in the university there, he met Hilda, and they were married.

Mary suspected that this sweet, Christlike man, who had known such pain and misery in his early years, had made it his life's mission to ease hurt and suffering however he could. Even now, as she shook his warm, gnarled hands, Mary had to hold back tears at the love and respect she felt for him.

"It's so good to see you," he said. "Please sit." He eased back into his desk chair. "We haven't met for a few weeks. Your baby is due soon, yes?"

"Any time now," Mary said with a smile.

"What an honor for her if she is a Christmas baby, just like our Lord," Pastor Don said. The lamp on the desk made his eyes seem to twinkle.

"It's very possible, Pastor. If it's not wrong to admit it, I think I'll be relieved when it's all over."

Sadness traced his face for a moment. "I'm afraid it won't be that easy," he said softly. "She will be a part of you—somewhere—for as long as you live. You're still sure, you're absolutely *positive* that you don't want to raise her yourself?"

"I just can't." Mary gave a slight shake of her head and looked down at her rounded abdomen. "I don't feel any different than I did when I decided months ago. In fact, I'm nearly at the point of physical and mental exhaustion. I know

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that I'll recover my energy after she's born, but I just can't raise her by myself. I believe I'm doing the wise thing."

"You are," he said. "I just wanted to make sure. To be certain you didn't have any doubts."

"Cookies and cocoa!" Hilda announced from the doorway of the study, letting her husband know that she was entering the room and to stop any confidential conversation. She was every bit as wise as him.

After she set the silver tray on the desk, Hilda disappeared as quickly as she had come. Mary and Don each took a mug of hot cocoa and munched the chocolate chip cookies, still warm from the oven.

"I wish that I could stop thinking about him," Mary said, putting her hot mug on a coaster.

"Eric?"

"Yes. It's not that I'm in love with him. I never really was. I realized that, too late. I know, too, that I'm not innocent in all of this. I was a willing participant too."

Pastor Don wiped his mouth with a napkin and did his best to look stern. "I thought we had settled that. You have asked God for forgiveness, he *has* forgiven you, and he remembers the sin no more. Do I have to get my Bible and show you the verse again, Mary?"

"No. I guess…I guess I've still got a lot of anger toward Eric. Hate, really, and I'm ashamed that I feel that way."

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"I would be very surprised if you didn't. That's something else that you must hand over to Jesus. Healing of such a wound will take a long, long time."

Then Mary blushed, ashamed. If anyone knew about hate, it was this innocent man who had endured so much. When it came to healing, Pastor Don knew the subject firsthand.

"Something weird has been happening the past few months," Mary said. "I've been thinking about Jeff a lot."

"Your friend in Nebraska?"

"Yes. We dated for three years. I keep comparing Eric to Jeff, Jeff to Eric. Jeff had so many fine, admirable qualities."

"Please remind an old man why you and this Jeff split up."

"I took the job offer in Chicago. I transferred from Midwest Milling's Omaha office to company headquarters. For a lot more money, I thought, and a better chance of advancement. Jeff was working at an agricultural supplies company. He didn't want to move. He didn't want to live in the city or the suburbs. He said he liked living in Wahoo, in a small town."

"Ah, yes. I remember now. Why don't you call this Jeff, Mary? Why don't you pick up the phone some time and see what's become of him?"

She looked terrified. "It's been years. Besides, I ran out on him. He wanted to get married and I chose my career instead. He probably has a wife and four kids by now."

"So you've lost touch with your hometown and all your contacts there?"

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"I only have a few cousins left in Nebraska, and they don't live near Wahoo. I lost him, Pastor. I didn't know what I had."

Mary looked up and found an odd smile on Pastor Don's face. He dipped his head a bit then changed the subject.

"You've been having all your tests, seeing your OB-GYN on schedule?" he inquired.

"Yes, yes. He says everything looks good. Everything looks normal, the way it's supposed to. He says I'm his model patient."

"And in a few months you will again look like a model."

Mary erupted into laughter. "On my best day—in *high school*—I never looked like a model. Where'd you ever get *that* idea?"

"Those models! They *wish* they were as beautiful as you, Mary Chapman."

The remark was so sincere, so genuine that it hit the overweight, insecure woman right in the heart. She couldn't help crying.

Later, driving home, Mary reflected on what Pastor Don had said about Jeff. But it *was* too late. Too much time had passed. She put the memories of him out of her mind.

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Chapter Four

In a very real sense, Mary Chapman felt that her entire life was on hold until the baby came. She didn't expect anything to *change* after that, but she had put off decisions and plans until the first of the year. A new year, a new life, she told herself.

She sat down at her kitchen table, although she wasn't hungry. After the cookies and cocoa at the parsonage, she was eating now out of habit. She toyed with a carton of yogurt, stirring the blueberries off the bottom and blending them through it with her spoon.

Glancing over at the calendar, she saw a reminder she had written on the 28th to mail in her rent check. She liked her two bedroom apartment, but everything in the suburbs was much more expensive than she had expected when she moved to Wheaton six years ago. Mary knew, too, that there were cheaper places to live, but she felt safe here and Jill wasn't too far away, in Lombard.

She frowned when she thought of Jill's confession about her debts. From the time she had left home to attend the University of Nebraska at Omaha, Mary had been very conservative with her money. Even today, she still paid in cash whenever possible. Something about watching those twenty-dollar bills disappear from her wallet provided a *realness* that was absent with credit or debit cards.

Mary couldn't judge Jill, though. Jill was her best friend, and even though Jill was younger, she had taken Mary under her wing, helped her furnish her apartment, settled her in at work, and looked out for her in more ways than Mary

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could count. So it surprised Mary that Jill had been able to dig herself in so deeply without even hinting at it before.

Jill had more responsibility and seniority and made more money than she did at Midwest Milling. Although they had never exchanged salary information, Mary knew that Jill also got a bonus whenever she filled in for Elizabeth during vacations.

For years Mary had known that Jill was desperately unhappy over being single. Jill's forays into online dating had produced no marriageable prospects so far. Mary had suggested that Jill switch to a Christian dating site, but Jill repeatedly ignored that advice. Jill had never attended church. Despite Mary's open invitation, Jill would not go to church with her or see Pastor Don. Every time Mary had tried to witness to her, Jill had politely but quickly shut her out.

Mary was baffled how anyone could make it through life without a strong relationship with God. One disappointment after another could build a core of bitterness that turned everyday life into monotonous drudgery. Jill had not reached that point yet, but Mary saw signs that her friend was approaching it. Jill had turned cynical over the past year. Except for her online dating addiction, Jill saw little hope in anything else.

Dutifully, knowing that the calcium was good for the baby, Mary finished the yogurt then retreated to the bathroom. She brushed her teeth, washed, and pulled on a soft flannel nightgown. In the medicine cabinet mirror, she caught a glimpse of her distended belly before the nightgown slid down over it. She wondered what her mother and father would have thought.

Almost automatically, Mary set out her clothes for the next day. She methodically found a skirt and maternity blouse, underwear and shoes and put them on a chair. As a child she had learned that it saved much time and tension in

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the morning by getting everything ready the night before. A smile danced briefly across her face. She wondered what a new husband would think of her eccentric little routines.

Finally, she turned down the comforter and sheet, then sat on the edge of the bed. She found it too difficult to kneel to say her nighttime prayers, as she usually did. As she reached for her Bible from the nightstand, it slipped out of her hand, opened, and fell on the carpet.

