

# *Sharing Hope*

DEBBIE ENTSMINGER



Part 1

"And I pray that the sharing of your faith  
may become effective, for the full knowledge  
of every good thing that is in us for the  
sake of Christ."

Philemon 1:6 (ESV)

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Dedicated

to the women who've

shared the journey with me

and the generations to come

Philemon 1:4



# Contents

1. I do?	1
2. Bon Appetite	4
3. Connect Group	7
4. Barren	12
5. Show Me	17
6. Trash or Treasure	20
7. Solicitors	22
8. Birthday Blessings	27
9. The Elevator	30
10. Tea Party	33
11. Good Will	43
12. Crash	47
13. The Challenge	50
14. Leading	53

15. Flowers	57
16. Heart to Heart	62
17. Belonging	65
18. Mrs. Pellegrino	68
19. Trailer Park Treasure	72
20. Train Older Women	77
21. Women's Bible Study	81
22. Unexpectedly Seen	84
23. The Plane	88
24. Lawsuit	94
25. Cover Girl	98
26. The Offer	102
27. Running A Hospital	105
28. Power of Prayer	109
29. Harvest Festival	116
Discussion Questions	120
About the Author	123



## CHAPTER ONE

# *I do?*

CLARA

*August 17, 1996*

“Wait a minute!” A voice hollered from the steps leading to the Courthouse patio.

Clara turned. What was Todd’s ex doing here?

Susan made a beeline toward them, her gaze fixed on the clerk. “What happened to, ‘If anyone has objections speak now or forever hold your peace?’”

The court official’s eyes widened. He looked at his handbook, flipped a few pages, then shrunk back. “It’s not in here.”

Susan stepped forward, her hand on her hip. “Well, it should be, and I have an objection.”

“Susan.” Todd groaned. “What are you doing here?”

Hunter raced over. “Mommy!”

“Who are you?” The clerk asked.

Clara gave him a look, then turned to Susan, “Why are you objecting? You divorced him.”

Susan lifted her hands, “Because he’s lying. He’s not going to do what he promised.”

“You’re the one who left.” Todd roared.

“Because you couldn’t stay faithful. And now you’re lying to another woman.”

Todd looked at Clara, “I’m not lying.”

*I can’t believe this is happening.* Clara gazed at the sky as storm clouds closed in, blocking the last bit of blue.

Todd shifted from one foot to the other. His jaw clenched; his brow furrowed. “How did you know where we were getting married?”

Susan tilted her head toward her sons, “How do you think?”

Todd’s oldest son slumped. “She asked.”

Clara’s daughter, Ashley, put her hands on her hips. “Go away. This is supposed to be my mom’s special day.”

Her special day? Clara looked at her wedding dress. The strapless gown hugged her body in all the right places. The hemline fell above her knee with a slit up the left side. Soon as she saw it, she knew it would make Todd’s eyes pop. She was right. The moment he’d seen her, he pulled her close and whispered. “Our honeymoon can’t start soon enough.”

But they hadn’t made it to the honeymoon before Susan started trouble.

Thunder rumbled. Clara fanned herself with the copy of her vows. Her arms stuck to the sides of her dress. Todd thought being married outside on the courthouse patio would be more romantic. Clara rolled her eyes.

It was over 90, with humidity sky-high. She was thankful she'd worn her hair up. But as her tendrils wilted and Susan argued with Todd, romance was the last thing on her mind.

*What am I doing?* She glanced at Todd. At six feet tall, with a full head of sandy hair atop a chiseled body and a dimple in the center of his chin, he was one good-looking man. Caring, funny, and considerate, he even helped do the dishes. With no tattoos or pierced body parts, he was different from her last four husbands. There weren't many men like him. Surely this time it had to be right.

The sky split with a brilliant flash, accompanied by a thunderous boom. Clara felt the ground beneath her shake. *Damn! That lightning was close.*

The skies let loose. Everyone ran for cover.

As she entered the courthouse, Clara looked at her drenched dress and sighed.

*So much for the magic that begins happily ever after.*



## CHAPTER TWO

# *Bon Appetite*

SANDY

When the phone rang, Sandy wiped her hands on her apron, grabbed the handle off the hook, and balanced it on her shoulder as she pulled a loaf of homemade bread from the oven.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Babe.”

“Robert!” How she loved hearing his voice. Forty-three years of marriage only intensified her love and respect for him. “Dinner’s almost ready. I even made the strawberry rhubarb pie from the cover of last month’s *Bon Appetite*.”

She heard a deep sigh. “Looks like it’s going to be a few more hours till I can get home. I have to get this contract through tonight, and the fax machine is giving me trouble.”

“Again?” Another late night of work? Lately, she never knew when he’d make it home. She’d been looking forward to sharing this meal

with him. She thought it'd be fun to surprise him and spent the past four hours in the kitchen.

"I know. I'm sorry. I've been pushing hard all day to finish before dinner, but it's not going to happen."

Sandy forced a smile, "That's ok. Thanks for working hard to take care of us." Us? These days it was only her. But he'd know what she meant.

"I'll keep working as fast as I can. Don't wait for me to eat. Hopefully, it won't be much longer. Love you."

A familiar click, then the line went dead. Another meal alone. It'd been twenty years since their daughter died—twenty years since Robert buried himself in his work. *You'd think I'd be used to it.* She hadn't felt his absence as much when her son and grandson were an active part of her life. But now?

She glanced at the table arrayed with China and wine glasses. At least it wasn't their anniversary. She thought waiting for special occasions to set a beautiful table was silly. "We eat with our eyes," her mother said.

She was tempted to eat in the kitchen and save the table for the next night but then glanced at the Miso Glazed Salmon with Muffaletta Pasta Salad and Gruyere Mushroom & Caramelized Onion Bites. They weren't fare to be scarfed down in the kitchen.

At times like these, she missed her family. The boys appreciated her cooking. Meals that took hours to prepare were devoured in a matter of moments amid smiles and laughter. She never had to wonder what to do with leftovers. Meals together had always been her favorite part of the day.

She looked at the pie cooling on the counter. *They would've gone crazy over this.*

It turned out exactly like the cover of the magazine. She looked at the empty chair across from her. If only someone were here to share it.

*Might as well enjoy a glass of Chardonnay.* She crossed to the wine cabinet, then remembered she'd finished it last night. The Cabernet Franc would have to do. Sandy pulled out a new bottle and grabbed a corkscrew.

As the sun's rays cast their final hue, Sandy inhaled, taking in the feast before her. It may not be the romantic evening she'd planned, but at least it'd be delectable.





## CHAPTER THREE

# *Connect Group*

RACHEL

**D**r. Phillips leaned forward, “The phenomenon of hematidrosis is well documented.”

Juliette scrunched her nose, “Hemati-what?”

Rachel leaned over, “Hematidrosis. That’s the medical term for bloody sweat. Under great emotional strain the capillaries in the sweat glands can break, mixing blood with sweat.”

Shari grimaced. “Bloody sweat? That sounds gross.” She turned to her husband. “Jim, we’re eating.”

“I know.” He scooped more cobbler onto his plate. “Modern scholars often dismiss things in the Bible as erroneous. Like Jesus sweating drops of blood. But there was an article in the Journal of Medicine last month that summarized seventy-seven known cases.”

“I saw that article.” Dan raised his hands. “Blood, Sweat and Fear.” Doc Hollingsworth peered over his glasses. “It is extremely rare.”

“But possible.” Dr. Phillips speared a blueberry with his fork. “Especially when under great duress.”

Rachel leaned back in her chair. “At the first hospital I worked at, a twelve-year-old girl was brought into the ER with blood oozing from the intact skin on her scalp.”

Dr. Phillips’ fork halted mid-air. “You’ve got to be kidding?”

Doc rubbed his chin. “Did they identify the cause?”

“She’d been in a fight at school with another student. For punishment, she was made to stand in the hallway and cried for an hour after they threatened to inform her parents of her behavior. There was no physical trauma at the bleeding site.”

Dan leaned in. “So the etiology was intrinsic?”

Rachel turned to him. “Extreme fear of a father and mother who scolded her frequently and compared her to her older sibling every time exams came around.”

“That poor girl.” Amanda shook her head. “I hate to think what was going on inside her brain to prompt such a physical response.”

“Imagine what had to transpire in Jesus’ brain in the Garden of Gethsemane.” Dr. Phillips pointed to his Bible. “What that little girl experienced further affirms the Biblical narrative.”

Rachel’s eyes were wide. “I love how medicine helps us understand and appreciate what Jesus endured.”

Doc poured coffee into his cup. “And that was only the start of Jesus’ blood loss. I have no idea how he continued to carry that cross after the scourging he received. Forty lashes would penetrate underlying muscles. Arterial blood had to be spurting.”

Shari grimaced.

Rachel rubbed her thumbs together. “When people sing, ‘What can take away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus,’ I wonder if they realize how much blood Jesus shed.”

Amanda leaned forward. "With all that blood loss, it's amazing he didn't faint."

"Don't forget the robe torn off Jesus' back after it adhered to the clots of blood and serum." Dan made a tearing sound. "That had to cause excruciating pain as well as excessive blood loss. When I was on a mission trip to the Republic of Georgia the doctors routinely tore bandages off patients. They thought it helped the healing. Copious amounts of blood flowed daily."

