

Chapter 1

Cindi Trahan rolled over in bed and squinted at the numbers illuminated on the dial of the alarm clock on her husband Marc's nightstand. It was only five in the morning. She knew there would be no more sleep that night and groaned. Wearily she pushed herself out of bed. She wrapped a worn flannel robe over her nightgown and rubbed her arms. The temperature had dropped again.

Moving soundlessly down the hall, she paused at her daughter Esther's room and opened the door. In the sudden glare of the light she saw the child sprawled face down, arms akimbo, legs tucked up beneath her in almost a kneeling position. Her flushed face was squashed up against the side-rails that Marc insisted she continue to use, even though Esther had argued that they were for babies.

Cindi couldn't help seeing Esther as a baby still. It was hard to believe they had adopted her nearly six years before. It seemed as though she had always been part of their lives. Cindi laid another blanket over the child and crept out of the room.

In the kitchen she filled the tea kettle with water. While it heated she went to the china cupboard to choose a pretty teacup to drink from. It was part of her early morning ritual. She settled on one with a Blue Willow pattern and returned to the stove, where she spooned loose tea leaves into the silver strainer, inhaling deeply the fragrance of tropical flowers. Splurging on handpicked and blended herbal teas was one of her necessary luxuries. As she put the tea canister back on the shelf the kettle broke into an agonized whistle. Cindi removed it from the stove and carefully poured boiling water into her cup.

With the steaming cup of tea she made her way into the living room and sat down at the computer. Its bright screen lit up the dark room, and Cindi needed no other illumination as she logged on to the Internet. As she watched, her email Inbox flooded with messages. Carefully she scrolled through them, cutting and pasting key parts of the body text into one giant email she called A Wing and a Prayer. This master email she sent once a week to a list of people who had agreed to pray for each other's concerns.

Cindi smiled as she remembered how this system had worked when Ethel Bennington, one of her former home-nursing patients, had been alive. The phone had jumped all day as people phoned in prayer requests. Cindi would write them all in a notebook, and Ethel faithfully prayed for each one.

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After Ethel died, it fell to Cindi to carry on Ethel's prayer chain. And so she had. Wouldn't Ethel be surprised, Cindi thought, if she could see the changes modern technology has made? With the click of a mouse the prayer requests could be sent to hundreds of people who subscribed to A Wing and a Prayer.

Cindi had often asked herself what Ethel might have thought of such an idea. Would she scorn it as impersonal? Or would she praise it for being practical and easy? Most of the time the answer came in the remembered voice of her former patient, heard clearly in her head. "What matters most to God is that we hold each other up in prayer often and in earnest." Yes, that's what Ethel would say, Cindi thought.

Cindi cleaned up her Inbox and saved the draft of her mass email. The next day she would enter any final requests and then send it out. Before logging off she printed a copy of the email to use during her own prayer time. She brought up the Disconnect box, but before she could click on it, an instant message appeared on her screen. She frowned and opened the dialog box.

"Are you there?" it read. The sender's screen name was Rainman. That was Jared Flynn's screen name. She had been corresponding with Jared after he joined the email list requesting prayers for his wife, who had cancer. The list members prayed for her for six months. She had died, and this was the first time in the two months since that Jared had contacted her.

"Yes," she typed. "How are you?"

She hit Send and waited. There was a long pause.

"I've been better, but I can't remember when. It must have been a long time ago. Can't eat. Can't sleep."

Cindi began a reply asking him if he'd like to have the list members pray for anything specific. Before she could send it the screen flashed again.

"I lost my job."

"What do you want us to pray for specifically?" she asked, concentrating on the keys. She stared at the screen, waiting for a reply.

"Me." It was so pitiful; she felt a rush of sympathy.

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked.

"I'd like for someone to listen."

"I can do that."

Cindi waited for a reply, but none came. She assumed he was typing a long response, but the wait stretched on, and he sent no reply.

"Jared?" she typed, "are you there?"

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Nothing. She waited a while longer in case he had lost his connection and needed to log on again. Her fingers drummed impatiently. After a minute she gave up and logged off. Her tea was cold. She prayed silently for the faceless man out there named Jared, who had lost his wife and now appeared to be losing the rest of his life.

Their light was so bright that had Cindi Trahan been able to see it, she would have gone blind instantly. Though the angels filling the room around her were as real as she was, she could not see them. They spoke to her, and she heard their words as thought suggestions, which she was free to heed or ignore. By making sentient beings, the Creator had given human beings the power to choose between good and evil, right and wrong.

Shania, their leader, stood a bit taller than the rest. Cindi was her particular charge. She had noticed through the years that whenever her charges spent time with the Master and tried to follow Him, they heard her voice much more clearly, and their choices were in keeping with the Masters holy will. When they neglected the Master, the voices of the fallen angels competed more easily with the holy angels, and a human being was likely to go either way.