When she bent to pick it up, she saw a faded photograph of Jeff Bennett smiling up at her. She had stuck the photo between the pages of the Bible shortly after she got it and hadn't come across it in years.

Mary picked up the snapshot and stared at it. She had taken it on a daylong fishing trip he had dragged her along on, insisting that she would enjoy herself. All she caught was a severe sunburn, but he had filled a stringer full of large bass in a few hours. In the photo, he held the fish up proudly. He had short, light brown hair, greenish blue eyes, and a squarish chin. It was the crooked smile that she remembered best about him. How she had loved to see that smile.

The last time she had seen him, when she was getting ready to accompany the moving van from her parents' house in Wahoo to her apartment in Wheaton, harsh words were spoken, mainly by him. Even at the time, she couldn't blame him. In the years they had dated, it was the first time she'd seen him lose his temper. She recalled seeing him in her rearview mirror, his lips pursed, jaw set, staring at the ground and shaking his head. She cried half the way to her new home.

Still, she couldn't throw the photo away. She returned it to the recesses of her Bible, between the pages of the *Book of Leviticus*, where she was unlikely to run across it ever again.

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Mary turned ahead to the 91st Psalm, and read through it slowly, silently. It told of a God who promised shelter and protection, a God who could be trusted, a fatherly being who would not desert his children, no matter what.

Then, as was her habit every night before going to sleep, she prayed aloud. Pastor Don had taught her that the simple exercise of saying the words out loud would keep her mind from wandering, and he'd been right. In all the years she had known him, Pastor Don had always been right.

For a moment, she wondered if he had also been right about calling Jeff. Just as quickly, she dismissed the idea. Too much time had passed. She had coldly cut Jeff out of her life when she moved. Even as kind and sweet as Jeff was, she knew he couldn't forgive her for that.

"Jesus," she began slowly, softly, "A lot of things have been happening in the past couple days that I don't understand. I know that *you* understand them, but I don't. Jill isn't a believer, but I want her to be. I want her to know you and love you the way I do. I want her to be saved, so we can both enjoy her presence in heaven. She's in a terrible situation with her money. Can you show her what to do, or show me, so I can help her? She's a good person, she really is. Will you please help her get through this?

"You know I'm getting by, but just barely. I'm so tired all the time. Will you give me more strength and energy to do all the things I have to do? I'm so sorry that I failed you. I know you've forgiven me, but will you help me accept that? Will you help me find a loving, godly home for this baby? My bravery is just about gone. Will you give me a fresh supply for tomorrow? I can only make it one day at a time, and then only with your help.

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"Thank you for sending Pastor Don and Hilda and the women at church into my life. I know that you're working through them to help me. Please keep them all healthy and safe and bless them with happiness and peace.

"Jesus, I don't feel much like celebrating your birthday this year. I know I'm supposed to be joyful and happy, but I'm having such a hard time. Thank you for the sacrifice you made for me. Thank you for this little baby within me who's going to make some good couple so happy. Thank you for my job and all my material blessings. Please tell Mama and Dad that I love them and miss them so much. Amen."

She double-checked the setting on her clock radio, switched off the lamp, eased into bed, and tugged the covers up under her chin. Her mind skipped to Elizabeth McAllister and the budget projections. She had not been able to find any new data on natural gas, so she had turned in the report again, unaltered, but with more footnotes and sources.

Elizabeth had been in a meeting and was still absent from her office at quitting time, so Mary laid the report on the center of her desk with a Post-It on top explaining that she had an appointment that evening with her pastor and didn't want to be late. She promised in the note to go over the figures with Elizabeth first thing in the morning.

Mary used all of her willpower to push worries about work out of her mind. A fleeting image of Jeff's smiling face flitted through her thoughts before she drifted off to sleep.

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Chapter Five

Mary always enjoyed seeing miniature Christmas villages in store windows. Except this year.

As she surveyed the little ceramic houses and stores, the ice skating figurines, the snow-crusted pine trees and the electric train traveling along its oval track on the outskirts of the tiny town, it reminded her too much of Wahoo.

Small towns possessed an out-of-time quaintness, like this Christmas village that seemed frozen in the past, a three-dimensional photograph of happier, more innocent days. She missed seeing people on the street that she knew, and having store owners and mechanics call her by name. At 55,000 people, Wheaton was too big. Other than people from church and a few acquaintances she had made over the years, no one there knew her name. Like many of the suburbs, it tried to masquerade as a small town, but so many of its picturesque buildings were only a few years old, clever counterfeits from a simpler America.

Even as a small girl growing up on a farm outside town, she had thought Wahoo was a funny name. It was a word that characters in old black and white movies yelled when they were excited. Her father had told her it was a Dakota Sioux name meaning *arrow wood*. He wasn't sure whether it described the purple-flowered bushes that grew wild in the area or cork elm trees, but he was positive it was an Indian expression.

After her parents' funerals and she sold their house, Mary never went back. In a way, there was too much pain for her in Wahoo, so many places they had gone together. If she went back, she knew she'd be able to see her mother waiting on a downtown street corner, watching for their rusty green pickup truck to pick her

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up—an old, round-fendered model just like the one in this twinkling, snow-covered village.

Mary turned slowly from the store window, then put her gloved hand on the brick wall to steady herself. She was so tired. Her life had not turned out the way she expected. Next to her parents' accidental deaths, this pregnancy was the worst thing that had ever happened to her.

She still struggled with guilt, although she knew in her heart that Jesus had forgiven her and loved her as much as before. Chicago, even Midwest Milling's headquarters, was very different from the Omaha factory where she had started. People were more like family there. They laughed more, the plant's supervisors weren't so pretentious, and people looked out for each other.

As she walked toward the building where Midwest's offices were housed on the eighth floor, she gave one last glance back to the decorated store window.

That was me, she thought, of her life in Nebraska. *The real me, not the me I am today*. *Maybe some day I'll work up the courage to do something about it.*

"Earth to Mary!" someone shouted.

Mary looked to her right to see Jill approaching the building door from the other direction.

"Where were you just now?" Jill asked, smiling. "You looked like you were really gone somewhere. Nebraska, even."

"Hi. Oh, I've just been feeling kind of down the past couple weeks. Too much forced holiday jolliness I think."

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"Boy, are you right about that. Every year it gets worse. All these parties they show on TV. Who's going to all these parties anyway, besides a bunch of sitcom actors?"

"I like Christmas," Mary asserted, almost embarrassed because she had told the truth about being depressed. "It's just this *particular* Christmas I'm not looking forward to."

"I know the feeling," Jill said, suddenly grim. She held the door open for her friend and they both hurried across the lobby and found a spot in the crowded elevator.

Jill's cheeks were pink from the cold. Mary had forgotten how pretty her friend was. Now Jill was wearing stylish black glasses instead of her usual contacts. Her dark hair was cut in a perky bob, and she had a quick, natural smile that everyone liked. Why Jill had not been married yet was a constant mystery to Mary.

They got off the elevator and entered Midwest's suite of offices through double glass doors. The company occupied nearly the entire eighth floor, with the exception of a small suite that housed an orthodontist and his staff.

One of the secretaries was already clattering away on her keyboard. Mary double-checked the wall clock. It was still fifteen minutes before starting time.

"You're getting at it early, Lucille," Jill said.

That was something Mary liked about Jill. She treated everyone with equal respect.