Rachel bit her lip. "Sounds barbaric."

Dan winked at her. "I'm sure their patients agreed with you."

Doc pointed to his forehead. "And then thorns went into Jesus' head. Even minor cranial lacerations bleed heavily."

"That was true when Cory hit his head on the windowsill." Juliette said, "But why?"

Rachel turned toward her. "Because the face and scalp have so many blood vessels close to the skin."

"When I was in Nam I operated on a patient who lost half his face. I've never seen so much blood. It took four surgeons to stop the flow. Two of us clipped and cauterized." Dr. Phillips wiped his forehead. "We had to tie off dozens of arteries and veins torn and bleeding. While we worked on the face, a vascular surgeon struggled to gain control of the jugular."

Rachel leaned in, "What happened?"

Shari stood and collected the plates. Amanda followed her into the kitchen.

"Little by little as we got the bleeding under control and replaced his blood with new units donated by hospital personnel, his blood pressure stabilized, and vital signs began to improve. Then we put him back together." Doc Hollingsworth sat back, "It was a miracle, but he survived."

Rachel raised her eyebrows. "Hospital personnel donated blood?"

"In Nam, we gave everything we had."

Dan sighed. "Sounds like quite a team to work with."

"That it was."

Rachel looked around the group and smiled. *I can't believe I found a group like this.* She'd lost count of how many small groups she'd attended over the years. It could be difficult to connect with other believers when you were single and over forty.

But this group felt like a perfect fit. With a surgeon, a cardiologist, and a physical therapist, they had health care in common. What joy to relate intellectually as well as spiritually. She loved the dialogue back and forth between medicine and God's Word.

She looked at her watch and stood, "I've enjoyed this time. But I need to run. The board is meeting tomorrow morning."

"You've been doing a great job at Venice Hospital." Doc peered over his glasses. "Employees and doctors are impressed with the changes you're making."

Rachel sighed. "Not all of them." Being the CEO of a hospital was not for the faint of heart. "But that's encouraging to hear."

"I think it's amazing what you've accomplished in such a short time." Dan gave her two thumbs up. "It's like a whole different culture."

"It's good to see someone putting the care back in health care - for patients and medical personnel." Dr. Phillips pointed to the group, "Now I know why. I should've known Jesus would be behind that."

Rachel picked up her coffee cup. "May the Great Physician be glorified in all we do." She headed into the kitchen to say goodbye.

Shari and Amanda were washing dishes. "Who does she think she is, walking in here, monopolizing the conversation? Can't she see the guys need to leave work at work and talk about something else?"

Rachel froze.

Amanda stacked plates in the dishwasher. "For these guys medicine is more than a job. It's their life. So it interfaces with all aspects of our life. It's what you sign up for when you marry a doctor."

"It's not what I signed up for." Shari shook her head. "But I wonder if someone else is hoping to sign up for it. Did you notice how much she talked to Juliette's husband?"

Amanda noticed Rachel's reflection in the window and elbowed Shari. "Shh."

Rachel grabbed her coat and bolted for the door. Juliette stood beside it.

"Nice of you to join us." There was no smile in her eyes.

Rachel couldn't leave fast enough.



## CHAPTER FOUR

# Barren

## ELIZABETH

Elizabeth pulled into the church parking lot, turned off the car, and glanced in the rearview mirror. *Oh great! I never should've put on mascara. Not today.* She found an old napkin in the glove compartment, wet it with her tongue then scrubbed to erase the smudges under her eyes.

She'd thought for sure this would be the month. Hadn't she felt nauseous yesterday? But this morning, when she'd gone to the bathroom, red on the tissue told a different story.

For seven years, they'd been trying to get pregnant. But the longing extended much farther. All her life, she'd dreamed of the day she'd be a mom.

Barren. It wasn't only her womb. It was her life.

True, her life looked full enough. As a youth pastor's wife, rare were the days her house didn't overflow with people. She did love them. But...

She grabbed her purse and Bible, took a deep breath, and headed into the foyer.

“Elizabeth, you’re here just in time.” Roger handed her a stack of bulletins. “You handle the east doors. I’ll take the west. Extra bulletins are on the welcome table.”

*Oh, Lord, I need grace.* As a couple approached, she forced her cheeks to smile and held out a bulletin. “Welcome to Island Community Church.”

“Thanks.” The husband said. His eyes darted around.

The woman reached for the bulletin. “This is our first time here. Can you tell me where the nursery is?” On her hip was a toddler. His hands wrapped around his mom’s neck.

“Can’t I stay with you, Mommy?” He pleaded.

“No, buddy. It will only be for a little while.”

“But I don’t know anyone.”

The mom smiled, “Yes, you do. Jesus is here.”

The little boy perked up, “He is?”

“You better believe it.”

Elizabeth bit her lower lip. What she wouldn’t give to have a little guy like that. She’d never want to leave him.

“Lucy! You’re here.”

Elizabeth turned to see Sheryl race to greet the newcomer.

“I’m so excited you decided to come.”

Elizabeth looked from one to the other. “You guys know each other?” Sheryl’s husband Curt recently became an elder.

Sheryl put her arm around her friend’s shoulder. “We were roommates in college. Lucy and Mark moved to Sarasota last month. We’ve been trying to convince them it’s worth the drive to attend church with us.”

“Well, look who decided to head South.” Curt clapped the new guy on the back, then turned to Elizabeth. “We better pray they decide to stay.”

Elizabeth forced her smiling face to nod. *Oh God, please give me strength.*

Sheryl leaned toward Elizabeth, “In college, we were all part of the planning team for our Navigators group. You wouldn’t believe the events these two came up with.”

“Correction,” said Mark, “The four of us came up with. I doubt little would’ve happened without Curt’s crazy ideas.”

Curt laughed, “Do you remember the Hawaiian party with the belly flop contest?”

Mark lifted his hands. “Who could forget.” He looked at Elizabeth. “Curt was on top of the winning team’s pile holding two lighted torches till he smacked the water.”

Elizabeth tried to imagine the new elder doing a belly flop.

“Or the fifties dance?” Sheryl added.

“Where Curt swallowed three goldfish.” Mark chimed in.

*Wait. What?* Elizabeth felt her head spin. This was getting hard to follow. *I feel like a fifth wheel.*

“You wouldn’t believe the skits Lucy used to write,” said Curt.

*Skits?* She looked at Lucy, who shrugged.

“I don’t write anymore.” Lucy turned to Sheryl, “I was hoping you’d be here. Are your kids in the nursery?”

Sheryl leaned towards the little boy, “Josh is going to be so excited to meet you, Eli.”

Lucy turned to her son, “Hear that, buddy? A new friend is waiting for you.” A smile began to form on Eli’s face. He loosened his grip on his mom’s neck.



Elizabeth watched them depart and sighed as they headed to the nursery. Nearly everyone her age had kids. *I feel so left out.*

But she didn't have time to think about that now. A steady stream of people approached. By the time church started, her cheeks ached from smiling.

*I should go sit with the youth.* But now cramps started. *As if the ache in my heart isn't enough.* She grabbed a bottle of Midol from her purse and crossed to the water fountain.

"Are you ok?"

Elizabeth turned to find Nancy, the worship pastor's wife, beside her.

"I'm fine."

"You don't look fine."

Elizabeth shook her head. *I should've known Nancy would press in.*

"My period started."

"I am sorry." Nancy hugged her.

Elizabeth appreciated the hug, but Nancy couldn't understand. She gave birth in August to a beautiful little girl.

*I feel so left out. And so alone. No one gets it.*

Elizabeth looked toward the church doors contemplating an early exit.

*Wait.* Was that a student hovering near the entrance? Elizabeth walked over. "Hello. Can I help you?"

A girl popped into view, "I'm late." She pointed over her shoulder. "I'll come back another time."

Elizabeth reached out, "You don't have to. They're singing the opening song. It's easy to slip in the back."

The girl hesitated.

*Ok, Lord, give me strength.* "I was about to head in myself. Would you like to join me?"

“Really?”

“Yeah. I’m Elizabeth. My husband is the youth pastor here. It’d be my joy to sit with you.”

“I’m Tina. I’ve never been to this church before. My family just moved here, and we live around the corner. I was curious....”

Elizabeth put her arm around the girl. “Come with me and check it out.”

The girl looked into her eyes. “Thanks.”

“My pleasure,” Elizabeth said.

And she meant it.



## CHAPTER FIVE

# Show Me

CLARA

What a mess! Clara turned her back to the wind to light a cigarette. A wave rolled in, splashed her ankles, and wet the frayed edge of her jeans. She inhaled deeply, then flicked ashes into the sea. The diamond on her finger glittered in the sun's rays.

Clara scowled. It'd been a month since she'd married for the fourth time

Life with a blended family, her two, his three, was challenging enough. With five kids under ten, the noise was constant. And when arguments started? Clara groaned. *I need peace.* She often drove to the beach to get away.

But the waves lapping at her feet didn't calm her heart today. Her life was a mess externally and she was a hot mess inside.

