

Chapter 1

Wisconsin Interlude

Kari threw the tattered canvas-sided suitcase onto the bed and yanked at the closure. "This impossible buckle! I can't get it undone," she sobbed. Tears blurred her vision. Blindly, she pawed around the rim of the bag, trying to locate the zipper pull. "I've got to get out of here. Oh please, Lord, help me to open this stupid case!"

As her left hand settled over the zipper pull, Kari sensed the presence of an intruder. She whirled about to face him. "What are you doing in here? Haven't you done enough damage for one lifetime?"

Keith, her third stepfather, snickered and leaned against the doorjamb. "She won't believe you, you know. Her pride won't let her. Sheena needs me far more than she ever needed a daughter." An unlit cigarette hung limp and insolent from his mouth. "Too bad she had to show up when she did. You and me could have had some fun. Of course your religion wouldn't have allowed that, would it?"

Kari backed away from him, her eyes spitting anger. "You stay away from me, do you hear? I'm not some simpering child you can molest at will."

"Ooh," Keith sneered, "the pretty kitten's showing her claws!"

Kari clamped her jaw shut, hurried to her dresser, grabbed a handful of clothing, and tossed it into the open case.

Again Keith sneered. "You gonna run to your do-gooder buddy?"

Kari stuffed another armload of clothing into the case, "You leave Amanda Fisher and her family out of this."

"Hmmp!" Keith snorted, stretching out his arms to effectively bar the doorway. "You'll be back, you know. You can't resist. And I'll be waiting."

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Kari continued packing her belongings until she'd stuffed the last handful of clothing into the case. Then she zipped it closed, grabbed the case by the handle, threw her coat over one arm, and started for the door. "Let me by!" she ordered.

"And what if I don't?" Keith tipped his head to one side and grinned.

Kari shuddered. Keith's uneven, stained, fanglike teeth had always reminded her of a reptile. "Do you really want to find out?" Kari eyed him malevolently.

A voice from the dining room broke the moment of challenge. "Keithy baby, is my good-for-nothing daughter trying to lure you into her bedroom again?" Sheena, her streaked blond hair straggling across her flushed cheek, her eyes watering and bloodshot, staggered to one side, beer can in hand. Sheena flew into a tirade when she spotted Kari in the doorway. "You cheap little tramp, didn't I tell you to get out of my house? Trying to take my man from me! That's what you were doing." Sheena aimed her body in the general direction of the parlor and stumbled forward, arms outstretched to steady herself.

"Is that what that no-account church is teaching you? Them and their so called principles! Teaching a girl to turn against her loving mother? I should report em to the police." Pointing weakly toward Kari, she continued. "And - and the Amanda whats-her-name too."

"Mother," Kari began, watching Sheena cringe at the title of mother, "I am certain that somewhere in the alcohol-deadened recesses of your mind you know what really happened here today."

Keith jumped to attention. "Nothin happened, Sheena baby. Don't let her kid ya'. You know that you're my one and only."

Kari continued, ignoring his protestations. "In times past, when you've thrown me out, I've come crawling back. But now, thanks to Amanda Fisher and to my faith in God, I can stand on my own two feet, which is more than you can say. If

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you ever decide to rid yourself of this - this parasite you call a husband, let me know.”

For a moment, Sheena swayed, her eyes clouding over as if she would fall into a drunken stupor. Keith stepped to Sheena’s side, draped an arm across her shoulders, and sneered. “Well, if you’re going ...”

“Yeah, get out! Get out of my house! And never come back,” Sheena screeched. Furrows of pain filled Kari’s brow for an instant. Then she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and left the apartment.

Mrs. Dumont, the building superintendent’s wife, stood at the base of the stairs, broom in hand, shaking her head sadly. “Goodbye Kari. My Joey and Jeremy will miss you.”

Kari flushed, knowing that the cheerful little round-faced woman had heard every word. “Thanks, Mrs. Dumont. Tell the twins goodbye for me, won’t you?” The woman nodded and attacked a corner of dust under the stairwell with her broom.

Weighted down with emotions too heavy to handle, Kari barely noticed the shabby little shops, the boarded-up store windows, and the graffiti-covered brick walls on her way to Amanda’s apartment. Even knowing that Amanda would happily open her hide-a-bed and her home to Kari, she hated to inconvenience the young widow again. “Maybe it’s time,” Kari thought, “to take Amanda up on that offer to spend the summer in Wisconsin helping her older sister. With the nurses all out on strike, I don’t stand a chance of landing a job right away. Yeah, maybe Wisconsin’s the best bet for me right now. What do you think, Lord?”

Just as Kari had predicted, Amanda swept the young woman into her home, brushing aside all of Kari’s apologies. “I won’t hear any more about it, Kari. You and I are past that stage in our friendship, right? A sister in Christ can do no less.”