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"'Mornin', ladies. Well you know, Jill, we got a two-dayer coming up, so I'm getting as much done ahead of time as I can. I don't plan to come back here wiped out from partying and have a big ol' honkin' desk full of work staring me in the face."

"That, Lucille, is an excellent bit of strategy," Mary said, giving her a quick wink as she and Jill headed back through the labyrinth of cubicles to their own desks.

After they hung up their coats and returned to their desks, both women checked their telephone voice mail while they waited for their computers to boot up.

Mary glanced over and noticed that Jill was making a call already, without listening to the rest of her messages. That was unusual. Mary assumed it must be something urgent.

Five minutes later, a visibly shaken Jill walked briskly down the hall to the women's restroom. Mary got up and followed. When she pushed through the door, she found the room empty except for Jill holding on to a sink, gasping in breaths.

"Jill! What's the matter? Are you all right?"

She shook her head, still fighting for breath. Mary got behind her, and put her hands on Jill's shoulders. "You're hyperventilating. Try to relax, slow your breathing."

It didn't work. Mary yanked a handful of brown paper towels from the dispenser and rapidly formed them into a sort of small tent. She put it up to Jill's mouth and nose, got her to move her hands up and hold it in place herself.

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"Okay. Breath into here. Slowly, steady. Through your nose. We want to get more carbon dioxide in your blood. Okay, that's about a dozen breaths. Take the towels away for a minute."

Jill nodded. Her breath had slowly considerably and was calmer. Within a minute her breathing had returned to normal.

"What happened?" Mary asked. "What was that phone call about?"

"It was Dave Meade in the California plant. They're scheduled to make Krunchy Krowns today, but the cartons didn't come in."

"Why not? Was there a problem with the printer?"

"I…I forgot to order them," Jill blurted out.

Mary studied her friend for a moment. "It's only six o'clock in California. What did Meade say?"

"He was pretty angry. We've been using just-in-time inventory until they get that warehouse addition finished in L.A. Since they don't have enough storage space yet, the printer delivers the cartons and we get the box liners a day or two before we need them."

Mary thought a moment. "Why didn't he call you a day or two ago when the cartons didn't show up on time?"

"I don't know," Jill said, suddenly wondering herself. "You're right. That's weird."

"Does he have any other cartons on hand?"

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"Well, he *should*. We've got enough storage room for boxes for *some* of our brands, but not all of them."

"How about Cinnamon Poppers?"

"Yeah. Yeah, he should have enough box stock there to work for a couple days."

Mary, who had worked in the Omaha plant and was more knowledgeable about the manufacturing processes, began to see what was happening.

"It's Dave's responsibility to make sure he's got the boxes on hand. He's not without blame in this, Jill. He should have called you a couple days ago instead of waiting on this. He dropped the ball too."

"Please don't tell Elizabeth about this, Mary. Please don't. I could get fired."

Mary was shocked. "Jill, I'm not going to hurt you. You're my friend."

Jill looked at the floor. "I know you…Christians believe in always telling the truth."

"Listen, Jill, Elizabeth doesn't need to know about this. You can be darn sure that Dave Meade isn't going to call her, because he'd get in trouble himself for not calling you when he should have."

"I don't know what to do."

"Here's what you do. You call the printer, get the Krunchy Krowns boxes ordered. Then you call Dave back. He knows he's not clean on this, so don't let him intimidate you. Tell him to make Cinnamon Poppers until the Krunchy Krowns cartons get there. The shapes of those two products are different so he'll

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have to change the dies, but the gun-puffing process and ingredients are exactly the same, except for cinnamon, so he'll have ingredients on hand. He'll store the finished Cinnamon Poppers where he had the empty Poppers boxes, and the rest in empty trailers. We keep rotating production on all our products, so when Poppers are up again, he can add that product to the next run. He'll have to juggle his production schedule a little, but I'm sure he'll be more than happy to do it to cover his own mistake."

Jill's hands were trembling. "I..I've been so worried about my debts that I completely dropped the ball on this, Mary. I've got all my deadlines written on my calendar and I have my computer set up to prompt me on them too. I just don't know what happened."

"Try to calm down, Jill. It's going to be all right. You think Elizabeth never made a mistake in all her years at Midwest? After this is all over and California's scheduling is back where it should be, you can tell her what happened and how you solved it, if you want, but if no harm is done, I don't see any reason why you need to."

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Mary."

"You're a lot stronger and smarter than you give yourself credit for, Jill," she replied, hugging her and gently patting her back. "Ready to get back to work?"

"Sure. I've got a call to make."

Jill left the restroom first, then Mary followed a few feet behind. In the hall, they met Elizabeth. From the stern expression on her supervisor's face, Mary knew that something was wrong.

"Mary. In my office. *Now*!" Elizabeth snapped.

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Chapter Six

Following Elizabeth down the corridor, Mary said a silent prayer:

Jesus, please help me now. Please guide me and give me wisdom so I do what honors you. Help me to hold my temper and accept her criticism. Tell me what to say and do. Amen.

No sooner had she finished than a strange, warm sensation came over her. Mary had never felt anything like it in her life. She was enveloped in complete calm and peace. She no longer felt anxious and afraid. In that moment, a profound air of confidence filled her.

When they got into the office, Elizabeth closed the door and picked Mary's report off her desk.

"You didn't make any changes to the natural gas section like I told you to."

"My first figures were correct," Mary replied calmly.

"I don't *think* so," Elizabeth shot back.

"What do you base that on?"

"Are you questioning my authority? *You* may have researched these projections, but *I'm* the one who has to take responsibility for them. These figures are crucial in next fiscal year's budget-making process." Elizabeth's face reddened as she became more angry. "The reason we do these so far in advance is so we can make revisions as new data comes in. If we have to pay more for natural gas than you've projected, it will cut into our profits. You know how competitive our

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pricing is. A couple cents a unit can be the difference between us retaining a customer or their going to Sunrise Milling or Breakfast Bowl. When I tell you to do something, do you think I'm just doing it to waste time?" Elizabeth's face was red, tense, her right hand clutching the report and her left clenched tightly into a fist.

Then it came to Mary. It was not exactly a voice, but she heard it inside her head, clear and simple. It was so true that she knew exactly who it came from. Mary looked at her angry supervisor a moment, took a deep breath, then asked.

"Elizabeth, would you and Kevin like to adopt my baby?"

For an instant, Elizabeth looked stunned. Her eyes grew wide as she realized that Mary was not joking. Then her lower lip began to tremble, and she exploded into tears.

Mary took a step forward and hugged her tightly. Elizabeth's entire body was wracked with sobs. She could not speak. Clinging to Mary, she cried and cried for several minutes until her chest stopped heaving and she could manage a few words.

"I thought…I thought.."

Taking Elizabeth's hand, Mary eased back so she could see her face. "My pastor was going to arrange a private adoption. He had two couples in mind, but he hasn't told them anything yet in case, well, you know, in case something goes wrong with the birth. They don't know, so they can't be disappointed."

Then Elizabeth began crying again, shaking her head and looking at the floor. "I've been so…mean to you. How could you…?"

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"That's not you, Elizabeth. You're a good person. A kind, loving person. And Kevin is a wonderful man, too. I can't think of anyone I'd rather trust this child's future with."

"I don't know what to say, Mary."

"Will you say 'yes'?"

"Of course, of course." She got out a short laugh, then began crying again.

"It's all right. Everything's going to be all right, Elizabeth. The baby's due any day now. Are you and Kevin going away for Christmas?"