*What have I gotten myself into? I keep hoping things will get better, but...* she pulled out another cigarette and then looked down as she lit it.

“Hey, Baby. Wanna light my fire?”

Clara raised her eyes and saw an old man hobble toward her.

She put her lighter into her pocket. Then pointed to her ring finger.

“Sorry, buddy. Taken.”

He puffed out his chest, then leaned in. “Bet he can’t give you what I can.”

*He has to be nearly seventy.* She fought the urge to roll her eyes.

With long blonde hair and a figure curved in all the right places, she was used to comments as she walked the beach. A beach populated by lonely men.

She pointed to his VFW hat. “Thanks for serving.” Then moved on.

She knew what it was like to feel lonely and desperate, so she tried to be gentle in her rebuff. Besides, who was she to judge?

Her life was so broken like the bits and pieces of shells that littered the sand. Tossed by waves, crushed underfoot. Her eyes followed as a sand crab scurried to its hole. She spied a tulip shell and leaned down. It looked so beautiful. But when she flipped it over, the back was missing.

She picked it up. This was her on a good day. Even when she looked good to others. If they got close enough, they’d discover the brokenness and all that was missing. She’d hoped this new relationship might change her life. It changed it all right. More chaos. More noise. *What shell ever gets unbroken?*

A huge wave crashed in. She peered down. As the wave receded, all it left was seaweed, driftwood, more broken pieces.

*Is there no hope?*

She tossed the shell and watched as it disappeared into the face of another wave.

Overhead a bird soared. She followed his path as he gained altitude taking energy from currents in the wind.

*I'd love to soar like that. To rise above all the crap of life.*

The bird shifted directions, then soared higher. What song had her daughter been singing? *They will mount up on wings like eagles?*

Ever since Heather invited Ashley to Awana's, she'd come home each week happy, singing new songs. She said they were learning about God and loved the fun she had there.

Clara was thankful something was going right. But God? She'd never really thought much about him. If he existed, he seemed far from the daily grind of life, especially her life. She felt trapped in a dark place, deep within a hole. Anxiety and depression were never far. But what if —?

She glanced at the sky. A longing to connect with something, someone bigger, filled her heart.

"If you are real, I need you. Please show me."



## CHAPTER SIX

# *Trash or Treasure*

RACHEL

**S**he'd done it again. Run away when the heat came on.

Rachel felt like she wore a bright letter A. Not for adultery, but for alone. At times they felt the same. Especially when women acted like they couldn't trust her with their husbands.

But could she blame them? How would she feel if the shoe was on the other foot? In truth, she had no clue. There'd never been a ring on her finger.

Still, she had as much right to be there as they did.

As she walked through the doors of Island Community Church, she sighed. It was her fifth attempt. The fifth church in as many years. The older she got, the harder it seemed to make connections.

As the C.E.O. of Venice Hospital, she loved having the responsibility of an entire medical facility rest on her shoulders. With a single

word, she could execute change and impact lives. But at church, she felt small, tainted, unseen.

Halfway through the first song, a bunch of teens filed into the rows before her. One girl with a full head of frizzy hair caught her attention. She was big-boned, wore glasses, and intently took notes throughout the sermon. *That could've been me twenty years ago.* When the guy beside her whispered in her ear, her face lit up with a beautiful smile.

As the pastor preached on Psalm 139, Rachel wondered, *Does she know she's wonderfully made?* Rachel wished someone had taken the time to help her grasp this when she was in high school. *Maybe if they had, I'd be able to believe it now.*

Instead, she felt like trash. Something to be used, then tossed aside when no longer needed. A series of broken relationships reinforced that. *I must have a radar for dysfunction. If a guy has issues, I'm attracted to him.* The few she'd dated with character, she ditched before they discovered her baggage. She could easily become a crazy cat lady if she hadn't been plagued with allergies.

At work, no one would guess. As the Chief Executive Officer of the local hospital, she was used to being treated with respect. But in church, that only seemed to make women more suspicious.

She longed for community. She needed other believers in her life.

She gazed out over the congregation. *Please, Lord, would you help me find a place here?*



## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Solicitors

CLARA

*W*almart sells Bibles? *Who would've guessed?* When Clara saw them on the shelf, she eagerly reached for one and added it to her cart. Her kids had recently been invited to a Bible club and started memorizing verses. *Maybe I'll find some answers here.*

Clara arrived home to an empty house. The stillness was unsettling till she saw Todd's note. "Took the kids to Culvers. Love you."

Well, that was a pleasant surprise. As she unpacked her purchases, she pulled out the Bible, grabbed a soda, and headed to the couch. She opened to the first page and started reading.

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and void ..."

She scanned the page. There was a lot of repetition. *Not sure what that's about.* She thumbed forward a couple of pages.

"This is the written account of Adam's family line. When God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God. He created them



male and female and blessed them. And he named them “Mankind” when they were created. When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth. After Seth was born, Adam lived 800 years and had other sons and daughters. Altogether, Adam lived a total of 930 years, and then he died.”

*Holy crap! People sure lived long back then.* She scanned the rest of the page. Just a bunch of people’s names and the crazy ages they died. *What is up with this?*

She flipped towards the middle.

“Call if you will, but who will answer you? To which of the holy ones will you turn?”

*Holy ones?* She turned more pages, “Happy is the one who seizes them and dashes your infants across the rocks.”

*What?* She started crying and tossed the Bible onto the coffee table. *This makes no sense. I told you I need help, Lord.*

She reached for a tissue, blew her nose, and walked to the trash can. *Might as well use the time to tidy up.*

The doorbell rang. Clara glanced at her watch. It was three in the afternoon. Who could that be?

She looked through the peephole. Two men she’d never seen before. Didn’t they see the No Solicitors sign? When they knocked again, she opened the door, thankful for the locked screen between them.

“Hi! I’m Pastor Dan, and this is my friend Harry. Do you have anything you’d like us to pray for? Or any spiritual questions?”

Clara rolled her eyes. *Who does this?*

Then she remembered the beach and her prayer for help. *Could this be an answer? What the hell, why not ask?*

She crossed her arms, “Is it true?”

Pastor Dan leaned in, “Is what true?”

“All this stuff I hear TV preachers say about God? Doesn’t he have better things to do than waste time on someone like me? Does he even give a damn what’s happening in our lives?”

Harry’s eyebrows shot up.

But Pastor Dan pulled out his Bible and flipped to the middle. “Listen to this, and tell me what you think. ‘O Lord, you have examined my heart and know everything about me. You know when I sit or stand. When far away, you know my every thought.’”

Pastor Dan smiled, “Does that sound like God cares?”

“God knows everything about me?” Clara grabbed a pack of cigarettes from her pocket and tapped it against her hand. “That’s pretty scary.”

Pastor Dan nodded. “He knows everything about every single one of us. The good, the bad, the ugly, and he still longs for relationship with us.”

She lit her cigarette, then tossed the lighter onto a nearby table. “But why? That makes no sense.”

Pastor Dan pointed at her lawn. “I see toys out here. You must have kids.”

Clara rolled her eyes. “I tell them all the time to put stuff up when they are done.”

“I know,” Pastor Dan said. “Mine can drive me crazy, too. But I love them something fierce. Bet you love yours, too.”

Standing taller, Clara tapped her chest. “No one gets between this mamma bear and her cubs.”

Pastor Dan chuckled. “Exactly. Listen to what the Bible goes on to tell us about God,” he looked down at his Bible, then back up, “No, wait. Would you like to read this for yourself?” He held out his Bible. “It’s incredible.”

Clara sighed. Unlocked the screen door. Then stepped out, tossing her unfinished cigarette. She took the Bible from him and started reading where he pointed. “You made all the delicate inner parts of my body and knit them together in my mother’s womb. Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex. It is amazing to think about. Your workmanship is marvelous—and how well I know it.”

She looked up with a scowl.

Pastor Dan nodded, “It’s true, though I sometimes struggle to believe it. Keep going.”

“You were there while I was being formed in utter seclusion. You saw me before I was born and scheduled each day of my life before I began to breathe. Every day was recorded in your book. How precious it is, Lord, to realize that you are thinking about me constantly.”

She looked up, “God is thinking about me constantly?”

Pastor Dan nodded. “Yes. He created you. He cares about you. How many times a day do you think about your kids?”

She shrugged. “I couldn’t begin to count.”

Pastor Dan said, “Exactly. See what it says in the next verse.” He pointed. “I can’t even count how many times a day your thoughts turn toward me. And when I waken in the morning, you are still thinking of me.”

Clara scratched behind her ear. “You guys are probably going to think I’m crazy.” She told them about her walk on the beach and her prayer.

When she finished, Pastor Dan nudged his friend. “Do you hear that? We’re an answer to prayer. Now I know why God told me to do this today. I’m not even from this area. I was visiting Harry when the Holy Spirit said, ‘Get up and go.’ So, we did. I wondered if I’d heard right. Then you answered the door.”

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Later, as the men prepared to leave, Pastor Dan said, "There's a party happening in heaven right now."

"A party?"

He nodded, "Yep. Do you have a Bible? If not, you are welcome to mine."

Clara nodded, "I do. I just bought one today."