The fallen angels were not given much quarter in Cindi Trahan's home. She neither listened to them nor followed them, and their voices were weak in her ears. Still, they congregated as close as they dared. This woman was an odious and dangerous adversary. She had picked up the ministry of the great Prayer Warrior, Ethel Bennington. Their leader, Sparn, was under direct orders from Prince Satan to bring her down. Besides the general havoc she wreaked with her prayers, the powerful prayer cover of Cindi and the diligent people on her prayer list sustained the Operation C.A.R.E. mission outpost run by her brother, Don Germaine. And the demons wanted to destroy the mission. At any cost.

Since they were not able to work through Cindi directly, the demons employed whomever else happened to be handy and easily influenced. Sparn had tried for months to find a chink in Cindi's armor but had come up empty-handed until now. Ogel, a demon with very little to recommend him besides his relentless persistence, had come to him with a plan, and this morning, as he observed, he was delighted to see that it might work.

Ogel had been cavorting with this particular contingent of demons because his charge, Jared, was communicating with Cindi. After Jared's wife died, Ogel had been unceasing in his efforts to take down the man

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whose grief had placed him in a precarious position emotionally. There were all manner of inappropriate responses Jared's grief could take. Ogel decided to concentrate on one. That very morning he had convinced Jared to contact Cindi. Sparn thought the move was pure genius, but he didn't tell Ogel.

So far, it was all very innocent, to be sure. But using Jared's weakened state, Ogel hoped to persuade him that he had more than a friendly interest in Cindi. He hoped Jared might discover that in Cindi he could find solace. After all, the Master had given human beings many wonderful blessings, and all it took for a blessing to become a curse was to convince them to enjoy it the wrong way. Sometimes that was an easy thing. Or maybe it just looked easy.

No sooner did he have Jared connecting with Cindi than that troublemaker, Kaskai, Jared's guardian angel, severed the connection. Cindi had given up on him and was now making breakfast for her family. But Ogel was nothing if not persistent. He would wait for his chance.

"Keep it up," Sparn urged. "You will succeed, and when you do, the prayer link to the mission outpost will be severed, and it will finally die as we have intended all along. Your victory will be my victory. See that you report only to me." Ogel nodded, glad, finally, to be appreciated in his work and puffed up with a sense of his own importance.

Cindi made some banana French toast and put on a fresh kettle of water for more tea. Marc liked a hot mug of apple spice in the morning, and Esther liked peppermint. She called it candy-cane tea. Marc came down the stairs while she was slicing fruit into a bowl for fruit salad.

"Morning," she said cheerfully.

Marc grunted. He was not a morning person. He slumped into a chair at the table, and she brought him a mug of tea that he alternately blew on and sipped gingerly. She knew it was no use talking to him until after breakfast.

Esther appeared at the bottom of the stairs, rubbing her eyes and yawning. "Can I get up?" She asked this every morning, and Cindi always had the same answer.

"Aren't you already up?" Esther smiled at the old joke and sat down at the table.

"Are those banana or plain?" she asked, indicating the French toast.

"Banana."

"Yum! I'll have two, please."

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Cindi was often amazed at the food the small girl packed away. Yet she was willowy and tall, like her mother, Julia Vargas. Julia and Ray, Esther's biological parents, had visited the Trahans on their last visit home from the mission field. They had come to see Esther, who knew them as Uncle Ray and Aunt Julia. When she was old enough to understand she would be put in the picture and informed of her paternity. Until then, Cindi was happy with the way things had gone since the adoption when Esther was born.

Ray and Julia had been as involved as any loving aunt or uncle could be, and not the least bit possessive. They never regretted their decision to give up Esther for adoption. Russell Duffy - Julia's father and Esther's biological grandfather - was a loving, supportive presence in Esther's life as well as a dandy last-minute babysitter. All in all, she felt satisfied that they had made the relationships work, and a difficult situation had turned into a blessing for all concerned.

"Oh, by the way, I forgot to tell you, your brother Don called the other day and left a message," Marc said, scraping the last of his French toast from the plate.

"When did he call?" Cindi fought down a twinge of irritation. It was just like Marc to take a message and forget to relay it.

Marc shrugged and looked at his watch. "A couple days ago maybe."

"Well, did he say what he wanted?"

"Nope. Just said he'd call back again and catch you some other time when you weren't on the computer." Marc pushed back the chair and headed up the stairs. Cindi didn't bother to follow him. His brain was already halfway to work. He always woke up the same way. One minute he was meandering out of dreamland, the next he was charging along, full speed ahead, torpedoes at the ready.

