

A Compelling Passion...

CALLED TO SERVE



The
**KEN COX
STORY**

3ABN 
3ABN BOOKS

P. O. Box 220
West Frankfort, Illinois
www.3ABN.org



Pacific Press® Publishing Association
Nampa, Idaho
Oshawa, Ontario, Canada
www.pacificpress.com

Chapter 1

An Unforgettable Christmas

I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.

—Hebrews 13:5, KJV

I remember the first time I learned about Mama's headaches. It was Christmas Day. I was four. The reason I remember that Christmas so well is that Donald and I had tied our big toes together with a string the night before so neither of us could get up without waking the other. Of course, every time one of us moved, it awakened us both—so it had been a long night. Before we went to bed, we had gone through Dad's drawer and located his largest socks. Already an expert on Christmas, I knew they would be bulging the next morning with nuts and candy.

A cold wind whistled past the windows of our one-bedroom flat as the weak sun peeked over the tenement row houses. I was out of bed in a flash, jerking my big brother's toe before I remembered the string.

The commotion woke up the entire family. Even if we had tried, we couldn't have gotten out of the room without waking Dad and Mama in one bed and our sisters in the other.

"Wow, Dorothy, look at this!" I shrieked as I ran to the Christmas tree in the living room, pulling out a doll in a blanket from the top of the brightly wrapped gifts.

Still rubbing her eyes, my two-year-old sister came over and grabbed



Left to right: Donald, Dorothy, Otto, Laura, Kenneth, and Billie

her new baby, embracing the soft bundle in her arms.

“Oh, look! *Look!*” my big brother Donald and I squealed in unison as we spotted our wooden trucks—a fire engine with real ladders and wheels and a logging truck with a trailer-load of logs.

“Thank you! Thank you!” we kept saying, sharing our toys and playing together as my parents and older sister, Billie, sat watching us.

“When will Uncle Virgil and Aunt Sally get here?” seven-year-old Donald asked.

“Oh, not long—maybe a couple of hours. Everyone else will be here too,” Mama said. “Come on, Billie, I need your help in the kitchen.”

As she began to stand up, her hand shot to her head.

“Oh! Oh! Ow! *My head! Oooo*, it hurts,” she said, sinking back down into the sofa.

Panic stricken, I watched Mama sit motionless for a moment, tears streaming down her face.

“Oh, Otto, I’ve never had a headache like this!” she groaned to my

AN UNFORGETTABLE CHRISTMAS

dad. "I don't have time for this now, but I can't even stand up!"

Realizing this was serious, my dad took charge. "Laura, don't get up. Just rest. It'll probably go away. We'll cancel Christmas dinner. Billie, bring your mother some water while I go find some aspirin and call the doctor. Here, Laura, lie down and relax."

She protested weakly, saying all she needed was to rest for a few minutes. As she did, we were sent, wide-eyed, to the bedroom. *What is happening to my mama?* I wondered. *Why is she crying?* We tried not to think about it as we sat on the bed and talked quietly.

Forty-five minutes later, Mama got up slowly, and four sets of young eyes watched Dad walk her to the kitchen. He stood around helplessly until she ordered him to leave and go help us straighten up the house.

I kept glancing back at Mama as she carefully removed from the icebox the food that she and Billie had been cooking for the past few days. Although quieter than usual, she seemed to be OK as she placed food in the oven, lit the gas burner, and began setting the table.



Laura Cox

A ticking bomb

A year went by, and Mama suffered increasingly frequent dizzy spells and headaches, frequently needing to steady herself by gripping whatever piece of furniture was close by. Finally, she visited a doctor, who told her that she had an iron deficiency, but the iron pills and extra liver she ate didn't seem to help much.

CALLED TO *Serve*

Because we were so young, my siblings and I weren't very concerned. Sometimes Billie would send us down to the basement to play or tell us to be quiet so Mama could rest. But none of us realized the seriousness of what was happening.

One day Mama came down with flulike symptoms, and because her regular physician was out of town, Billie and Dad took her across the street to a young doctor instead. He examined her carefully and used a small light to look into her eyes.

"You have a tumor in your eye," he said, clearly alarmed. "It's large enough that I see it, and I'm afraid it's a ticking time bomb! I want you to go to the hospital as soon as you can."

Billie was gripped with fear. She was old enough to understand that the situation was serious, and her mind raced through several scenarios.