"Great." He smiled, "Check out Luke 15:10."

Clara repeated, "Luke 15:10?"

Pastor Dan nodded, "Yep." He opened his Bible to the table of contents and pointed. "Luke is one of the books in the New Testament. So you turn there. The numbers stand for the chapter and verse. God bless you, Sis."

Clara headed inside and grabbed her new Bible.

"Luke... chapter 15... verse 10... 'In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'" Clara laughed and looked up, "Imagine that. Angels are rejoicing over me?"

She looked down at her Bible. "I just might learn to like you."



## CHAPTER EIGHT

# *Birthday Blessings*

SANDY

Sandy rose at the first hint of dawn and walked two blocks to the beach, eager to hunt fossilized sharks' teeth before the tourists descended. Daily tides created an ongoing treasure hunt. A surge of joy filled her whenever she spotted a black, triangular shape with one long point at the end. The guidebook assured they were prehistoric. For the sake of the lone woman swimming offshore, she hoped they were right.

As she passed the turtle patrol checking nests, her phone rang. "Hello?"

"Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday dear Sandy! I'm so glad God made you!"

"Barbie! What a delight to hear from you."

"I wanted to be the first to wish you a happy birthday."

"You are. But, it has to be early for you." Sandy looked at her watch and did the math. Colorado was two hours earlier. "4:43 am?"

"Yep. I couldn't sleep. The post-menopausal curse strikes again. When I looked at my watch, I realized you were probably up."

"You're right." Sandy smiled, "Out walking the beach."

"What a great way to welcome this next year of your life."

Sandy inhaled the fresh salty air. "It is lovely here."

"Wish I was with you. It's 44 degrees outside. The first snowfall may be early this year."

"You can always come visit."

"I would love to."

They both knew it'd be a while. When the last of Barbie's kids left home, she decided to head back to school. Law school. She now worked her dream job facilitating adoptions.

"Better run and see if I can catch a few more winks. Got a case to present this morning. All prayers appreciated."

"You've got them. Thanks for calling."

"Enjoy the beach extra for me, ok?"

Sandy assured her she would. She certainly had time to. Now she could walk this beach all day, every day, if she wanted. She looked forward to the day when her husband could join her. Last month Robert celebrated his sixty-second birthday. *Just a few more years until he can retire.* Whether he would or not remained to be seen. He loved his work and enjoyed the people he worked with, as well as the thrill of winning the sale.

Maybe one day, he'd come to love Jesus like she had.

After their daughter died in a car accident, a friend invited her to a small discussion group where women could ask hard spiritual questions. Did Sandy ever have questions.

How could a loving God let her daughter die? Janet always talked about Jesus after going to vacation bible school with a friend. She walked around the house singing Jesus loves me. Did he? Then why

did the drunk driver walk away with only a few scratches? How was that fair? Anger exploded as she asked each question.

But she also wanted to know what happened after death. She longed to see her daughter again.

That's when she met Barbie. She led the discussions and welcomed Sandy warmly. The women in the group listened, attentive, patient. No one tried to correct or judge her, even when she ranted and raved against their God. Instead, they cried with her and gently led her to the Great Comforter. What a gift to have a safe place to process.

Robert never had that. Instead, he threw himself into work.

Sandy sighed. Some aches never leave. She turned and gazed at the horizon. *Thank you, Lord for carrying me and holding the pieces of my heart.*



## CHAPTER NINE

# *The Elevator*

RACHEL

**T**he click of Rachel's heels on the tiled floor echoed through the hall. Her feet ached, but she didn't care. At 5'8", she needed the extra height to look most doctors in the face. Nobody looked down on her.

She glanced at the file in her hands as she waited for the elevator to open. She was not looking forward to this next encounter. When the doors opened, she paused to let the passengers exit.

A girl with frizzy hair emerged, pushing a cart of art supplies. *Wait. Isn't that the girl from church?* Rachel's heart rate increased.

As the girl pushed her cart over the elevator gap, the back wheels caught. A stack of papers fell to one side. Though the girl jumped to steady them, some fell to the floor. Rachel kneeled to help and heard her mumble, "I am such a klutz."

Rachel held out the papers. "Did I see you at church last Sunday?"  
The girl looked puzzled. "Excuse me?"



Rachel tried again. "Do you attend Island Community Church?"

A smile illuminated the girl's face. "Oh yes. I've been going there for the past few years." Then her brows knit together. "Do you go there?"

Rachel leaned in. "Last Sunday was my first time."

"Sweet." The girl said, "My name is Kalea."

"What a beautiful name. Does it have a special meaning?"

"It's Hawaiian and means flower wreath." Placing the errant papers on the cart, she moved her hips and laughed. "Like the kind hula girls wear."

Rachel asked. "Are you Hawaiian?"

"My dad was from Hawaii. But," her smile faded, "I've no idea where he is now."

"I'm sorry." Rachel longed to reach out to this girl.

Kalea shook her head. "It's ok. He isn't very nice." She fidgeted with a pencil.

*Oh God, what should I say?* Rachel bit her lip. "It's good to meet you, Kalea. My name is Rachel." She pointed to the cart. "Looks like you have your hands full."

Kalea lifted a hand covered in dried paint. "Been creating with kids on the pediatric floor."

Rachel's eyebrows rose.

"I started a couple of weeks ago to get volunteer hours for college. I need all the scholarships I can get." A smile lit her eyes. "But I sure do love those kids."

"I bet they love you too." As the elevator doors reopened, Rachel put out her hand to stop them. "Thanks for doing this." She held up the folder. "I've got to run."

"Thanks for helping me. I hope to see you at church." Kalea pushed her cart down the hall.

Punching the button for the fifth floor, Rachel wished she could help the girl. *But, She frowned. I've no idea how unless it's to tell her what not to do so she doesn't screw up her life.* She looked at the folder. *Here's hoping I'm not about to screw mine up even more.*



## CHAPTER TEN

# Tea Party

ELIZABETH

“**A**nd over here are the hats.” Elizabeth led the teens to the corner, where a stand featured many styles.

The girls squealed with delight as they tried on different ones, then checked themselves in the mirror.

“Oooh. I want the floppy one. How do I look?” Amanda plopped it on her head and twirled.

Elizabeth smiled, “Absolutely adorable.”

“I’ll take the cowboy hat.” Kelly placed it on her head and elbowed the girl beside her. “Howdy, Pardner.”

“What is this?” Tina held up a clip with a large decorative design.

Elizabeth crossed her arms. “That, my dear is a fascinator.”

“A what?”

“A fascinator. Its name comes from the Latin word *fascinare*, which means a thing or person especially enthralling.”

Janice snatched it from Tina's hands. "I'll take that one. I'm the most fascinating one here."

"But—?"

Elizabeth reached for another hat and handed it to Tina. "This is my favorite. It's called a pillbox hat and was my mom's. Jackie Onassis made it famous. You wear it tilted to one side." She helped Tina put it on, "Just as I thought. It looks lovely on you."

Tina looked at herself in the mirror and smiled, "Thanks."

Janice scowled and threw off the fascinator. "This looks ridiculous."

"Would you like me to help?"

"No." She selected another one. "What's this called?"

"A pork pie hat."

The girls giggled.

"It's similar to a fedora, but the fedora," Elizabeth reached around the back and pulled one out, "has a longer brim."

Janice ditched the porkpie and grabbed the fedora.

"You have so many hats," Amy said.

Elizabeth winked. "I like to have fun."

Everyone had a hat except Amy, who kept looking, periodically reaching out, then dropping her hand.

"I've got just the one for you." She pulled out a simple hat resembling an upside-down bowl that flared at the edges. "It's called a cloche. To be 1920s authentic, you can wear it with a boa." She pulled one out of the chest next to the stand.

"Oh, my goodness." Amanda gasped, "That looks amazing on you."

Amy looked at herself in the mirror and smiled.

"There are all sorts of accessories in the chest. While you have fun putting your outfits together, I will get our tea." She grabbed the pork pie hat, curtsied, and headed to the kitchen.

The girls gasped when they saw the table.

"This is beautiful."

As they sat down, Tina said, "Everyone needs beauty as well as bread."

"Woah." Kelly scratched her head. "That's deep."

"And true." Elizabeth agreed.

"John Muir said that." Tina shrugged. "I like to collect quotes."

Elizabeth put the sugar cubes on the table. "Me too."

"I like to collect cookies." Janice grabbed a handful, then took a huge bite.

Elizabeth reached over. "Would you like to thank the Lord for us, Janice?"

Janice rolled her eyes. "No, Amanda wants to."

"I do?" Amanda put her cookie down. "Ok." She folded her hands and looked up, "Dear God, thanks for the fun and food and hats and tea and —"

Janice nudged her. "Amen."

As the girls heaped food onto their plates, Elizabeth poured the tea.

"Do you have any soda?"

Elizabeth grabbed a two-liter of coke from the fridge. "Would you like me to pour this into your tea cup instead?"

A number of the girls nodded.

"Can we do this every week?" Amanda reached for a finger sandwich, then took a big bite.

"No, silly," Kelly held up a mini muffin. "Then it wouldn't be special. And we wouldn't get to do the other fun things Elizabeth comes up with. I loved the relays we did last week."