Cindi checked the kitchen clock. Not quite seven yet. Would Don be awake this early? She debated with herself for a few minutes, wondering if it was important enough to wake him if he wasn't up. Finally she laughed at herself. If it was important, he would have called back.

He definitely would have called back.

Don Germaine stepped out of his apartment into a brick wall of heat. It wasn't even 7:00 a.m. yet and already the temperature had to be in the nineties. That was New Orleans. He would be drenched with sweat before he made it to the end of his short driveway to get the

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newspaper from the box. At least, that was his excuse for ambling into the heat at such an early hour. More than the news, he wanted to know if Shay Okeke and her children, Marcus and Madina, were up yet. He'd already been up for hours, and he was starved.

They had a nice little arrangement, he thought. Shay's father had left her ownership of a duplex when he died, and since her return to the States she had occupied one side of it. After the accident that claimed the life of Shay's unborn baby, Don had lived in the duplex and cared for the other two children until she returned from the hospital. When Shay came home he took a hotel room nearby so he could be close by to help out. He hadn't been there for long when the couple that rented the other half of the duplex moved into the house they had been building. Don settled into the vacated side of the duplex and had been there ever since.

Living right next door to Shay and the children gave Don an odd feeling sometimes. It was like playing at having a family. During the day he helped out around the house, sometimes watched the children so Shay could run errands, and occasionally did odd jobs or conferred with the staff at Operation C.A.R.E., the mission he was in charge of just outside of Niamey in Niger, Africa. He kept close tabs on the mission, from which he was officially on temporary leave, and participated in making decisions that affected it. For a while that had been enough. Lately, though, he had begun to feel restless.

Shortly after the accident, Shay had made the decision to return to the mission in Africa with her children, and Don had assumed that the entire process of moving would take about a month, maybe less. A little more than a year had passed since she'd decided, and things were still not settled. At times he felt it might be better if he went on ahead of Shay and the children and let them follow when they were ready. But, no sooner did he think so than he tried to imagine life without them and couldn't bear the thought. It seemed he had lived his whole life for this time and these people. So much of what he had been looking for he had found in the simple life of a family. And they weren't even his family. Not yet.

"Hey! Good morning! You coming over for breakfast?"

Don saw Shay's arm poking out of a window, waving at him. He waved back and threw her a kiss. "I'll be right over."

"Good, because we're having scrambled eggs, and you're cooking."

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He laughed. At the rate Shay cooked he really should have the kitchen paraphernalia moved over to his side of the duplex, he thought. "I'll be right there."

To outsiders they must have seemed a strange assortment of individuals, if they were grouped together. Don's skin was as "white as paste," Shay was fond of saying when she felt like teasing him. Hers was the color of milk chocolate, her mother having been mulatto and her father white. The children, both of whom she had adopted, were as dark as coffee beans. It just went to show you, Don often thought, that skin color does not a family make. In fact, their little multiracial group reminded him of the inclusiveness of God's family. Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in His sight.

Marcus, the eldest, was nearly seventeen. When Don opened the door and stepped with relief into the air-conditioning of Shay's half of the duplex, Marcus was hunched over a schoolbook, looking up now and then to scribble industriously in a notebook. "He forgot to do his homework last night," Shay explained when she saw Don glance at Marcus.

"I did my homework," five-year-old Madina said, tugging on Don's sleeve. "Want to see? Look, I made all my letters and my numbers, and I even read a story to Mommy."

Don looked over the papers and made positive sounds while trying to catch Shay's arm and plant a kiss on her cheek. She was packing lunches and danced away from him playfully. "None of that before breakfast," she teased. "Come on, we're famished. Work your magic at the stove and feed us."

"I'll help," Madina volunteered. It was a good thing one female in the house wasn't afraid of the kitchen, Don thought with some amusement.

"Sure, Peanut, you can help." He got out the mixing bowl and handed her the eggs one at a time. With extreme seriousness she cracked each one on the edge and then fished out the shells, which invariably ended up in the bowl right along with the eggs. "Good job," Don said. "Now it's my turn. I'll whisk them. You watch, OK?"

Soon the eggs were cooking as Madina looked on with considerable pride of accomplishment. She wielded the spatula like a scepter and beamed at Don with pleasure. He smiled back. Her big brown eyes were nearly black, and they sparkled. Her forehead was broad, and her features, though she was only five, were sharp and angular. Good bone

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structure, Don thought. She seemed wise beyond her years and had always displayed an almost shocking maturity for a child.

Though he hardly ever thought about it, for some reason this day he had a clear picture of the day she was born. He could clearly recall the filthy hut where her mother had lain, her life's blood draining away. He remembered her desperate grip on his hand, her eyes burning with only one desire, to bring her child into the world as she exited. He and a mission nurse, Toby O'Connell, had struggled valiantly to fight off death, but in the end they had only succeeded in delaying it. The mother had died, leaving Madina, the squalling baby daughter. And she was unwanted by her father, Bossou. Unwanted by everyone except Shay.