The X-rays they took at Chicago's Cook County Hospital confirmed the doctor's diagnosis. Not only did she have a tumor on her optical nerve, but a huge brain tumor as well.

If there is a God . . .

Dad paced the floor outside the waiting room as he reviewed the events of the past few weeks. Mama's headaches had become almost constant, and she obviously had needed surgery. Through an unusual "coincidence," the young doctor she had seen had mentioned her case to his mentor, Dr. Adrien Verbrugghen, the famous neurosurgeon.

After examining her, Dr. Verbrugghen had offered to remove the massive and unusual brain tumor at no cost in the name of medical research. Dad knew he would still have to pay the hospital bill, but he would take on a third job, if necessary.

Now his heart was gripped with fear. *If there is a God out there, this would be a good time for You to show up!*

My parents were nominal Christians. They took us to church occasionally, typically at Easter or Christmas, but that was about it. I'm sure Dad wondered whether Mother would survive this delicate and

invasive procedure. What if she wasn't "right" afterward? How would he manage alone with four children?

After eight long hours, Dr. Verbrugghen called him out of the waiting room. He explained that although the surgery was fairly successful, he'd been able to only remove half the tumor because it was wrapped around some important nerve centers in Mama's brain. With more room in her skull, he hoped that the tumor would now loosen its grip, allowing him to remove the rest of it in a second, more invasive surgery a few months later.

Dad thought it best not to tell Mama about the second surgery right away, and the doctor deferred to his judgment.

Alone with her thoughts

In a few days, Mama was moved from the intensive care unit into a semiprivate room near the nurses' station. Her pain had eased considerably, and she missed us. Dad had come by every afternoon on his way home from work, but we children hadn't been allowed to visit Mama.

Because her roommate was incoherent and had few visitors, Mama spent a lot of lonely time reflecting on her life, marriage, children, and her illness. Dr. Verbrugghen had suggested that perhaps the tumor had been the result of the bad fall she'd suffered when she was twelve. Already she felt amazingly better, though. Surely she would soon be able to get back to her home and family and resume her life.

Poor Billie, only sixteen, was already doing the work of a mother: shopping, cooking, cleaning, and tending to the younger ones. She rarely complained and was so dependable.

Unfortunately, Mama had lost her second child, Jogene, to double pneumonia, just as he was developing his winsome, happy personality. Now he was resting in an Oklahoma cemetery.

Donald was her little mechanic who could take apart and put together almost anything. Well, let's just say that he was much better at taking things apart! Clever and cheerful, he was a natural leader too.

But he certainly didn't come with an instruction manual!

I had come next—so tiny for my age and afflicted with asthma when I was only eighteen months old. I talked and dreamed of running and playing with other kids, but no matter how much I wanted to, I dared not. It was hard enough to breathe when I stood still.

Our financial situation meant limited medical treatment, so Mama and Dad learned to be resourceful in treating my condition. Sometimes in the evenings, they would gather us up for a ride as I gasped desperately for my next breath. Before inhalers, I seemed to get the most relief by hanging my head out the window as we drove down the streets—even in the dead of winter!

Then there was Dorothy, always compliant, and maybe just a tiny bit spoiled as the baby of the family. She always seemed intuitively aware of the needs of others—*compassionate* was the best way to describe her. Dorothy and I were fast friends and fiercely protective of each other!

Dad hadn't seemed overjoyed when any of us were born, but he had been noticeably distant with Dorothy and me. Now, looking out the window at the cold, gray skies, Mama must have longed to move back to Oklahoma. It had been so hard to leave the fresh air, green fields, and meadows for the dark, smoky, and crowded streets of Chicago; but when the coal mines closed in 1928, they had no choice. Dad had searched unsuccessfully for a job near home. Then Mama's brothers wrote, telling that work was plentiful in Chicago. Reluctantly, after burying Jogene, our parents packed everything and moved to the big city.

It wasn't all bad, though, Mama told herself. *What a blessing it had been for Otto to have a regular job during the Great Depression!* She'd seen the lines of people waiting for government handouts; she knew that if they'd stayed in Oklahoma, they'd have been in a similar line too.



Grandparents Fate and Annie Hankins

Growing up poor

Chicago, Illinois, was not a good place to raise a family—at least not in our neighborhood in 1934, the year I was born. Gangsters ran the city streets as the Great Depression brought about a massive migration of people looking for jobs.