"Just to my mother's in Waukegan," Elizabeth sniffed. She went to her desk, got a tissue from a box, and dabbed her nose and eyes. "But we'll wait for the call. We'll be there as soon as you need us."

"Our insurance will cover the delivery and doctor's fees, but do you think you and Kevin could pay for any incidentals that aren't covered? That was the arrangement my pastor and my lawyer were going to make with the other couples."

"Yes, yes. Whatever you need, Mary."

"I'm going to go now so you can call Kevin."

Elizabeth shook her head. "No, no. I'm going over to his office. I want to tell him in person. I want to be there with him, I want to see his face when I give him this news."

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"I don't blame you." Mary laughed. She picked up her report from the desk and turned toward the door. "I'll get back to work on this and see what I can come up with."

Elizabeth stepped forward quickly and took it from her. "No, I don't know what I was thinking of. The figures are what they are. You put a lot of time and work into this, Mary. I'm sorry I was so unreasonable."

"It's all right." Mary felt an inexpressible sense of joy, almost lightheadedness. "I'm going back to my desk. Can you call me later and tell me what Kevin says?"

"Sure. Thank you, Mary. I can't put into words what this means to me."

"I think God answered *both* our prayers," Mary said. She left, closing the office door behind her.

When she got back to her desk, Jill came over. "What happened to you? You look like you're walking on air."

"I feel like it too! Elizabeth and Kevin are adopting my baby."

"What?" Jill's mouth dropped open. "Did she ask you for it? How…"

"No, no. I offered. I *know* them, Jill. They're both good, kind people. They go to the Lutheran church in Naperville, and Kevin even teaches Sunday school. The child will be raised in a loving, Christian home. I couldn't be happier."

Jill frowned. "But what about the company picnic and things like that? You're going to see your child grow up. It's going to be awfully painful, Mary. Are you sure you're doing the right thing here?"

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"I'm absolutely positive." Mary was embarrassed to tell Jill about the prompting she had received. "I don't know right now how it's all going to work out. I just know that it will. God is involved in this, Jill. I'm sure of it."

Jill gave a nervous laugh. "You always say that like you're on a first name basis with him, Mary."

"I am. You could be too, Jill, if you'd just make the decision."

"Maybe. Maybe someday." Jill looked almost surprised at her own reply. "Hey, I've got some news too."

"Yeah? What?"

"I called Dave Meade. I explained the rescheduling idea to him, and he snapped it right up. No more accusations, no trying to put it all on me."

"That's great, Jill! Is it all going to work out?"

"Here's the unbelievable part. I called the printer in L.A. to tell them I'd dropped the ball, and my rep said another job got cancelled, so they have a press window open tonight to print the Krunchy Krowns boxes. Can you believe that, Mary?"

Mary smiled. "Sounds like a miracle to me, Jill. I'll tell you what. Let's celebrate our good news tonight. I'll treat."

"Okay. I drove in today, so after work I'll take us anywhere you want to go."

"How about that Chinese place in Wheaton? I'll buy, and no arguments."

"Works for me."

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Both women had brought sack lunches, so they ate together in the break room, giggling like junior high school girls. Mary's elation was tempered, though, when she called Pastor Don late in the afternoon to tell him the news.

"Are you certain of what you're doing, Mary? A child is not something you can give away, like a toaster or a coffeepot."

"You're right. But life is a gift from God. You taught me that yourself, Pastor. I can't raise this child myself. I feel that I'm just an instrument that God is using to answer Elizabeth and Kevin's prayers. Haven't you always told me that God uses unlikely means to accomplish his plan?"

The minister laughed. "Okay, you've got me. How can a man argue with his own advice? You're sure there are no other motives here? You aren't doing this to ease tensions at work?"

Mary decided to tell him. "Pastor, you, of all people should understand when I tell you I felt a prompting from the Holy Spirit. I believe, with all my heart, that this is what God wants me to do."

He was silent for several seconds then said, "I know you, Mary. You are a good, kind person with a generous heart. If you tell me that the Lord spoke to you in this way, who am I to doubt?"

An hour later, Mary took a call from Kevin McAllister from his office at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. He was only slightly less ecstatic than Elizabeth, and his voice caught several times during the conversation, as he tried to tell Mary how grateful they were. Elizabeth came on the phone as well and gave Mary the details of a conversation they had had with their attorney about private adoptions.

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When the work day was finished, Jill retrieved her Honda Civic from a parking garage, picked up Mary at the curb, and they squeezed into the rush hour traffic. As they drove west, freezing rain began to fall, pattering on the roof of the car. Jill switched on her wipers.

"Was this predicted?" Mary asked.

"You know Illinois weather," Jill said. "It changes by the minute."

Their conversation became more subdued so Jill could concentrate on her driving. Mary felt completely safe; Jill was a cautious driver, but several big SUVs sped around them, as if somehow they had been gifted with better traction.

"After we eat, you're staying at my place tonight," Mary said. "I don't want you driving home in this."

"Works for me. Think that cute beige suit of yours will fit me?"

"Hey, I haven't *always* been as big as one of those inflatable cartoon characters in the Macy's parade."

As they entered Wheaton's city limits, Jill found that the salt trucks had not been out yet. Intersections especially were hazardous.

"Take this side street here," Mary pointed. "There's less traffic and it'll get us there quicker."

Jill flipped on her turn signal. Both women looked through the ice-encrusted windows when they heard the deafening blare of a horn.

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Mary screamed. A delivery truck was skidding sideways across two lanes, headed directly for Jill's car!

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Chapter Seven

The truck rammed into the left front fender of Jill's car, crumpling the metal like a sheet of notebook paper. Both airbags deployed, smacking the women back in their seats.

After the impact, the momentum pushed the car across the icy pavement and onto a snow-covered patch of lawn, where it half-turned and slammed sideways against a utility pole.

Mary blinked when the motion abruptly stopped. She sensed something warm on her forehead, put a finger to it and discovered that it was blood. She looked over at her friend.

As Jill tilted her head back, her broken eyeglasses fell off her face. Mary saw no cuts or wounds on her.

"Jill! Jill! Are you hurt?"

She answered groggily. "I don't think so. No. My chest and my head hurt but I think it's from the air bag. Are you okay?"

"I don't…" Mary began, then paused. An odd expression came on her face.

"What's wrong?"

"I…I think…my water just broke! Oh, Lord, I think I'm going into labor."

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Jill reached to her left. Mary heard a repeated mechanical crunching, but nothing happened. "My door!" Jill shouted. "It's tight up against this pole. I can't get it open. Try yours."

Mary found the door handle and pulled it but nothing moved. She tried again and again. "It's jammed shut. What are we going to do?"

Through the ice-crusted side windows and cracked windshield, Mary could see moving forms and colors. After a moment she realized they were people. With a gloved hand, she wiped at the fog on the inside of her passenger window, but saw that the outside of the pane was covered with ice. Something—a man's gloved hand—wiped at it furiously. She heard more crunching but again nothing moved. The crash had disabled the power windows. Neither she nor Jill could get their window down.

"Your door's jammed shut," the man shouted. "Can you open it from your side?"

Mary tried once more. "No!" She yelled back. "It won't work."

She heard more noise, watched more shapes pass by the windshield, then heard a scratching sound. She looked to her right and saw someone using a plastic windshield scraper to clear the ice from her side window. Another face appeared, topped by an odd-shaped hat, then when the street light glinted from a badge, Mary realized it was a police officer.