"Look, Daddy." Madina broke into his thoughts and then stopped, looking uncertain. She glanced from him to Shay and back again. It was an awkward moment, but it wasn't the first time she had called him Daddy.

"What, Peanut?" Don asked smoothly, trying to distract her attention from the embarrassing moment while at the same time deciding with determination that he had waited a decent length of time to propose marriage by anyone's standards. Shay's children were starting to think of him as a father figure. Her husband, Nwibe, had been dead for more than a year. Don had waited long enough for propriety's sake to ask her to marry him now, he thought. Surely she wanted that. He was over here making scrambled eggs, wasn't he? Surely it was high time to get married and make them a legal family.

His heart skipped a beat as he sneaked a glance at Shay, but her face was unreadable, buried in his newspaper. Maybe she had missed the whole exchange. Still, he felt strongly that it was time and decided that he would talk to her as soon as Marcus left for school and Madina was occupied with Sesame Street.

"I think they're burning," Madina said, wrinkling her nose and waving the spatula over the eggs.

"Whoops, I think you're right," Don said, snatching the skillet from the stove and dumping the eggs out into a serving bowl. "Breakfast," he announced cheerfully.

"Great! I'm starved!" Shay put the paper aside and gave him a bright smile. Sniffing suspiciously, she heaped eggs onto her plate but said nothing about the scorched parts. "Great job, Muppet," she praised Madina.

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Don busied himself making toast, but his mind was jumping ahead to the conversation he planned to have with Shay. “Shay” he would say, “you stop my heart. I’ve never known anyone like you. You complete me.” No, too corny, and it probably only worked in the movies anyway. No, better to go with something practical. “Shay, we’ve been seeing each other for close to a year now, and I think it’s time we got married, shared expenses, and gave the children a solid family.” No, no, that was a bit too practical. Women like romance, after all, especially in a marriage proposal.

He carried the toast to the table and absent-mindedly placed a basket of potatoes next to them. “Don?”

“Yeah?”

“What are the potatoes for?”

He stared at the table, but it took a few seconds to register. “Oh, sorry, I meant to put out oranges.” He knew she was snickering at him, but he didn’t look at her. He could not believe how nervous he was all of a sudden. He couldn’t remember the last time he felt so nervous.

Marcus slammed his book shut and jumped up from the table. “I’d better get going or I’ll miss the bus.”

Don saw the last bastion between him and bachelorhood disappearing, and he grabbed Marcus’s hand like a drowning man. “I’ll drive you.”

They stared at him.

“No, that’s OK.” Marcus disengaged his arm gently. “Really, I like to ride the bus.”

“But you haven’t eaten.” Don was desperate.

“I’m not hungry.” Marcus gave his mother a quick kiss, and then he was gone. Madina meandered through her breakfast, picking at everything like a little bird. Shay ate methodically, looking at Don thoughtfully now and then as if she was wondering if perhaps he had contracted some sort of brain fever. Don ate woodenly, not even tasting the food.

This is stupid, he berated himself. I love this woman. I love these kids. We’re practically a family now, and I love it. He felt like a bride getting cold feet seconds before beginning her walk down the aisle. He knew his fears were unreasonable. Change had always frightened him. “God,” he prayed, “I want what You want for my life, really, I do. But let me tell You what I want. I know this isn’t news to You, but I want to marry this woman. If she is Your plan for my life, give me some backbone here. Cast out these fears of mine. They have no place in my

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heart. Fill it with love for Shay and the children so that its overflowing. They deserve that much and more. Thanks, amen.”

Merck had been having a rough day. Rough century really. He hadn't properly enjoyed himself since Don Germaine had realized God was not to blame in the tragedies he'd lived through in Rwanda as the doctor of a mission there. For Merck, the only bright spot in his recent past had been the brief period when Don was so sick with an infectious disease in Rwanda that he nearly died. It was a miracle that he had lived. Merck cursed his rotten luck.

The entire year he'd been stuck in the United States watching Don get doopey and lovesick was so disgusting that Merck could hardly see the point in getting up each day. Clearly, he was of no use until the lovesickness wore off and reality set in, so the few brief moments when Don began to question himself, his dedication, and his love for Shay had been the most sublime Merck had felt for, literally, ages.

At the start of Don's prayer Merck had shaken him hard. “What do you think you're doing?” he hissed. “You are right. Marriage would limit your freedom. These kids would limit your freedom. Keep things as they are. Better yet, break it off for awhile. Explore other options. After all, you've been so tied down here for so long you really don't know what... who... is out there. You're young. OK - well, not a spring chicken maybe, but you've got lots of years ahead of you. Why saddle yourself with this lot?”