Kari’s eyes misted over. “You’re too good to me.”

Amanda laughed and handed Kari a set of sheets and pillowcases. “Ho! I plan to put you to work tonight babysitting the kids. I was wondering what I would do. The agency called

me this morning. They want me to work the graveyard shift again.”

Amanda hustled into the parlor, opening the hide-a-bed and chatting along the way. Kari followed with the bedding. “Is your sister’s offer still open? You know, for someone to help her this summer?”

Amanda’s eyebrows lifted quizzically. “I thought you didn’t want to give farm life a try.”

Kari grinned, shrugging her shoulders. “Maybe I was too hasty.”

Amanda nodded and frowned, hesitating before she spoke. “You’ve been through a lot today. Don’t make a decision until you’ve had enough time to pray about it and be certain God is leading you that way. We could start by praying right now,” Amanda suggested.

Kari agreed, immediately kneeling down beside the extended hide-a-bed. Amanda joined her, and in turn they prayed that Kari would have faith that God would take care of her and that she would learn to forgive her mother and Keith. When they rose from their knees, Kari threw her arms around Amanda’s neck. “Thanks. Thanks for just being here.”

Kari picked up a large pillow and threw it onto the sofa, then stared at the abstract design in the carpet. She knew Amanda was right, but with very little cash and no immediate prospects of employment, and with the ink on her practical nursing license barely dry, Kari also knew that time was not on her side. She eyed her friend. “If the Lord has an alternate plan, I’ll need to know it soon.”

Amanda bent over to tuck in the last corner of the light-weight blanket. “In His good time, Honey, in His good time.”

Three days later Kari’s eyes sparkled with anticipation as she stared out the train window at the scattered lights from farms and villages racing by in the night. She ran her fingers over the broad, green upholstered seats that had seemed so cushiony when she boarded the passenger car earlier in Chicago. Now they felt scratchy and confining.

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For the first time since it happened, the memories of her last few days in Chicago seemed mercifully blurred in her mind. She glanced about the passenger car, empty except for an elderly woman seated to her right and a middle-aged man, disheveled from travel, sitting two rows ahead of her. Kari idly wondered where her traveling companions might be going and what adventures they'd face upon arriving at their destination. "Will their lives change as much as mine?"

"I don't understand myself at all," she mused, her lips talking soundlessly to her reflection in the windowpane. "One minute I'm as anxious as a ten-year-old heading for Lake Michigan on a hot July day; and the next, I feel alone, totally alone, almost like that - that water tower." She stared after the light blinking on the tower silhouetted on the horizon until it disappeared from view, then shook her head and sighed.

An all-too-familiar chill prickled at the nape of Kari's neck. "Can I survive without Amanda's strength, without her unfaltering faith in God, without her wise counsel?" She leaned back against the seat and closed her eyes, finally forcing her mind to transport her south across the rolling farmlands, past the ramshackle, soot-clothed shanties along the tracks, to Chicago's south side and to Amanda Fisher's three room walk-up apartment.

It was there, after receiving months of Amanda's unwarranted compassion, understanding, and love, that Kari caught her first glimpse of Jesus. There, one cold February night in the tiny efficiency kitchen, Kari stood before a sinkful of dirty dishes and came face-to-face with Amanda's Saviour.

Kari's discovery hadn't been due to one encounter, one hymn, or one sermon. It came after months of listening to Amanda share how God had led in her life, even through the death of her minister husband, and observing Amanda's behavior in the very unchristian world of south Chicago. It was Kari's admiration of Amanda's buoyant spirit, as the young woman struggled to maintain a full-time job at the state welfare agency and bring up her two children alone, that finally broke the girl's resistance.

Yet every time Kari attempted to tell Amanda how much she admired her, Amanda recoiled and shook her head vigorously. “Oh no, Kari. Please don’t. Without Jesus I am a weakling. Look to Jesus - He’s who you want to copy.”

The train whistle jarred Kari out of her reverie as they passed through another sleeping Wisconsin town. She slipped her feet from her high-heeled sandals and curled them under her in the double seat. Idly, she massaged her stockinged toes and eased back into her memories.

She’d met Amanda one frigid February night when she wandered into a neighborhood church during a Wednesday night prayer-meeting service. Seventeen years old at the time, Kari had fled from her mother’s drunken tirade, trudging aimlessly through the subzero, snow-cruised streets until she stopped in front of the brightly lighted church.

The building looked so warm and inviting. The sound of four-part harmony drifted out to where she shivered beneath the streetlight. With nothing else to do and no place else to go, Kari climbed the steps to the church and stepped inside.

Tears threatened to melt Kari’s facade midway through Pastor Mason’s sermon on the unfaltering love of God. Dabbing the corners of her eyes with her fingertips, she slipped out of the pew and through the swinging doors to the vestibule, unaware that the gentle-faced woman who earlier had shared a tattered song book with her, followed her.