"Speaking of which," Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "I've got another idea."

The girls leaned in.

“One of our missionaries in Africa offered to send a bunch of beads. Would you girls like to make bracelets?”

Amy’s eyes widened. “That would be so fun.”

“With real African beads?” Janice crossed her arms.

Elizabeth nodded. “I was thinking we could each make two bracelets, one to keep and one to give away.”

Kelly scrunched her nose. “Who would we give it to?”

“What if we did it like a service project?” Amanda said.

Amy reached for another cookie. “A service project?”

“Yeah. Like what if we made the bracelets and took them to women over at the Senior Friendship Center.” Amanda shrugged. “Then we could get volunteer hours for college.”

“Volunteer hours?” Tina asked.

“Yeah, to get the Florida Bright Futures Scholarship.”

“What’s that?”

Kelly rubbed her fingers together. “A free ticket to college.”

Tina’s jaw dropped. “Seriously?”

“Yep. If you get 70 volunteer hours and score high enough on the SAT or ACT, you get a full ride to any state college in Florida.”

“Or if you don’t score high enough,” Amy said, “you can at least get 70% of your tuition paid,”

“That’s incredible.” Tina raised her hand. “Sign me up.”

“Gladly.” Elizabeth hugged her. “I’m so thankful you’ve joined us.” She looked at the other girls. “I was thinking since this is Tina’s first time, we’d have some fun.” She leaned in. “Who wants to play two truths and a lie?”

The girls gasped. “Ooooh, yeah.”

Tina’s brow wrinkled. “What’s that?”

Amy lifted her hands. “You share three things about yourself, but one is totally made up. We have to guess which one isn’t true.”

Kelly held up a cookie. "We always learn sweet stuff about each other."

"And whoever guesses right," Elizabeth lifted a bag onto the table, "gets a handful of M&M's."

"Yum."

"Who wants to go first?"

"I do." Kelly jumped up. "I climbed three 14ers with my family last Summer, took my first step when I was six months old, and like to knit baby blankets."

"There's no way you could ever sit long enough to knit." Janice reached for the M&M's.

Kelly reached into her backpack and pulled out knitting needles, "Nope. I just found out I'm going to be an aunt, and I love knitting. I do it to keep my hands busy when I watch TV or wait for something."

Janice tossed the bag onto the table.

"No one starts walking at six months." Amanda reached for the bag. "I'm studying child development in my psychology class."

"Wrong again." Kelly laughed. "I really did start walking at six months."

"So you didn't climb three 14ers?" Tina asked.

"Bingo." Kelly handed her the M&M's. "We climbed five."

Tina took a few out of the bag.

"Now it's your turn to go."

"Um, ok.... I moved here from Boston. I've moved thirteen times." She looked around the room with a tiny smile, "And Johnny Watkins just asked me out."

Janice rolled her eyes. "There is no way Johnny Watkins asked you out."

Tina looked at her. "Why?"

"Because he's mine." Janice glared.

“He’s yours?”

Amanda leaned over. “She’s had a crush on him since kindergarten.”

“Oh.” Tina fidgeted with her napkin. “I didn’t know.”

The front door opened. “Hi, guys.”

“Kalea.” Joy surged through Elizabeth’s heart. “You made it.”

“Just finished volunteering at the hospital.” She raised her paint-stained hands.

“Grab a hat off the rack, then join us.” Elizabeth pulled another chair to the table.

Kalea selected a beret, then sat next to Tina. “I don’t think we’ve met.”

“I’m Tina. My family moved here a month ago. I live around the corner from the church.”

“What year are you in school?”

“Senior.”

Amy turned to her. “You had to move your senior year? That stinks.”

Tina looked down at her hands. “Actually, it was a good thing.”

Kalea grabbed a cookie, “Where did you move from?”

“Boston.”

Elizabeth’s eyebrows raised. So that one was true.

“You haven’t moved thirteen times?” Amanda said.

She held out the M&M’s. “It’s been fifteen.”

Amy’s jaw dropped. “Is your dad like in the military or something?”

Tina looked flustered. “Or...something.”

Elizabeth turned to Kalea. “We’re playing two truths and a lie. Your turn Amanda.”

Tina looked at her gratefully.



"I love hamburgers, watching Touched by an Angel, and," Amanda got a dreamy look in her eyes, "Justin Timberlake."

"That's easy." Janice said, "You're a vegetarian."

"You are?"

Amanda nodded, "Just became one last week. Eating animals is gross."

*Guess she didn't notice ham in the finger sandwiches.* "Your turn Janice."

Janice looked at Tina. "I love Johnny Watkins, thong underwear, and vodka."

"Ooooooh, girl." Amanda gave her a high five, "That's one loaded list."

"You can not love wearing butt floss." Kelly said, "That looks so uncomfortable."

Janice smiled, "You don't wear it to keep it on."

The girls giggled.

*Oh Lord, have mercy. What do I do with these girls?*

"So then it must be vodka?" Kalea asked.

Janice nodded, "I haven't had it yet."

Kalea helped herself to M&M's. "Bet these taste a whole lot better."

Janice smirked. "I bet vodka's more fun."

Elizabeth shook her head. "Your turn Kalea."

"Ok. I love Jesus, want to be a missionary when I grow up, and just started learning how to play the guitar."

"You're supposed to say things we don't already know." Amanda said. "I'm going to guess the guitar is a lie."

Kalea handed her the M&M's. "Well, I hope it becomes true soon. I'd love to learn how to help lead worship."

"You would?" Amy said.

"I think it would add so much to our group, and my fingers are itching to try."

Elizabeth stood. "Caleb's been praying God would provide someone to do that." She ran into the other room and came out holding a guitar. "He brought this home the other night. He was helping to clean out Mrs. Edwards' house after she passed, and her son gave him this." She held out the guitar. "You're welcome to have it."

"Seriously?" Kalea's face lit up, "But doesn't Caleb want it?"

"Caleb is about as musical as," Elizabeth scratched her head. "let's just say he's in the joyful noise category."

Kalea ran her hands over the wood. "It's beautiful."

"It's not fancy, but Mrs. Edwards' son said it's a great one to learn on. He gave a book that explains how to get started." She handed it to Kalea.

"Awesome. I can't wait to start." Kalea caressed the strings.

Elizabeth looked around. "Amanda, you already went. Pick someone who hasn't shared."

"I pick..." She pointed at Amy but saw Janice frown, so turned to Elizabeth. "You."

"Yes." Kelly said, "Tell us something we don't know."

The girls leaned in.

"Yeah." Janice snickered. "What's it like to have sex with Caleb?"

The girls gasped. Elizabeth felt her face get warm.

Kalea put down the guitar. "Stop it, Janice. Not everyone is thinking about sex all the time. Elizabeth gets to pick what she wants to share."

*Oh God, help me not react.* Elizabeth exhaled. "Ok, Here's my three: I have a blue belt in karate, once hitchhiked in Europe, and Caleb and I waited until after we were married to have sex."

"You waited til after you were married?" Amanda's eyes were big.

Elizabeth smiled. "That is definitely true. And I am so thankful we did."

Janice looked up. "Is that why you don't have kids?"

Elizabeth felt the blood drain from her face. The girls gasped and looked at Elizabeth.

Kalea jumped up. "Janice!"

Elizabeth placed her hand on her heart. *Father forgive her. She doesn't know what she does.*

Janice sat with her arms crossed. A smug look on her face.

Ever since Janice started coming to youth group, she'd been trying to push everyone away. *I wonder what her story is. Please help me see her the way you do, Lord.*

Elizabeth took a deep breath and looked at Janice. "That hurt. But I hope you know, I hope each of you knows, how much I love you. No matter what."

Amy snapped her fingers. "Hitchhiking. It has to be hitchhiking."

"What?" Elizabeth turned and looked at her. Her heart still felt like it was bleeding, but at least now there was peace.

"I just rented 'The Karate Kid.' No one could endure a comment like that without some serious karate training. Am I right?"

Elizabeth handed her the bag of M&M's, "You've got that right. That and a big dose of grace. Your turn."

Amy munched on a couple of M&M's as she thought. "I once had a puppy, sang a solo on Broadway, and..." her face lit up, "I just started meeting with an older woman from church."

Janice pointed at her, "There is no way you ever sang on Broadway."

Amy tilted her head to the side. "You're right. But I do hope to one day."

"Sweet! Will you get us tickets?" Amanda clasped her hands together. Janice glared. Amanda dropped her eyes.

Elizabeth's brow furrowed. "You're meeting with an older woman from church?"

Amy's head bobbed.

*This is so exciting!* Elizabeth longed for years to get the older women connected to the teens. Finally, one was doing more than complain?

"We met last week. She sat in the row behind me and reached out before the service. After she heard my story, she asked if I'd like to get together to read the Bible." Amy giggled. "She was really into drama in high school, too."

*Into drama in high school? Who could that be?* Elizabeth lifted her hands. "So, who is this older woman?"

"She just started coming to Island Community Church. Her name is Lucy."

Elizabeth's heart started to beat faster. *Lucy? An older woman? Like maybe a year older than me.*

What was Lucy doing reaching out to her youth?