“And look at that woman! She's a girl, really. She's too young for you. Sure, she doesn't mind the difference in your ages right now, but she will. You'll be old and gray soon enough, and then she'll be embarrassed to be seen with you. Maybe she'll even leave you for a younger man someday. Who knows? In this day and age anything could happen.

“And what makes you think she really loves you anyway? You're convenient, that's what you are. You cook; you run errands. You're like a glorified, unpaid babysitter. Yeah, that's what you are. She doesn't love you. Has she said as much? Even once? OK, the time you guys sat in lawn chairs and watched the stars does not count. She was just feeling sentimental. She hasn't said it since, has she? Has she?”

Don was looking miserable, and Merck knew he was getting through at least a little. Julian moved in and placed an arm around his charge's shoulders. “Be not afraid, neither be discouraged nor disheartened. You know this woman; your heart knows her. She would not trifle with your affections. To her they are rock solid, and she relies

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on you. She trusts you not to break her heart and to take your relationship to the next level when you are ready. Her heart is tender and her spirit fragile. Do not hurt her with indecision or distance. Love is not a passing feeling; it is a conscious decision.”

Don’s shoulders straightened a little. Determination lit his eyes, and he almost smiled. He cleared his throat, and Shay looked up at him expectantly. “Madina? Isn’t it time for Big Bird?”

“And Elmo!” squealed Madina. She put down the fork and spoon she had been playing with and ran into the living room. Soon Don heard the familiar strains of the Sesame Street song. He cleared his throat again.

“Well?” Shay had an amused look on her face.

“Well, what?” He knew he sounded defensive, but he wanted to do this right.

“You’ve been twitching like you have a rash or something. What’s on your mind? Out with it. I’m sure you’ll feel much better. Go ahead. I’m listening.”

Don groaned inwardly. What a way to start a marriage proposal. A rash... really, the woman had no shame. “I haven’t got a rash,” he declared.

“So, what have you got? Have you heard something about the mission you don’t want to tell me?” She looked suddenly sober. “Is that it?”

“No, I haven’t heard anything out of the ordinary. It’s just that, well, I was wondering, that is, I think maybe it’s time that you, I mean, we, were, you know, married.” There, he’d said it. He winced. What a way to say it. He inhaled deeply and got down on one knee, ignoring the stricken look on her face.

“Shay Judalon Beauregard Okeke, I love you with all my heart. Would you do me the great honor of agreeing to become my wife?”

His knee was beginning to throb before she finally gave a strangled cry and threw herself into his arms. Don really did wonder if perhaps he hadn’t given the gap in their ages quite enough consideration as his knees protested at the strain and he toppled over onto the kitchen floor, Shay on top of him, hugging him and kissing his face over and over.

“I love you, you crazy man! What took you so long? I thought you were never going to ask me.”

“Shay?”

“Yes, darling?”

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"I think I've sprained my knee."

"What are you two doing down there?" Madina's voice asked. "Can I play too?" She stood looking down at them, puzzled.

Shay rolled off, still laughing, and helped Don get to his feet. He rubbed his knee ruefully. "You OK?" she asked.

"Yeah, nothing hurt but my pride, I guess. You sure you want to marry someone as old and decrepit as I am?"

"You're only as old as you feel. Besides, who says I'm not marrying you for your money?"

Don laughed out loud. "I should have known you'd have your eyes set on the fifty-three bucks I've managed to stash in my savings account. I demand a prenuptial agreement."

"Oh, pooh, you can keep your money," Shay teased. "Just give me all your love and I'll be happy forever."

"You're easy to please."

"Are you done wrestling? 'Cause I want to play."

"Madina," Shay said, pulling the little girl into her arms. "How would you like to have a new daddy?"

"No." The little girl set her mouth in a stubborn line. "I don't want a new daddy. I want him." She pointed a chubby finger at Don's chest. "I want him to be my daddy."

Shay drilled her finger into Madina's tummy, and the little girl squealed with delight. "He's the one I had in mind too. I think I'll marry him. What do you think?"

"Yea!"

Later, over iced tea, Don said it. "What do you think about going back?" He didn't even mean to, but the words just popped out of his mouth.

They both knew he meant going back to the mission in Niger. Shay didn't answer for a moment. "You haven't changed your mind, have you?" It was something he'd considered but not for very long. She had always seemed to want to be there. He thought she felt the same way he did about the place.

"No," she said quietly. Then with a resigned sigh she said, "No, I haven't changed my mind. I have so many great memories of Africa. But then I have so many horrible ones too. It's just something I'll have to get over, I guess. I've really been fighting it. I want to go back, but I'm scared at the same time."