"Are either of you injured?" he shouted.

"No!" Jill returned. "But I can't open my door either. We can't get out."

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"I'm going into labor," Mary screamed, and was shocked at the panic in her voice.

"Fire Rescue's on the way," the policeman told her. "They should be here in about five minutes."

Mary began to feel contractions and wondered if she'd be able to wait. She had taken a strong punch from the airbag, and the shoulder belt had dug roughly into her chest.

"My baby," she whimpered, "My baby." Then she began to cry.

Jill clutched her arm. "Hold on, Mary. *Please* hold on. They'll be here in a few minutes. Everything will be all right."

Mary turned to her, hot tears dribbling down her cheeks.

"We need to pray," Jill said firmly. She took Mary's hand, squeezed it tightly, and closed her eyes. "God, we need your help, and we need it right *now*," Jill demanded. "This girl is one of your own. Help us get out of here, *please*."

Both women turned to Mary's window at the sound of two men arguing. They recognized the first voice as that of the police officer.

"Sir, if you don't move away from here, I'm going to arrest you for interfering with a police officer."

"We need to get that door open," the other voice shouted back.

"I've already tried it. It's jammed shut. Fire Rescue should be here any minute with the Jaws of Life. We'll use that tool to cut them out."

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"I can get that door open."

"Sir, I'm forty years younger than you, and I can't budge it. Now *please* get away from the car."

Then the other man's tone changed abruptly. Both Jill and Mary noticed it. Suddenly he sounded much younger, decisive, *commanding*.

"Officer, you will step back and wait over there where I am pointing."

"Yes, sir," they heard the policeman say, almost mechanically.

A terrific grinding, scraping noise filled the air. Then the man ripped the crumpled door off the car and cast it aside as if it were a piece of cardboard!

Mary and Jill, still holding hands, looked open-mouthed in amazement as icy rain flickered in on them. They heard the forceful voice again.

"Officer, you will kindly help these two ladies out of the vehicle now."

"Yes, sir."

Mary looked up, saw the face of the man who had torn the door off and was dumbfounded. *It was the same elderly gentleman who had given her his seat on the train a few days ago.* He smiled and said softly, "Everything will be all right now, Mary." Then he left.

She turned to tell Jill, but swiveled back when she felt a tugging and easing of pressure on her. The policeman had cut her seat belt away with a knife. He took her by the arm, and another set of hands took her other arm. An Emergency

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Medical Technician guided her toward a gurney. He helped her lie down, put straps across her, then another EMT helped load her into the ambulance. Jill walked up, got into the ambulance, holding onto one of the men's arms, and sat beside Mary.

"We'll be at Central DuPage Hospital within two minutes," the EMT told them.

They heard the siren as the ambulance pulled onto Main Street and headed north. The EMT began taking Mary's vitals and radioed the information to the hospital's emergency room.

"Is my baby going to be all right?" she asked.

"They have excellent doctors in this emergency room," he answered calmly, evading her question. "They'll do everything they can."

"It's going to be all right, Mary," Jill said, holding her hand, "I just *know* it is."

"For an amateur, you prayed pretty well back there," Mary said.

Jill managed a nervous laugh. "Hey, it worked, didn't it?"

Mary started to tell her about the old man when her face contorted in pain. "Ohhh. Oh, it hurts…"

The EMT positioned himself by the end of the gurney and said, "Delivery has started."

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Chapter Eight

Although Mary was in intense pain, the baby had not started to emerge from the birth canal. The EMT ripped open a bag of sterile gauze and a second package containing a thin, sterile cotton blanket.

"Pulling in now," the ambulance driver shouted from the front.

"The doctor will be here in a few seconds, ma'am," the EMT told Mary.

When the ambulance stopped, someone opened the rear doors and a short, balding doctor dressed in green scrubs hopped in. He asked the EMT a few questions, did a rapid exam, then said, "Let's get her into the ER."

The EMT who had been driving appeared at the back, and the two men carefully pulled the gurney out until its collapsible framework opened and the wheels touched the pavement. Cautiously, unemotionally, they moved the gurney through opened sliding doors, down a long hallway and into an exam room.

Jill, running behind, saw nurses scurrying in. One of them asked, "Are you with her?"

"Yes."

"Please go to the desk so we can get some information."

"Okay." Jill walked through a doorway where the nurse had pointed and found a male nurse in blue scrubs seated at the registration desk. "They told me to give

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you the information on my friend who was just brought in. We were in an accident and she's in labor."

He nodded, pulled a printed form from a cubbyhole, put it on a clipboard and began asking questions. After they had completed the questionnaire, he asked Jill to have a seat in the waiting area. Five minutes later, another nurse came out and spoke to her.

"You were in the same accident with Ms. Chapman? Please come with me and we'll check you over. Are you feeling pain anywhere?"

"In my neck and right cheek," Jill told her, as she followed the woman to an exam room.

"Did the airbag deploy?"

"Yes."

"We'll take some x-rays, but it's not unusual to suffer a mild abrasion or bruise on your face from the airbag."

A physician who introduced himself as Dr. Khan performed Jill's examination. A half hour later, as Jill was walking back from the radiology department, the male nurse who had registered her approached her in the hall.

"Miss Novak? Your friend gave birth to a healthy girl. Six pounds, thirteen ounces."

Jill felt a great wave of relief wash over her. She had feared that the airbag or shoulder belt might have injured Mary or the baby. "Can I see Mary now?"

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"In a few minutes. Have a seat and we'll let you know."

Fifteen minutes later, when they let Jill in to see Mary, they directed her to a different exam room. Mary was lying on a different gurney, several pillows propping her up. In her arms she held a tiny, red-faced baby with a full head of fine, brown hair.

When she saw Jill, Mary said, "Isn't she beautiful?" Before Jill could reply, Mary's face puckered and she burst into tears.

No words were necessary between the two friends. Jill understood exactly what Mary was feeling. Now that Mary actually had her baby in her arms, it would be so, so hard to give her up to Elizabeth. Jill put her hand on Mary's shoulder and squeezed it gently. Then tears began to trickle down her own face. Jill had never experienced anything so happy and so heart-wrenching at the same time.

Finally Mary was able to say, "I can't keep her. I'm just not strong enough to raise her by myself."

"I know," Jill said, reassuring her. "It's all right. Elizabeth and Kevin will be so good to her, Mary. You *know* they'll love her and take good care of her."

"Yes. I know."

They were interrupted by the male nurse. "We have a room ready for you now in maternity, Mary."

"I didn't think…" Mary said, embarrassed, "are *you* okay, Jill?"

"Fine. No broken bones, just a few minor bruises."

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"There's no need for you to stay here tonight," Mary said. "Why don't you go to my apartment, get some of my things, and come back in the morning. Oh! My keys. They're back in your car."

"No," the nurse said. "A police officer brought both of your purses in about twenty minutes ago. I've got them at the desk. You should call or go into the police station in the morning to fill out the accident report."

"Okay. Do you know if there's a rental car agency in town?"

"I think there's one in Glen Ellyn," he answered. "They'll even drive the car to your door and pick you up. Would you like me to call you a taxi?"

"Yes, thank you," Jill said. "I'll rent a car in the morning. Anything else you want me to do, Mary?"

"In the morning, would you call my pastor and tell him what happened? His number's written in the back of my phone book."