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# *Good Will*

### SANDY

Sandy flipped through the shirts on the rack, then gasped. There was one from Chico's that still had tags on it. Her smile widened as she discovered it just happened to be in her size. Eagerly she snatched the flowing tunic, added it to the pile in her arms, and headed to the dressing room.

A few years ago, she wouldn't have been caught dead shopping in Goodwill, but after a neighbor shared the incredible deals she found there, Sandy started going.

This was a treasure hunt. She never knew what she'd find. And at less than five dollars per item, who could resist?

As she headed to the checkout register, the sales associate smiled. "Sandy, so good to see you."

She placed her pile on the counter. "Louise, you won't believe what I found today."

Louise picked up the Chico's shirt. "This blue matches your eyes. And you found Calvin Klein pants? Sweet."

Sandy leaned in. "They're a little tight, but I'm hoping they'll motivate me to keep walking."

The sales associate laughed. "You certainly got lucky today. Ann Taylor. Coldwater Creek. Black House White Market. Got to love it when those rich ladies on the coast clear out their closets. That will be \$33.28. Would you like to round up to donate and help those less fortunate find work?"

Sandy nodded as she pulled out her credit card. At least someone would benefit from her hobby.

She piled the clothes into the back seat and figured she better buy more hangars. *Good thing Bed, Bath and Beyond is nearby.*

*I am going to go right in, pick up those hangars and then head straight out.* But the candles caught her eye. She reached for one, Eucalyptus Sage, and inhaled. *What a fragrance!* It went straight into her cart. Then she spied another called Lilac Vanilla. As she reached for it, a phone rang in the next aisle.

"Gail. What joy to hear from you. I am so thankful you called. I'm swamped trying to get bulletins folded for Sunday. And then I need to get fliers printed and distributed for the Harvest Festival and...."

Sandy added the Lilac Vanilla candle to her cart and headed to the hangars. She turned the corner and saw the woman on the phone groan and drop her head into her hands. Sandy paused. The woman stood in front of the hangars. *This is awkward.*

Then Sandy spied the salt and pepper shakers. *Mine could use updating.* She pondered whether to add them to her cart.

"I can't believe you're moving." From the corner of her eye, Sandy saw the woman on the phone shake her head. "You've been a lifesaver

volunteering in the church office. I don't know how I'll survive without you."

*Volunteering?* Sandy put a wooden pepper grinder into her cart. *I wish I could find a place to volunteer where someone needed me.* Last week she'd volunteered in the Friends of the Library bookstore. Not one person came in.

"I'm thankful your kids want you to live with them and that you'll get more time with your grandkids, but I will miss you. The whole church will miss you."

Sandy wondered what church she went to. She'd visited a few but hadn't settled on one yet. *It must be nice to feel so wanted.*

As the woman said goodbye and returned her phone to her purse, Sandy moved toward the hangars. She pointed behind the woman. "Excuse me. Could I get some of those"

"So sorry." The woman brushed away a tear and pushed her cart out of the way.

As Sandy reached for the hangars, she wondered, *Did I hear that for a reason? Is that something you'd have me do, Lord? I have the time. But wouldn't offering seem strange? Would it sound like I was nosy, listening to her conversation?* Except at that volume, Sandy expected much of the store heard. It wasn't like the woman whispered. *Would you please make it clear, Lord, if you want me to say anything?*

As she headed to the register, Sandy found the church lady in line ahead of her.

A woman in front looked at the church lady's cart. "Was there a sale on votives?"

The church lady shook her head.

"It looks like you're getting ready for a celebration."

The church lady exhaled. "Celebrating is the last thing I feel like doing today. They're for work."

“You must work at a fun place.”

“I’m the secretary at Island Community Church. It is a wonderful place. But currently, it’s anything but fun. I am swamped. I don’t know how I will finish everything before Sunday.”

“Sounds like you need help.” The woman turned and moved forward.

The church secretary sighed. “Do I ever.”

Sandy fumbled with her purse. *What if this is some weird church? I don’t know anything about it.* She looked at her cart with its hangars, pepper grinder, and candles and thought of the clothes in the car. *I need more in my life. This woman needs help. I guess I could offer to assist once and see how it goes.*

She reached out and tapped the church secretary on the shoulder.





## CHAPTER TWELVE

# Crash

CLARA

“C lara Johnson to the main office.”

Clara glanced at her bloody gloves. There were still fifty pounds of sirloin to package. *What are they thinking?*

“Clara, did you hear?” Dave popped into the grinding room.

“Yeah. I’m on it.” She covered the meat and pulled off her gloves.

“Those white shirts have no idea what they ask when they call us into the office.” Dave tied on his apron. “I’ll take over while you go.”

“Thanks.” Clara tossed her apron aside and wove her way through the shoppers. She hoped it wasn’t something with one of the kids. The last time she’d been called to the office Josh had been in a fight. *Who gets expelled at ten years old?* It would be nice if she were being called in for a raise. But with this economy, it wasn’t likely.

“What’s up, Sam?”

The clerk at the front desk shook her head, "You will not believe this."

Clara took a deep breath, "What is it this time?"

Mr. Bothwell emerged from his office with a policeman. "Clara, I don't know how to tell you, but your car is totaled."

"My car?" How could that be? She'd parked in the store parking lot this morning. Granted, she usually parked in the far corner with the other employees, but this morning she'd been racing to make it on time.

The policeman stepped forward. "A customer was backing out of a handicapped spot when his leg jammed on the gas. His car zoomed backward and crashed into yours."

Clara shook her head. "His leg jammed?"

The policeman nodded. "Yes, ma'am. His prosthetic leg became detached."

Mr. Bothwell held up his hands, "The customer sustained whiplash from the impact but overall seems fine. They've taken him to the hospital to be sure."

"But my car?"

The policeman looked down at his notes. "Appears totaled."

Clara raced outside and groaned. Her beautiful car was a crumpled heap.

Mr. Bothwell followed. "I called a tow company. They should be here soon. Where would you like them to take your car." He leaned in. "It's causing a scene. I'd like to get it moved as soon as possible."

Her car, the one she bought last month, the nicest car she'd ever owned, was totaled by a man with a prosthetic leg? Clara shook her head. *Only in Venice, Florida.*

The town's population tripled every winter, from October to Easter, as seniors flocked to the warmer climate. She'd moved here to get

away from her first husband. The sleepy little town felt like a refuge. But at times like this, she wondered. She looked at the twisted metal that used to be her car. There were definite drawbacks to living here.

“I bought the car from Venice Honda a month ago.”

Mr. Bothwell pulled out his phone. “They service cars. Want us to send it there?”

“Might as well. If it’s totaled, I’ll need another one.”

Sam patted her on the back. “No doubt about that, honey. That leg jammed bad.”

“Excuse me.” A man held out his card. “Fred Jones from the Venice Gondolier. Can you tell me about the accident? I’m here to write an article on it.”

Mr. Bothwell took the journalist’s card. “News travels fast.”

“In this town, any news is news.”

*A reporter? An article in the newspaper?* Clara looked from Mr. Bothwell to the Policeman, “I need to get back to the meat department.”

The policeman nodded. “We’ll send you the report so you can submit it to your insurance agency.”

The reporter looked in her direction. Mr. Bothwell handed his phone to Sam. “Please contact the tow company.” Then turned to the reporter, “Why don’t you come to my office.”

Clara grimaced. *This is so not good.*



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# *The Challenge*

RACHEL

**T**he door to Rachel's office slammed open. "What the hell is this?" In her doorway stood Dr. Arlington clutching a piece of paper. "You're giving an exclusive contract for Radiology services to Venice Radiology?" He slammed it on her desk, "Do you know what this will do to my practice?"

Rachel rose. "Aren't you part of Venice Radiology?"

He flicked his hand. "We've parted ways."

She wasn't surprised. She'd been hearing murmurs of Dr. Arlington's temper for months. *And now I get to experience it.* "Would you like to take a seat?"

"I am not taking this sitting down." His face was red. "You will not shut me out of this hospital."

Rachel returned his stare. "Dr. Arlington, you are not being denied access to equipment or staff at Venice Hospital. Only your status as a

staff physician is being changed. It is still possible for you to exercise clinical privileges through physician referrals.”

“That still reduces my income.”

*Never get between a doctor and his wallet.* That’s what her mentor warned. But in this case, she’d had to risk it. Revenue was down last year. An exclusive contract would help the hospital’s bottom line and protect patients.

She pointed to a stack of papers on the side of her desk.

“We’ve been getting complaints.” She reached for one. *“It’s not fair that when I come to the hospital, I’m assigned whoever is on call. While I was completely out of it, a radiologist who doesn’t take my insurance evaluated my results. I received an enormous out-of-pocket bill.”* She looked up, “An exclusive contract will protect patients from this.”

His eyes bulged. “I don’t give a damn about patients. This is the future of my practice we’re talking about.”

Rachel fought to not roll her eyes. *The public thinks of doctors as the compassionate ones who help patients. And they’re quick to vilify hospital administrators because we ‘take their money.’ If only they could hear.*

“It’s bad enough you’re doing it. But Englewood Hospital decided to do this, too.” He slammed his palms on her desk, “You are trying to ruin my professional relationships. This is a conspiracy. You are both out to get me.”