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“You don’t have to be scared.” Don took her hand and found her fingers cold. “Don’t you think it will be different now? We’ll be married. Won’t things seem different to you?”

She shrugged a shoulder. “I hope so, because I know how much it means to you... and to the children too. I had such dreams when I went there. It almost seems a lifetime away. I feel... older, much older.”

“Oh, you are older. I saw a gray hair on your head the other day.”

She socked him in the arm, and he pretended to fall over. “I guess what I’m really afraid of is burning all my bridges, you know? What if we sell everything here, move back, and I hate it? What if I can’t cut it over there anymore? We’d be stuck there, or we’d have to completely start over if we came back.”

He thought it over for a minute and then said, “I think we ought to pray about this. Clearly you’re not committed to the idea. But I am committed to you. Let’s pray about it and see what God has to say, shall we?”

He was rewarded by one of her dazzling smiles. “You first.”

Don took her hands and bowed his head. “Lord, thank You first for Shay. Thank You for her tender heart and her love. Help me to deserve her love. I will be grateful to You every day for her. We want to know Your will. Show us, Lord. Should we stay here or go back to Africa? We trust You to show us Your heart on this matter. And if You should want us to go back we ask You to remove the fear that Shay has about leaving. Please help the children to accept whatever decision we make. In the name of Jesus who saves us. Amen.”

When Shay looked up there were tears in her eyes. “I love you,” she said.

“I love you back.”

Billie Jo Raynard stood in nearly the exact middle of her home with a mop in one hand and a bucket of dirty water in the other. From where she stood it was possible to survey a good amount of her house and admire the work she’d just accomplished. The floors shone and the whole house smelled of pine. She breathed deeply and enjoyed the feeling of cleanliness and accomplishment. Too bad there was no one to see it before it got dirty again, she mused ruefully.

She had just emptied the bucket and stowed it with the mop in the hall closet when a sharp rap on the door startled her. A glance at her

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watch confirmed that the children wouldn't be home from school for another hour. Who could be at the door?

She peered through the living-room window to see who was on the front step before opening the door and was surprised at the sight of her mother-in-law's car in the driveway. What was Helen doing there? It was unlike her to drop by for an unscheduled visit. She wasn't the type to socialize without a reason. Warily, Billie Jo opened the door.

"Why, Helen, what a nice surprise," she said, hoping her voice sounded sincere. A surprise it was; it was anything but nice.

Helen sniffed haughtily. "Are you going to let me in?"

Billie Jo stepped aside and hid a smile behind her hand. She pretended to tuck a loose hair behind her ear. She tried to smile but knew it looked as phony as it felt. Relations had never been good with her mother-in-law, but it seemed that lately they had taken a turn for the worse.

"What brings you here?" Billie Jo finally asked.

Helen stared at her blankly. "That's what I'd like to know."

Taken aback, Billie Jo blinked rapidly, hunting in her memory, trying to remember if she'd invited Helen and then forgotten. She came up with nothing and stood there feeling stupid, with her mouth hanging slackly as she tried to think of something to say. Before she had the chance, the door opened again and her husband, Jimmy, bounded into the house.

He gave his mother a peck on the cheek and slipped his arm around his wife's waist. Billie Jo wasn't a tall woman, and she stood up straighter to fit into her husband's awkward embrace. "Sorry I'm late, girls," Jimmy said with a radiant smile it was hard not to catch.

"Jimmy, what, I don't understand..." Billie Jo felt as though she'd stepped into her own personal Twilight Zone. "What's goin' on?"

"For once, I agree," Helen said. "I don't understand either. Why did you ask me to meet you here? Please clear up this mystery at once. I don't like wasting my time in this fashion."

Jimmy grinned from one to the other. "I got some great news."

Billie Jo's eyes flicked from Jimmy's face to Helen's. Great news for whom? Suddenly her mouth felt dry and her palms wet. She had a vague idea it was supposed to be the other way around. "Jimmy," she pleaded. Something dreadful was about to happen, she just knew it.

"I got me a new job," Jimmy supplied finally. "I got me a great new job."

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Nog, who had grown perhaps not wiser, but more tenacious as time passed, hadn't been handed an opportunity like this for quite some time. He could hardly restrain himself. He wanted to see the fireworks, but at the same time he was enjoying the suspense. "He got a job! That's not all he got. Wait till you hear this one! You're going to love it!"

"Is that all?" asked Helen. Relief suffused her face. "Well, it's about time. Those imbeciles down at that plant you work at didn't know what they had in you. Now they do. It took them long enough. Congratulations, Jimmy, but you could have just phoned." Helen made a move as if she intended to leave, but Jimmy grabbed her arm.