"Sure." Jill leaned over and kissed Mary on the forehead, then she did the same with the baby. "Get some sleep, Mary. I'll see you in the morning."

* * *

When a knock sounded on Mary's hospital room door at 9:30 the next morning, she was surprised to see not Jill, but Pastor Don.

"Mary! How are you feeling? How is the baby?" he asked, as he clasped her hands warmly and gave her a hug.

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"We're both doing fine. I believe God has been watching over me, Pastor." She told him about the strange incident with the elderly man ripping the car door off. The old pastor just smiled and nodded his head gently.

"From what Jill told me about the accident when she called this morning, it's a miracle that all three of you came out of it alive—let alone with no serious injuries." He pulled up a chair and sat by Mary's bedside. "And how are you feeling about…the adoption, Mary? Are you having any second thoughts about the arrangements you made with Mr. and Mrs. McAllister?"

"I never expected it to be this hard," Mary confessed. "To give her up…I feel as if my heart is being torn from my body."

He held her hand and spoke softly, his eyes glistening. "I am an old man now, and I have seen many terrible—and many wonderful---things in my lifetime. I would be quite disappointed if this *wasn't* difficult for you, Mary. But you followed God's will by having this baby. Your pain will ease, over time, but it will never completely go away. Some pains never do. But the *gift* you have given this good Christian couple! The *joy* that this child's life will bring! And I can promise you something, Mary, because I know this to be true. God will reward you for your obedience, your suffering, and your generosity. God cannot be outdone. You are hurting now, but your life will change. God will change it. He has something beautiful in store for you, Mary. You'll see."

His words made her eyes well up. She laughed a little and said, "I think I've cried more in this last year than I have in all my life."

"Would you pray with me now?" He bowed his head, still holding her hand, and said quietly, "Lord Jesus, Your servant Mary has honored You with her life. She has honored You through her obedience to You. I ask You to bless her beyond

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her greatest dreams. I ask You to come into her life and heal her body and her heart as only You can. We pray this in Your holy name. Amen."

When they looked up, Jill was standing by the foot of the bed, her hands clasped before her. As she raised her head, they saw that her eyes were glistening too.

"How are you feeling this morning?" Jill asked.

"Tired," Mary said. "Very, very tired. But happy. I just know this is all going to work out somehow. Oh! You spoke with Pastor Don on the phone this morning, but you haven't actually met. Pastor, this is my best friend, Jill Novak."

"Mary has told me wonderful things about you," he said, rising from his chair to shake Jill's hand. He gave a little bow.

Jill blinked. Mary had told her about the man's background and his twisted body, but it took her a moment to get over the surprise.

"I half-expected to see a halo over your head," Jill joked, "after the way Mary's been raving about you."

That brought a loud chuckle from the old man. "I'm sure it would be very tarnished if there was," he replied.

"I went to the police station this morning and filled out the accident report," Jill said. "The driver of the truck just had minor injuries. The police said he lost control because the pavement was so icy."

For a moment there was an awkward silence as they all looked at each other. Then Jill nervously cleared her throat and spoke.

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"Pastor, after everything that happened last night…and after knowing Mary so well and seeing her strength and her kindness and courage, I wonder…I'd like…"

"Yes?" He looked at her expectantly, his eyes sparkling.

"I want what she has. I've been…struggling for so long. Mary has talked to me about it many times, but I've always pushed her away. Could you…*would* you help me accept Jesus into my life?"

"It would be my great privilege," he answered. He motioned toward the door. "There is a visitor waiting room down the hall that is empty. Come. We'll talk for a while, then you can make your decision."

Jill turned to look at her friend before they left the room and saw that Mary had the most lovely, serene smile on her face that she had ever seen.

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Chapter Nine

The adoption was conducted the day before Christmas. Mary's attorney and a registered nurse brought the baby from the hospital to Elizabeth and Kevin's attorney's office, where the adoption papers were signed and the new parents took custody.

They named their daughter Molly. Mary's attorney phoned to tell her that the adoption had been completed and that both parents cried when they held the baby for the first time. After the phone call, Mary cried too.

Jill insisted that Mary spend Christmas with her and her family, and even though she hadn't felt like socializing, Mary found herself enjoying the offbeat sense of humor of Jill's parents, aunts and uncles. And, as is the case with every American holiday gathering, there was too much good food and everyone ate too much.

By the time she returned to work after the holiday break, Mary still felt sad, but she could feel her strength and energy returning and she resolved to move on with her life. She felt more dependent on God than ever, which, she knew in her heart, was exactly what He wanted.

Jill was already at her desk when Mary came into the office. Mary was glad to have no more need for the huge red coat she had borrowed. She wore her own short, baby blue jacket, slacks and a sweater. She had already started to lose some of the weight she had gained during pregnancy.

"Hi, Mary! How are you doing?"

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Mary hung her coat up, came back and stood by Jill's desk. "Well, in one way I have a certain sense of relief that it's all over, but in another way, I'm feeling a lot of disappointment. I know I shouldn't, but that's just the way I feel."

Jill pushed her new glasses up on her nose. "You did the right thing, Mary. And you're the only one who knows your limitations. You were honest in knowing you're not up to raising a child by yourself right now."

"I imagine Elizabeth will be taking some personal time," Mary said. "She's not here yet, is she?"

"No. Her office is dark."

"So. Does Pastor Don have you memorizing the entire Bible yet?"

Jill laughed. "No, but I'm reading through the Gospels now. I'm so excited, I feel like I could explode."

Mary smiled. "You know, this doesn't mean all your problems are going to instantly go away."

"I know, I know. But now I'll have God to help me with them. And I think, I think as he helps me feel better about myself, maybe I'll be more attractive to the right man."

"You've always been attractive, Jill. I'm so happy for you. I wouldn't last a day without Jesus helping me."

Jill's phone rang. She put her hand in the air to signal Mary to hold her thought.

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"This is Jill Novak." She picked up a pen to write a note while she listened on the phone, then put the pen down and said. "Yes. I'll be right there," then hung up.

"That was Ray Jefferson," Jill told Mary. "He wants to see me in his office."

"Probably about filling in for Elizabeth while she's off," Mary guessed.

"Yeah. That's it." Jill picked up the pen and a yellow legal pad then started down the hall toward the vice president's office. "We'll talk at lunch, okay?" she called over her shoulder.

"That sounds good," Mary said.

Mary sat down at her desk, listened to her voice mail messages, then checked her email. By the time she had returned three phone calls and replied to two important emails, Jill came back, her face showing an odd expression that Mary couldn't decipher.

"What happened? Jill, are you okay?"

"I can't tell you about it yet. He wants to see you, right now."

"Okay." Mary grabbed a pad and pen. "Any hint on what it's about?"

"We can talk about it when you get back." Then Jill broke into a broad smile, which relieved Mary immensely.

Everyone in the company had tremendous respect for Ray Jefferson, the vice president in charge of administration. He oversaw the Finance, Human Resources, Purchasing, and Marketing departments. An African-American in his early sixties, he had put himself and two of his brothers through college, served in

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the Marines in Vietnam, and was a deacon in his church. Ray was a model of integrity, intelligence, and patience, the kind of person who inspired loyalty and admiration from his employees.

Mary paused at the desk of Kathy Porter, Jefferson's secretary. The young woman looked up from her computer monitor. "Oh! He's expecting you, Mary. Go right in."

Mary rapped on the side of the open door. "You wanted to see me, Ray?"