Our neighbors included people of Irish, Polish, and German backgrounds. The tenements we lived in were narrow, several stories

tall, and only two feet apart. Although we children weren't allowed to play in the street, we could run free in the back alley.

Traditional toys were hard to come by, and one of our *favorite* pastimes was to push around small iron rims, up and down the alleys with sticks. We also loved to bat things around, and any object would do. I still have a scar on my forehead from a tin can that was destined to become a home run, but managed to hit me instead! Trucks would back up to the coal chute in the alley and disgorge their contents into our basement. The whole process fascinated me, and I'll never forget the day I got a whipping for coming into the house covered in coal dust from standing too close to the chute!

Dad worked hard to provide for his family, though it wasn't easy to keep food on the table for four kids. He and Mama managed the tenement building we lived in, renting out the upstairs flats. Eventually, they

even moved into the basement so they could rent out their own flat for a little more cash.

Dad would get up at 2:00 A.M. during the winter months to go down to the docks to unload grocery cargo until almost daylight. Then he would rush home, grab his lunchbox, and head to his job at the Wyckoff Steel Mill. The grueling manual labor and long hours took their toll on him physically, and I believe they took their toll on his attitude as well. My parents were used to hard work, though. Both of them grew up on farms in Oklahoma.



Grandparents Fate and Annie Hankins

My mother was part English and Choctaw Native American. Her parents, Grandma and Grandpa Hankins, lived on a twenty-acre truck farm in a four-room house with a kitchen, a living room, and two bedrooms. The old woodstove in the kitchen provided the only heat source in the house. I remember Grandpa Hankins didn't have a car; his horse and wagon provided their transportation.

Mama enjoyed being near her parents, so every other summer she would pack us up and take us to the farm. We would grow a big garden, can lots of vegetables and fruits, and often attend Sunday School and church. We loved milking cows, churning butter, and snatching fresh eggs from under the hens.

AN UNFORGETTABLE CHRISTMAS



Left to right: Mother Laura, Dorothy, Kenneth, Donald, and Billie

Grandma, bless her soul, dipped snuff—a polite way of saying she chewed tobacco. In my mind's eye, I can still see the coffee cans in every corner of the living room—and her incredible aim as she spit tobacco juice and saliva across the room. I never once saw her miss a can!

I wasn't born yet when my paternal grandmother died, but I do remember Grandpa Larkin Cox. He was German and Irish, and he was a mean man! He evidently made a lot of enemies, too, because he plowed his fields with a cigar box containing his revolver strapped between the plow handles. My dad told me that when he was a young lad, his father offered him fifty cents if he could pick a certain number of pounds of cotton in one day. After working feverishly, without a break all day, he finally met his goal and proudly accepted the prize money. But the next morning, his father told him that he dared not pick one pound less from that day on—with no reward, of course.

Mama told me many years later that when I was a tiny two-year-old, my crying upset Grandpa so much he walked into the room and slapped me clean off my high chair onto the floor!

Mama's recovery

Billie had been bossing us around all morning, no doubt wondering how she'd gotten stuck with all that responsibility, when Dad's '34 Plymouth pulled up out front. We all rushed to the window. Mama was back from the hospital!

My brother thought Mama looked bad, but Billie made sure he understood he was only to compliment her. Her head was covered with bandages, and her face looked puffy, but as soon as she was in the door, we crowded around her, full of questions.

No, her head wasn't hurting like it used to, but it still hurt some because of the surgery.

Yes, they'd shaved her head, but a little stubble was already growing back.

"It's really good to be home and to see every one of you, but I'm so tired!" she said. "Do you mind if I go to bed for a while?"

Dad and Billie helped her to the bedroom, and when they came out, Dad closed the door behind him. He looked serious, and in his stern way, he explained how we'd have to play quietly for the next few days.

"All of you must be nurses to help your mother get well," he said. "I'm heading back to work in the morning, and Billie's in charge when I'm gone. And you'd better do whatever she says, or I'll take care of you when I get home at night! Understand?"

We nodded solemnly, and although we didn't like Billie bossing us around, we fully understood the consequences of not obeying Dad!

Mama's recovery was far more rapid than expected, and Billie wasn't nearly as bossy as we'd feared.