"Mom, that's not all." He beamed. "You ain't asked me what the job was."

Helen's face arranged itself into patient lines as though she was dealing with a particularly tedious child. "What is the new job, Jimmy?"

"I'm going to be a partner in a carpentry business."

Helen and Billie Jo stared at him. He worked for a company that made canning jars. He had worked there for several years, since the logging accident that nearly claimed his life.

"Wha - "

"Where?" Helen guessed the truth first. "Where is it?" Her voice was very, very cold.

"In Vermont," Jimmy answered. For the first time since he'd entered the house Billie Jo saw the insecurity creep into his eyes. His show of bravado faltered. "I got this friend, Zeb Turner, you remember Zeb Turner? We was school buddies way back. His wife's got relatives in Vermont, and he moved up there. We kept in touch, you know, Christmas cards and the like, but the other day I ran into his ma at the plant. She works there now. She said he had his own carpentry business in Vermont and being there was a building boom going on, he needed help.

"Well, today Zeb called me up at work and offered me the partnership. Said it would be just like old times and was real glad I took him up on his offer. Seems he's been in a bad way up there, not being able to get any good help. He wants me to start as soon as possible."

"Isn't that a corker?" Nog cried jubilantly. "Moving!" To Billie Jo he said, "You're moving, and your husband never even told you!" Then he turned to Helen. "Give it to him! Let him have it!"

Helen's face had lost all color. "Vermont? Do you know where that is, Jimmy?"

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Jimmy topped six feet by several inches, but under his mother's scornful gaze he wilted into a shame-faced little boy. "Up north, I guess."

"That's right. Up north. Way up north. Do you know how cold it gets in Vermont in the winter? It's nothing but mountains on top of more mountains... that's why they call it the Green Mountain State. Why, they have more cows than people in Vermont! Now, you just call Zeb back and tell him thank you, but no thank you. You have a fine job where you are and plenty of security. Eventually you'll even have a pension and you'll be able to retire comfortably." Helen reached out her hand and took hold of the doorknob.

"I'm going to work with Zeb." The way Jimmy said it left little doubt about what he was going to do. "That is..." he shot Billie Jo a glance that was half supplication and half defiance. "That is, unless you don't like the idea, darlin'."

Billie Jo struggled against the feeling that none of this was real. Moving and all that it meant was more than her brain could comprehend on such short notice. Two implications shouted at her. The first was that finally Helen would be forced to recede to the background of their marriage. For the first time in their married lives they would be completely on their own. The second was that everything she knew and loved, everything familiar would be left behind. Billie Jo would not have been one of the pioneers, of that she was certain. But still, there existed in her being a streak of adventurousness. Ignoring the status-quo part of her nature, she listened to the adventure-seeking side and grinned at her husband.

"Tell him you think it's a lousy idea!" Nog urged. "No, no, don't smile. It's a terrible idea. What about your kids? You'll have to rip them out of school, away from their friends. What about you? What about your friends? What about this place? This house? Jimmy built this house. You've lived in this area all your life. You don't want to drag your family across the country. Even to get away from her." He jerked his head toward Helen. "I know she's a pain, but admit it. You wouldn't have moved to get away from her. Why would you do it now just because he wants to?"

"I think it's a great idea." Although she said it with as much enthusiasm as she could muster, she knew it would take some time before she could really get behind those words. Panicked thoughts were going through her head, and fear clutched at her heart, but she didn't own up to them.

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Helen looked capable of murder. Glaring at her son, she began to shriek insanely while waving her fists at him. "If you think for one minute I'm going to let you move up to that god-forsaken wilderness with my only two grandchildren you are sadly mistaken. I'll talk to your father. We'll write you out of our will. You won't get a penny! I mean it!"

Billie Jo was trembling with nerves by the time Helen left, slamming the door behind her. She sat with Jimmy on the couch while he apologized for springing the news on her. "I guess I got so excited about it myself I forgot not everyone would be happy about it." He stared thoughtfully at the ceiling for a minute. "You know, when Zeb called me and we talked about that job, I wanted it so much I never even stopped to think about what you might want. I guess I'd like to know now."

Billie Jo smiled. "Well, it sure was some shock. But I like the idea. I don't have nothing against moving, I guess. The kids will be some disappointed about leaving their friends... come to think on it, so will I. But there are new friends. The important thing, I think, is that you'll be doing something you love. I know you ain't been happy at that canning factory. It was good, steady money, and I'm proud you stuck it out. This doesn't sound all that risky to me. But there was something I was wondering."

"What's that?" Jimmy stroked her hair.

"Where we gonna live?"

"Well, now, that's the interestin' part," Jimmy said, lighting up from inside. "Zeb knows this great old fixer-upper he said we can get for a song. The bank is foreclosing and selling it for whatever they can get out of it."