"Good morning, Mary," he said, smiling. He stood, gave her a firm handshake, then gently shut the office door. "Please have a seat. We haven't spoken for quite a while."

Mary noticed that he was still smiling, and from the way Jill had behaved, she assumed this wasn't going to be any kind of disciplinary meeting. Besides, she couldn't think of anything she had done wrong.

"First, let me put your mind at ease." Ray folded his large hands on his desk blotter. "The reason for this meeting is a good thing—at least I hope that's how you'll see it."

Mary nodded, consumed with curiosity.

"I received a phone call at home the other night from Elizabeth," the vice president explained. "She notified me that she plans to resign from her position at Midwest Milling. She wants to stay home with their new baby."

"Oh! That sort of surprises me."

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Ray laughed. "Me too. But you should know that she hasn't been this happy in years. She's always wanted a child, and you made that possible for them, Mary. Kevin has a great job at the Mercantile Exchange, so finances are not an issue for them.

"I guess the big news," he continued, "is that I just offered Elizabeth's position to Jill, and she accepted."

"Wow! That's great. I'm happy for her." Mary was surprised, yet not surprised.

"Jill has filled in for Elizabeth during vacations, and she's always done an excellent job. Elizabeth recommended her and said she'd be a natural for it. Fortunately for us, Elizabeth agreed to come in part time for a couple months to train Jill. Jill probably knows most of it anyway, from filling in, but there are some procedures she's not familiar with."

"Can I ask who'll be filling Jill's old job?"

"Well, I don't have anyone specific in mind, so I'm going to post it within the company first. If no one applies, then we'll go to the outside. But I'd much rather have someone from inside, who already knows how Midwest operates. It's going to be a big load on Jill for a while, learning Elizabeth's work and training someone in her old job too, but I'm confident she can handle it."

"When does this start?"

"Today! I'll be handling some of Elizabeth's duties so Jill can still do her job at the same time. I don't want her to resign because we dump too much on her at once," he said with a laugh. "And now to the part that affects you, Mary. You trained under Mildred Stansky, out at the Omaha plant," Ray began.

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"Mildred was my mentor. I learned a lot about the company from her."

"Tom Buchanan, the Omaha plant manager, called me last week to tell me that Mildred is taking early retirement."

Mary was shocked. "She is? Gee, I'm surprised to hear that. Mildred and I still keep in touch, and she never mentioned that to me."

"Well, her husband Fred—you know Fred—had a TIA a couple weeks ago."

"What's that?"

"A transient ischemic attack. I guess you'd call it a small stroke. He came through it with no physical or mental effects, but it was like a warning signal to him and Mildred. He's on medication now, and his doctor says they caught the condition in time, but Mildred has decided to retire at 62 instead of working 'til 65. She wants to spend more time with him and be able to visit their grandchildren more often. I can't say I blame her," Ray added. "There's more to life than just work."

"I'll have to call her and congratulate her," Mary said. "She's been with Midwest over thirty years, hasn't she?"

"Thirty-two. Mary, Mildred has recommended *you* for her job at the Omaha plant."

Mary was stunned. She looked at Ray Jefferson several seconds, not knowing what to say. "I…I…"

"You don't have to give me a decision right now. But I would like you to seriously consider it. You'd be starting at $60,000 a year, a considerable increase

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from what you earn now. Naturally there's more responsibility to go along with that, but Mildred has complete confidence in your abilities, and that's good enough for me. Besides, I'm familiar with your work here. I looked at your personnel file and Elizabeth has always given you excellent performance reviews. She said you'd be perfect for the job too."

"This is so unexpected…"

"I have to admit that I'm selfish enough to want to keep you here at headquarters, but that wouldn't necessarily be the best thing for you," Ray said. "I know that your parents are deceased and that you don't have many relatives back in Nebraska, but this would be a major advancement for you, Mary. I've always been a strong believer that we need our best people out in the plants. Heck, that's where the cereal is made, not in these offices here in Chicago. We have our part to play, of course, but Midwest Milling succeeds or fails on the quality and delivery of our *products*. Mildred played a key role in the Omaha plant. I'd like you to go out there and keep up her high standards, Mary."

He stood and offered her his hand again. She shook with him.

"Can I let you know by the end of the week?" Mary asked. "I'll need some time to think about it." But already the idea appealed to her. Something was prompting her to make some major changes in her life.

"That'll be fine. Why don't you and Jill take a long lunch today so you can talk about it?"

Mary smiled as she opened the door. Ray Jefferson was a very perceptive man. As she walked down the hall back toward the Finance offices, she felt lightheaded, as if her feet were barely touching the floor.

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Except for her friendship with Jill, Mary couldn't think of any reason *not* to go. She wondered if this was God's strange way of answering her prayers.

As she thought about Wahoo, Nebraska and the short commute to the Omaha plant, Mary smiled. Maybe it *would* be good to go back home.

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Chapter Ten

Mary felt her excitement building as she followed Route 92 into Wahoo. The familiar landmarks she had seen along the way seemed to set off something inside her, like she had found the pieces to a puzzle she hadn't even known she was working on.

This was only an observation trip. She and Jill had had a two-hour discussion about the pros and cons of Mary taking Mildred's job in the Omaha plant and moving back to Wahoo.

Although they were both saddened about not seeing each other every day, Jill had concluded that it would be a good way for Mary to start over, to start fresh. Mary had kept it to herself, but she wanted to avoid seeing Mollie McAllister grow up. Even though Elizabeth had resigned from Midwest Milling, there was still the possibility that she might change her mind and return in some other capacity after their adopted daughter started school.

Giving up the baby was the hardest thing Mary had ever done, and it still hurt. Pastor Don had been so right that the ache would lessen but would never completely go away. She felt the truth of what he had said.

Mary had flown into Omaha and rented a car. She planned to stay overnight in Wahoo, then drive to the Omaha plant in the morning and meet with Mildred Stansky. Mildred would go through all of her job duties so Mary could get a better idea of what she was getting into. Mary knew that although she had started in Omaha, Mildred had become a fixture there, someone that everybody loved and respected. Mary knew she would have to prove herself able to do the work, but she never expected to equal the reputation that Mildred had earned.

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By the time Mary reached the outskirts of Wahoo, late afternoon was melding into a dark winter evening. Snow had been sputtering across the fields since she left the Omaha airport, with two inches on the ground already. It didn't look like the full-fledged Nebraska blizzards she remembered so well, but it did make her drive more cautiously.

She turned off Chestnut onto Fifth Street, toward Wahoo's small business district, a collection of old but well-maintained brick buildings. The trees around the courthouse still sparkled with Christmas lights, and there, just as she remembered it, was the torpedo, commemorating the sailors who were lost on the submarine U.S.S. Wahoo during World War II.

Mary eased the rental car into a parking place and got out. Snow was still drifting down in big, dime-sized flakes, putting a clean white covering on everything that wasn't moving. She walked down the sidewalk and went into the Wigwam Café, Wahoo's unofficial gathering place since the 1930s.

As usual, the place was noisy, filled with the sounds of clattering dishes, conversation, laughter, and people enjoying each others' company. She took off her gloves and coat and sat at an empty table.

"Mary! Mary Chapman!" A loud voice greeted her. Mary looked up to see a waitress approaching her.

"Jolene! I haven't seen you for ages. How are you?"