Rachel bit her lip. *This is ludicrous. This doc thinks everything is all about him. Help me not react, Lord.* She lowered her voice. “No one is out to get you.”

Dr. Arlington grabbed a pen from her desk and shoved it in her face, “You will write another memo saying you’ve changed your mind. There will be no exclusive contract. If you don’t, my career won’t be the only one going down the toilet.”

Rachel’s expression hardened. “Are you threatening me?”

He jammed his finger on the pad of paper before her, "If that memo isn't out by tomorrow, you will regret it."

He crossed to the door and looked at his watch. "You have till noon tomorrow." He bared his teeth. "You can't do this."

As he exited, Rachel crossed her arms. *Oh yes, I can.* And now, she was even more thankful she could.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# Leading

ELIZABETH

“Who does she think she is?” Elizabeth threw the invite on the coffee table. “She started coming to this church three weeks ago, and she’s already put together a meeting?”

“Just go.” Nancy dumped a load of clean laundry on the couch. “We’ve been talking about doing this for years. The women are excited.”

Elizabeth knew her friend was right. But it made her blood boil. First, Lucy started meeting with Amy, and now this? *People don’t start coming to church and take over the women’s ministry.* “Why doesn’t she start by helping in the nursery.”

Nancy smiled as she folded a onesie. “Lucy also volunteered to teach the two and three-year-olds every Sunday. Justin is thrilled. You know how he struggles to find people to do that.” Nancy leaned in. “Says she’s not going to babysit the kids but teach them.”

“What? Two and three-year-olds?” Elizabeth’s jaw dropped. “But what do we know about her? She may be totally off theologically.”

“Remember who her roommate was in college? Sheryl vouched for her.”

This was a nightmare. They were the pastors’ wives. At least two of them. It’d always been their job to plan things for the women.

“Well, what does Miriam say?” Miriam was the senior pastor’s wife. But even as Elizabeth asked, she knew. Miriam was the most introverted person she’d met. She hoped people wouldn’t look to her to do things.

“Miriam said she’ll be the first to sign up.”

“She did?” Elizabeth couldn’t believe it. They’d been at Island Community Church for two years. This was the first time she’d heard of Miriam volunteering for anything. Of course, Miriam taught full-time at a local Elementary school. A teacher herself, Elizabeth knew how draining kids could be. She couldn’t imagine teaching full-time as an introvert.

Nancy nodded and started folding her husband’s t-shirts. “You know Lucy wants to follow the outline from the book Heart to Heart. She’s not making this up; just getting the ball rolling. Miriam heard the author speak at a Pastor’s conference she went to with Brad and liked what she heard.”

Elizabeth’s heart raced. “This is so infuriating.”

“Actually, I think it might be fun.” Nancy folded a burp cloth. “I’d like to have an older woman meet with me, listen to me, help me.” She looked down at the monitor showing Dawn stirring in her crib. “I have so many questions.”

*Oh, God.* Elizabeth bit her lower lip. *Why does my heart have to hurt so much?*



It was true. They'd talked for years about connecting the older women to the younger women. But life in the church, working with the youth, and teaching at the local public school was so full her dreams to connect the women never got off the ground. Now someone else was doing what she planned.

*One more loss...*

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The following week, Elizabeth sat in Nancy's dining room surrounded by women from church. Their chatter filled the room. When Lucy walked in, all eyes turned to her.

"Thank you for coming today." Lucy smiled. "I'm excited to see what the Lord's going to do."

*Oh, brother.* Elizabeth shifted in her seat. Here *we go*.

"As I talked with each of you, I kept hearing a desire to get older women in the church connected with younger women. It was on my heart to get the ball rolling. Then I saw Eleanor Prentiss' book Heart to Heart at the bookstore and thought God might be up to something." She winked at the group. When she turned to address the other side of the room, Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "Now that you're here, I will watch the kids while you decide what you want that to look like."

Elizabeth looked up in surprise.

"But first, let's pray."

*Wasn't Lucy going to lead the meeting?* Elizabeth looked at Nancy, who smiled, then bowed her head.

*Oh great. Now everyone is going to think she's even more amazing. "Such a servant."* But at least Lucy wouldn't be telling them what to do.

As Lucy ended the prayer and left, Nancy leaned over and whispered. "She isn't taking over Elizabeth. Just helping us do what we've always wanted to do. So we better start thinking this through."

Elizabeth sighed. The way was open for her to lead. But... She glanced around the room, then rose to her feet. "Ok, ladies, who would like to take notes?"



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# *Flowers*

CLARA

“**F**lowers?” Annie punched her time clock. “You sure got a winner with Todd.”

Clara opened the card. “They aren’t from him.”

“They aren’t?” Annie looked over Clara’s shoulder.

“Nope.”

“Then who sent them.” Annie wagged her finger. “Do you have a secret admirer you haven’t told your best friend about?”

Clara exhaled. “Hardly. Listen to this. ‘Roses are red, violets are blue, Todd has been unfaithful to you.’”

Annie scowled. “What?”

Clara handed her the card. “No signature. Wanna guess who?”

“Susan?”

“Who else?”

Annie put her hands on her hips. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Clara smacked the card. "Every time I turn around, she keeps trying to cause problems."

"She's jealous."

"Jealous?" Clara threw up her hands. "She divorced him."

"Maybe she regrets it?"

Clara rolled her eyes. "It's a little late for that. Don't you think?"

Annie turned the card over. "What's this?" Glued on the back was a picture of Todd with a Playboy bunny on his lap.

Clara reddened. "Must be an old photo."

Annie held the card closer. "The date says August 96."

"That's when it was developed. Doesn't mean that's when it was taken."

Annie shook her head. "I'm pretty sure that's Trina."

"You know her?"

"Oh yeah. Tom met her at Todd's Bachelor party. She must've done a good job. Todd sure looks like he's enjoying it."

Clara's heart ached. "I don't even want to know."

"That's not being unfaithful. It was before you married."

"The night before."

"Good thing Susan didn't get a picture of the guy who jumped out of your cake." Annie held up her hands framing Clara's face. "The look on your face was priceless."

Clara looked down. "I still can't believe you guys did that."

Annie leaned in. "Wanna guess who got that guy's number?"

"But what about Tom?"

"Shhhh. It's our little secret." Annie pointed to the picture. "Speaking of secrets, I wonder how she got this?"

"Hired a detective?"

“Or, more likely, paid off one of the groomsmen. She sure likes to play dirty.” Annie handed the card back, “So what are you going to do with the flowers?”

“Pitch ’em.” Clara headed to the trash can.

“No, wait.” Annie jumped between her and the can. “Why don’t you send them back?”

“Send them back?”

“Yeah, along with another poem.” Annie raised her eyebrows. “Strawberries are sweet. Chocolate is rich. Would you please stop being a —”

Clara elbowed her. “And start world war three?”

Annie rubbed her shoulder. “I thought it was pretty good.”

Clara chuckled. “You are definitely a better poet than her.” She tossed the card in the trash.

“That’s what friends are for.”

A new hire passed by to clock out.

“Hey, Steph,” Annie tapped her shoulder. “Would you like some flowers?”

“Flowers?”

“Yeah, these were mistakenly left at the desk. I’d hate to pitch them.”

“Sure, I’ll take them.” Stephanie sniffed one of the blooms. “They smell lovely. You sure?”

“Enjoy.”

They watched her walk out of the store.

Annie leaned over. “Now you can forget about it. And if Susan happens to be watching out front. She can see whose day she made and maybe think twice about doing this again.”

“You think she’s out front?”

“Someone had to deliver them. Do you think she paid delivery fees?”

Todd said Susan was cheap as the day was long. *I hope I don't have to face her.* "What a way to start the week."

As they left the building, they scanned the parking lot. "If she was here, it looks like she's gone."

Clara exhaled. *Thank you, Lord.*

Annie pointed to the handicapped spot as they passed. "At least no prosthetics jammed gas pedals today."

"Was that not crazy?" Clara pulled her keys out of her purse. "Never in a million years did I imagine when they called me to the front office, it'd be for that. So what do you have planned for tonight."

Annie wiggled her hips. "The Macarena is calling. Wanna go dancing?"

"Wish I could. I have six hungry mouths to feed."

"Nothing like saying 'I do' to a whole new job."

"You've got that right."

Annie pointed to Clara's loaner. "When are you going to get a new car?"

"Got to wait for the insurance company to send payment. And who knows when that may be."

"Well, at least you weren't in the car when he hit it."

"That is something to be thankful for."

"And at least the guy had good insurance. I can't believe they're letting you use that car while you wait."

"Too bad it isn't a Lamborghini."

"That would've been sweet. Especially if it came with one of the Italian guys from the ads." Annie resumed dancing the Macarena.

"Sure you don't want to change your mind?"

"And give Susan the opportunity to catch a photo of me dancing with another man? No thanks." Clara waved, "See you later, friend."

As she opened the car door, a gentle breeze caressed her skin. The sky was aglow with radiant shades of pink and purple. She paused to savor it, thankful for this glimpse of beauty in the midst of life's crap.