"You mean we're gonna buy a house we ain't never seen?" Billie Jo was incredulous. She couldn't have been more surprised if he had said they were going to live on the moon. "What if we hate it? How much fixin' up are we gonna have to do anyway? When are you gonna have time to fix up the house if you're working all day?"

"What did I tell you? He has no idea what he's doing. This idea is crazy." Nog ranted until he was foaming at the mouth. "He's not thinking ahead, planning with the security of his family in mind. He's jumping in head first with no thought for the future. He doesn't care about you and the children. All he cares about is himself and what's best for him."

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Jimmy held up his hands to fend off her questions. "Relax, darlin'! Zeb emailed me a picture of the house." He fished in his pocket and pulled out a blurry photo printed on computer paper. All Billie Jo could make out was that the house had two stories and was built in the Victorian style with a wrap-around porch and gingerbread detail work, most of which appeared to be there. If it was half as nice as the picture it would be breathtaking, a much nicer house than she had ever expected to live in. A mansion, almost.

"It's pretty," she said hesitantly. "What kind of fixin' does it need?"

"Zeb said it's mainly cosmetic. Want to know the really good part? He thinks we can get this for about \$50,000. Can you believe that? We'll actually have some money left over after we sell this place."

Billie Jo was afraid to let herself hope that there was a possibility they might have some real savings. They knew people who claimed to live from hand-to-mouth, but for as long as she could remember her family had always lived that way quite literally. Jimmy cashed his check on the way home from work on payday, and when he got home and handed it over she went out immediately to buy groceries. Whatever was left was split up among the many bills that always seemed to be on hand. Frequently someone had to wait to be paid. Occasionally they even received threats to cut off service, and on rare occasions those threats were carried out. Billie Jo could think of times in the past couple of years when she'd had to do without basic necessities like a telephone and once, during the winter, no electricity for a week, because they hadn't had the money to pay their bill.

Just the thought of having several thousand dollars in the bank to "fall back on" was so tempting, she wanted to pack up that very minute. "You really think we'll have money left over?" she asked skeptically.

"You do the math. If we can get the house for \$50,000 and we sell ours for \$80,000, which is what the town appraised it for, shouldn't we have \$30,000 left over? Wouldn't that be a chunk of change?" Jimmy asked dreamily.

"How soon will we have to leave?" Billie Jo asked. She expected the answer to come in terms of months. "Two weeks."

"Do what? We can't move in two weeks! We'd be pushing it to be out of here in two months!"

"Be that as it may," Jimmy said, unconsciously copying a favorite saying of his father's, "I put in my notice today, and Zeb expects me on the job two weeks from Monday."

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"I'd better start packing then," Billie Jo said dully. As stress squeezed her from every side she realized there was no way she was going to be able to do this alone.

"You need never be alone," Jewel said. The angel supported her through the news but had not been given the opportunity for input. He moved in quickly when he saw a chance to encourage and strengthen Billie Jo. "The Master will walk every step of this way with you. He longs to love you lavishly. Don't settle for seconds... ask Him for everything you need."

"Everything you need except what you really want," Nog sneered. "You won't get stability by tearing your family out by the roots and flinging them up north. No good will come of this. Mark my words. You'll see."

Billie Jo's spiritual "ears" were closely attuned to God's voice, and she homed in on what the angel was saying, ignoring the demon.

"Lord," she muttered as she went to the basement to look for packing boxes, "I got no strength for this. Not now. I'm not even used to the idea. I want to do what's best for my family, but I'm so scared. Help me through this. Give me the strength to do what needs to be done so that we can move out in two weeks."

Suddenly an idea came to her. "And if it's Your will, Lord, help our house to sell before we move, 'cause I don't think we can move if our house don't sell." She doubted Jimmy had given that much thought.

Nog crowded close to Billie Jo. "Sure, you may be ditching Helen, but is it really worth it to go live in a house you've never seen, in a place you know nothing about, and, worse, have never wanted to know anything about? Come on, admit it. The only reason you're the least bit excited about the thought of moving is to get away from the old bat. Admit it."

Billie Jo squirmed uncomfortably. She had to admit, the only reason she was excited about moving at all was that she could get away from Helen. Otherwise she would be perfectly content to stay right where she was. Aside from Helen, there was no real reason to move at all. Except for Jimmy's job, of course.

She didn't really envy him, working at a job he didn't like. Lately she'd begun to think about getting a part-time job during the hours when the children were in school. If she made enough money it might give Jimmy the opportunity to look for the kind of work he enjoyed. It was a moot point now, however.

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Two weeks. It didn't seem possible that they would be moved out in two weeks and living in some strange place. As she collected boxes she couldn't help wondering what kind of place Vermont was.