“Amanda.” Kari thought as the train swayed back and forth over the rails. “Leave it to her to immediately sense when someone needed her special brand of love, and then refuse to take No for an answer.”

Growing up in one of the roughest neighborhoods of Chicago, Kari had never met anyone like the amazing Amanda Fisher. After a bowl of hot stew and a good night’s sleep on Amanda’s hide-a-bed, Kari’s barriers crumbled. From then on, Amanda became Kari’s hero. When Amanda suggested that Kari take the licensed practical nurse course at the local hospital, Kari signed up. So many times during the months that followed, Kari was tempted to quit, but Amanda always

managed to talk her into staying with the program for at least one more quarter.

Sheena, her mother, threw Kari out of the apartment on a recurring basis. Amanda and the children always took Kari in. Then, when Sheena would beg Kari to come back home, she would leave again, only to repeat the pattern a month or two later. It was Keith who finally severed the cord. Kari knew now that she could never go home again.

Somewhere along the way, Kari imagined herself the opposite of the little boy in the Hans Christian Anderson story who stopped the flood waters behind the crumbling dike with his finger. Amanda's touch unleashed a flood of hurts in Kari that allowed her to heal.

An abrupt snort and cough from the sleeping man two rows ahead of her interrupted her woolgathering. Kari yawned and stretched her feet in front of her, then curled up in the seat again to restring her memories. "So much has changed. Who would have thought, because of a chance meeting more than two years ago, that I'd find myself a baptized Christian, a licensed practical nurse, and on a train heading for the farm lands of Wisconsin?"

The coach lights dimmed, then brightened as the monotonous clacketyclack of the wheels changed pace, signaling the train's approach to a station. A rotund, flushed-faced conductor bellowed his way through the coach without missing a beat. "Columbus, Wisconsin. Columbus, Wisconsin. Those deboarding should have their luggage claim checks available for the porter upon reaching the platform."

Kari swallowed the sudden lump in her throat. "No! I won't be scared! I won't feel sorry for myself. I'm not abandoned. I'm not alone. God and I will make it - together. I'm a fighter. I'm a survivor!" She lifted her chin and tightened her lips, determined to defeat her own self-pity. "OK, Lord, I suppose turning me into a country hick should be easy enough after all the other changes You've made in my life."

The brakes squealed, and the train jerked and hissed to a stop. With a stubborn resolve, Kari slipped her raincoat over

her arm, stuffed the fashion magazines she'd purchased during the Milwaukee stopover into her red sports bag, and stood up. She turned to grasp both seatbacks firmly and noticed an elderly woman behind her struggling with her packages.

"Excuse me, Ma'am, but do you need any help?"

The woman's face crinkled into a smile. "Oh, do I!" she replied, heaving a huge sigh of relief. "That would be so nice of you. My niece, Betty, will be here at the station to meet me, if you could just help me onto the platform."

"Glad to." Kari grabbed two of the bulging shopping bags by their handles and slipped one of the white bakery boxes under her arm.

The old lady's eyes danced with delight as she pointed to the box. "That one's for Betty. She used to love Wiedelbaum's fresh-baked bagels. I even brought her some genuine dills from the deli down my block. Nothing's quite as good as pickles from a barrel, don't you agree?"

"Yes, Ma'am." Kari sidled up the aisle toward the exit sign ahead of the woman, the packages catching on each seat she passed.

"Is someone meeting you? A young girl like yourself shouldn't be waiting around a depot at this hour of the night." The woman clucked merrily after Kari as she stepped onto the platform. A porter standing at the base of the steps released Kari's arm to assist the older woman.

"Now, don't you worry. It's not that late, and I'm certain someone will be here momentarily. The train is a trifle early," Kari reminded, her eye singling out a brisk, carefully dressed matron hurrying toward them. "Perhaps this is Mrs. Wynters," Kari thought, then reconsidered. "I hope not, considering the frown she's wearing!"

"There you are, Aunt Mabel. Tsk! I thought I told you not to bring half of Chicago with you. You know that Harold and I don't eat such rich foods anymore." The interloper whisked the bags and packages from the suddenly silent old woman. "Now what will we do with all of this? I really wish you'd listen to me." Kari watched the old woman's eyes flash with

embarrassment, then dull with a resolute sadness. Somehow the woman had aged at least ten years before Kari's eyes. Kari smiled sympathetically. "Excuse me, but don't forget these packages also." Kari gently placed them in the older woman's limp arms.

The niece snatched at the bags. "More? You brought more junk? Here, give them to me!" She ordered. "A waste of good money!" The woman glanced past Kari as if she were invisible. Kari watched the older woman struggle to follow her smartly stepping niece into the crowded station.

"Hmml!" She muttered, "What a nasty person!"

"Who's nasty?" An unfamiliar voice interrupted her thoughts.