Jolene Jennings, a former high school classmate of Mary's was still blonde, buxom and bubbling with personality. She put the menu and glass of ice water down and gave Mary a hug across the shoulders.

"Oh, you look great, Mary. Haven't changed since high school."

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Mary shook her head, blushing. "If you're not wearing contacts, you need to get some eyeglasses, girl," she shot back. "I've gained twenty pounds. Can't you see it?"

"Nah! You look fine to me. Are you in town for the holidays? 'Cause if you are, you're a couple days too late."

Mary laughed. "No. I've been offered a job at our Omaha plant. I came back to scout it out, to see if I want to take it. How about you, Jolene? What's up with you?"

"Oh, Rick and I—you knew I married Rick Cavanaugh, didn't you?—we've got three kids now. Our oldest started junior high this year. Rick's still trucking and I work here part time. But look at you, Mary. You went off to college, got a big job in Chicago, and now you're thinking of coming back here? I always envied you, Mary. You were always the smart one in our class."

Mary frowned. "Not so smart. You've got a nice family, you're happy. You knew what you had here. I didn't."

"Yeah, I admit it. I *do* love Wahoo. It's small and sometimes things are kinda dead here, but it's a great place to raise our kids." Jolene scratched her head with the end of her pen, then was silent for a moment, as if she were deep in thought. A cryptic smile slowly spread over her pretty face. "But you must be hungry or you wouldn't have come in here. What can I get you, kid?"

Mary scanned the menu quickly. "How about that roast beef sandwich and a cup of decaf coffee, with cream and sugar."

"I'll be back with your coffee in two shakes." Jolene took the menu and hustled back toward the kitchen.

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In a sense, Mary felt as if she had never left, but in another sense, she felt as if she'd been gone for a hundred years instead of six. Stores came and went, new houses had been built, old ones torn down, but some things about Wahoo—its friendly, first name atmosphere and slower pace—would never change.

After Mary got her coffee and food, she realized that she was hungrier than she had thought. She had finished her coffee and wanted another cup. She looked toward the back, but Jolene wasn't there. Then she turned in her chair and saw the waitress at the front of the café by the cash register, absently touching the nose on a green bust of an Indian chief while she talked on the telephone. Mary caught her eye, pointed toward her coffee cup, and Jolene smiled and nodded. In a few seconds she hung up the phone and came over to the table.

"More decaf, Mary?"

"Would you, please?"

Jolene returned with the pot and filled Mary's cup. She picked up the empty plate. "How about some dessert, Mary?"

"Jolene! I've gained twenty pounds and you're talking dessert?"

"We've got some pumpkin pie with whipped cream that'll make you wanta shout."

Mary giggled. "I shouldn't, but I didn't get any pumpkin pie over the holidays, and it really sounds good. Okay. A *small* slice, and easy on that whipped cream."

Jolene wrote the dessert on the bill and retreated toward the kitchen. When she didn't return after five minutes, Mary checked the clock on the side wall. She

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wanted to get back to the motel, check in, unpack, and relax for a while before she went to bed. *Where was Jolene with that pie?*

Finally the waitress came back, bearing pumpkin pie with a round dollop of whipped cream on top. "Sorry it took so long," she apologized, glancing toward the front door.

As she ate the rich pie, Mary thought of her mother, how she had taught her to bake and all of the secrets they had shared working in the kitchen together. She missed her parents so much. Some hurts never healed.

Jolene appeared again. "More coffee?"

"No, I've got to get going. I'm staying at the motel tonight then I'll drive in to Omaha in the morning."

"Gee, it's sure great seeing you. I wish we could talk more."

"I wouldn't want to get you in trouble," Mary said, putting her coat on. "You've got other customers here." For a second, Jolene had a strange expression on her face that Mary couldn't quite read.

"I'll check you out," the waitress said, taking Mary's check and payment to the cash register. Mary got her change and gave Jolene a tip. Then, as Mary looked up after putting the money in her purse, she saw that Jolene had broken into a huge smile and was looking toward the front door. Mary turned.

It was Jeff!

His face and ears were red from the cold. On his baseball cap and the shoulders of his work jacket was a light dusting of snow. His face was more rugged—and

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seemed even more handsome than the last time Mary had seen him. Then he broke into that crooked smile, and it took her breath away.

"Hi, Mary."

"Jeff!" She couldn't think of what to say. In a moment she remembered all that he had meant to her, and she had to fight back tears.

"I thought you's *never* gonna get here," Jolene cut in. She erupted into laughter.

Then Mary realized who Jolene had been talking with on the phone and why she had tried to stall her.

"I'd like to talk," Mary said to him.

"I'd like that too," Jeff replied quietly.

He led the way outside. They stood next to each other under the green canvas awning, absently watching the snow drifting down.

"I almost didn't make it," he said. "As soon as Jolene called me at work, I got in my truck and headed for town. I was going too fast, and I slid off the road into a ditch."

"Are you all right? Did you get hurt?"

"No, no. I'm okay. But the truck was stuck up to its fenders. I couldn't back it out. I was just about to call one of the boys back at work on my cell to come get me, when this car comes along."

"You're still at the farm supply?" she asked.

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"Yeah. But I'm half *owner* now, Mary," he replied, beaming. "Anyhow, I'm standing on this back road, out in the middle of nowhere, when this car stops. A 1950 Buick Special. It was weird."

"What do you mean?"

"You know how I like old cars. But I've never seen *that* one around town before. So this old guy rolls down the window and asks if I need a ride. Normally I'd be a little leery, but he looked okay, so I went around to the other side and got in.

"Mary, this car was *perfect*, like it just came out of the showroom. I've never seen a 56 year-old car in that condition. Then I told him I needed to go to the Wigwam, and he says, 'I know where that is.'"

"Yeah?"

"He dropped me off right in front here. A few seconds later, and I would've missed you."

"I'm staying out at the motel," Mary said. "Why don't you ride out there with me, we can talk, then I'll bring you back or you can call one of your buddies to pick you up?"

He nodded. "I was stupid," Jeff told her. "I said a lot of mean things and I hurt you, Mary. I'm so sorry."

"No," she began. "I was wrong too. I thought that…"

Then they both turned to their left at the same time as a big, mint green car approached.

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"Hey! That's him!" Jeff shouted. "That's the guy who gave me a ride!"

As the big Buick neared, the street light lit up the interior of the car just enough for Mary to recognize the driver. He smiled and tipped his black hat to her as he drove by.

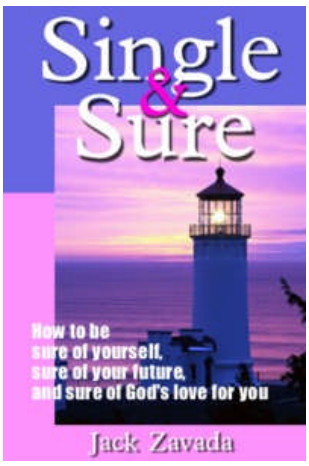
It was the same old man who had rescued her and Jill from the accident!

As they silently watched the car's tail lights disappear into the winter night, Jeff reached over and took Mary's right hand in his left. They entwined their fingers and put both their hands in his coat pocket, just as they had done when they were dating.

When Jeff kissed her, Mary felt warm and happy to the core of her soul. And she knew, with breathtaking sureness, that in his amazing, unexplainable, tenderhearted way, God had given her his perfect answer to all of her prayers.

---the end--

If you're a single person, you'll want to check out Jack's new ebook, *Single & Sure*.



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