The picture of Todd came to mind. *I sure wish I hadn't seen that.* But what could she do?

She bit her lip and climbed into the car.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# Heart to Heart

RACHEL

Heart to Heart? Rachel looked at the announcement in the church bulletin. An invitation to sign up for a new program where older women would be paired to meet one-on-one with younger women. As she entered the sanctuary, she saw the youth clumped in the front of the church. Kalea was easy to spot. She stood in the middle talking with two of her friends. As she turned to sit down, she saw Rachel and waved.

*Would I ever love to meet with her. But that's crazy. I have no idea what we'd talk about. She probably doesn't have time for that anyway.*

As Rachel sat down, she glanced around the church, observing different women. It would be nice to know at least one of them. *I should sign up to have an older woman meet with me. Maybe then I'd be able to figure life out.*

Throughout the service, she couldn't get the new program out of her mind.



As she exited the sanctuary, Rachel saw a crowd of women gathered around the sign-up table. *Looks like this is going to be a hit.* She waited to one side for the crowd to clear.

Young moms flocked to the table.

“C’mon Lisa, you never know. We might get free babysitting.”

Another called out, “I hope I get ideas for how to survive teething.”

“And the terrible twos.” Her friend pointed at a screaming toddler, wriggling in his father’s arms.

Two older women passed. “Finally, we can talk sense into their crazy heads.”

The other woman seemed hesitant. “What would we talk about?”

Her friend laughed. “Dolores, I have never known you to be at a loss for words.” She pointed at a mom who tried to calm a crying baby. “If nothing else, it’ll remind you why it’s a blessing to be on this side of child-rearing.”

Notably absent from the crowd were teens. They’d exited the church en masse and headed to their “room” at the end of the classroom wing. *I wonder if there’s an age limit?*

But then she spied a teen sitting on a bench with a young woman. The teen animatedly talked as the woman leaned in. Her eyes never left the teen’s face. Rachel watched as the woman put her arm around the teen, and they bowed their heads. *She’s praying for her?* Rachel’s heart filled as she witnessed the beauty of the moment.

When the woman finished praying, the teen wiped away tears, then gave the woman a big hug. A three-year-old raced towards them, “Mommy! Look what I made.” The little boy climbed into his mom’s lap and displayed his latest creation.

A man walked up. “Ready to go, Lucy? I need to get to the store.”

The little boy lifted his arms. “Hold me, Daddy?” His dad lifted him over his head, sat him behind his neck, and headed to a nearby van.

After another hug, the young mom followed them. The teen headed in the direction her friends had gone, a spring in her step.

*I would have loved to have someone care for me like that when I was a teen. I'd love that now.*

Rachel looked toward the table. The crowd had thinned, so she approached. "Do you have to be a church member to participate?"

"Nope," the woman behind the table explained, "You just need to be willing to commit to meet one on one with someone," she held out the sign-up sheet, "or be met with."

Rachel considered the paper before her. *In which column should I write my name?* She wavered between the two, then looked up. "Do you get to pick who you meet with?"

"Nope." The other woman behind the table shook her head. "We thought it'd be more fun if it were a surprise. All the names are going into two hats - one for mentors, the other for women who sign up to be met with. Then we'll draw names to pair people."

The woman beside her piped up, "We're letting the Lord decide."

The first woman laughed. "Yep, That way, no one gets upset at us."

Rachel exhaled. *I am not putting my name down to be a mentor. What if I get paired with someone who knows the Bible better?*

But to be met with sounded harmless enough. She lived in a town where the average age was sixty-eight. At forty-two, there were bound to be women far older than her, especially in a church of at least five hundred people. She looked toward the parking lot as the young mom's van disappeared around the corner. Maybe she'd end up with someone who cared like that. She couldn't wait to see who the Lord paired her with.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# *Belonging*

SANDY

“I know it’s only been two weeks, but I can’t imagine life before you started volunteering. How did I ever survive without you?” Karen stood in the doorway, coffee in hand. “Getting those Harvest Festival fliers printed would have put me six feet under. I can’t wait to see who shows up because of them.”

Sandy smiled. She loved working in the church office. It didn’t hurt she’d fallen in love with Island Community Church that first Sunday. It was a perfect fit. She only wished Robert would join her.

But he golfed on Sundays. In a way, this was a blessing. She wouldn’t have felt free to attend church if he was home.

Now this church, this office, felt like home.

Karen crossed to her desk, a massive pile in her hands. “Would you mind stuffing envelopes today?”

“I’m glad to do whatever helps,” Sandy replied.

“These are letters letting the women who signed up for the Heart to Heart program know who they’ve been paired with.” Karen pointed to a stack of brightly colored copies with names handwritten at the top and middle of each page. “If you could fold and stuff them in envelopes, that would be a huge help. I already put the address labels on. You need to double-check to ensure the right letters get into the correct envelopes.”

Sandy picked up the top letter. “I bet there’s going to be excitement when these are received.”

“For some.” Karen nodded, “But others?” she shook her head, “I’m glad I wasn’t the one doing the pairing.”

Sandy looked at her. “You think some women will be upset?”

Karen reached over and put her hand on Sandy’s shoulder. “That’s putting it mildly. And when they do, we’ll be the ones they call. You know what they say about beehives? There’s the sweetness of honey, but it’s also a place you can get stung. Is that ever true for church offices.” She sighed. Then headed back to her desk.

*‘We’ll be the ones...’* Sandy knew Karen was warning her, but hearing that *‘we,’ That includes me. I belong.* She smiled.

As she looked at the stack of letters before her, she wondered if she should’ve signed up. *I would love to get to know another woman in the church. But I bet they are expecting someone with deep insights. I’d hate to be a disappointment.* Even though she’d been a Christian for thirty years, there was still so much she didn’t know.

*And at 62, she laughed, I’m far too old to be a young woman.* She carefully checked the name at the top of the letter against the label on the envelope. *At least I can do something to help others get connected.*

As she inserted the letters into the envelopes, she prayed for each pair of women. *Lord, may you pour your grace all over these connections and may your purposes for their time together be realized.* She glanced

toward Karen's office and added, *especially if it's not what they're expecting.*



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

# Mrs. Pellegrino

## ELIZABETH

Elizabeth longed for an older woman to mentor her, someone to ask the questions she wrestled with, someone who would care for her heart and invest in her. It'd been a dream for years to do this.

She looked down at the letter. She'd been paired with Mrs. Pellegrino. *This should be interesting.* The Pellegrinos had been coming to Island Community Church for years. Elizabeth never interacted much with them, but that full head of gray hair had to contain tons of life experience and wisdom.

Another nice thing, Mrs. Pellegrino agreed to come to her. Between teaching and helping with youth, time was in short supply. But there was never a doubt she'd make time for this. Elizabeth couldn't wait to get started.

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Mrs. Pellegrino sat on her couch the next week as Elizabeth held out a tray.

“Would you like a cookie? I baked them with the teen girls in my Bible study last night.” Mrs. Pellegrino reached for one, then Elizabeth continued, “It was so crazy, I turned my back for a second to talk with a new student, and they piled all the ingredients into the bowl: butter, flour, salt, sugar, eggs, then brought the bowl to me asking, ‘Now what do we do?’” Elizabeth laughed, “Here’s hoping you don’t get a bite with a bunch of baking soda.”

Mrs. Pellegrino’s cookie halted halfway to her mouth.

“It’s ok.” Elizabeth smiled, “They must’ve turned out good. The girls devoured a ton of them.”

Mrs. Pellegrino put her cookie on her napkin, then folded her hands in her lap. “So what would you like to talk about?”

Elizabeth sighed. She didn’t enjoy superficial conversation. Might as well be vulnerable. “I’ve been struggling over not having children. It’s hard seeing my friends become moms. I feel left behind.”

“Sorry honey,” Mrs. Pellegrino shook her head. “I can’t relate. I popped babies out one after the other. I wanted someone to tell me how not to get pregnant.”

Elizabeth blinked back tears.

Mrs. Pellegrino continued, “Something else you’d like to ask?” She looked around the house, then leaned in. “I’d be glad to help you learn how to clean this place.”

Elizabeth lifted her eyebrows. *Didn’t she hear this house was full of teens last night?*

Mrs. Pellegrino leaned in, “I noticed dust on the mantle when I walked in. I’ve got just the thing that will take care of that. And your baseboards could use a really good scrubbing. And that ceiling fan is filthy.” She pointed up, reached into her purse, and pulled out a

catalog, "I started working for a company that sells great cleaning products, and as I look around, I see so many that would benefit you."

A sales call? This had become a sales call? Elizabeth shook her head. *Am I hearing right? Or is this a joke?* "I thought you were retired?"

Mrs. Pellegrino nodded, "Clive retired nine years ago, but it's been a bit tight living on his pension. As the pastor's wife, I figured you'd be glad to help us out."

Elizabeth took the catalog. "I will give it a look."

"Well, know I'm ready to answer any questions you have about cleaning."

Elizabeth flipped through the pages. She had no idea what to say.

"Would you show me your bathroom?"

Elizabeth looked up, "Oh sure, it's down the hall on your right."

Mrs. Pellegrino shook her head, "No honey, I don't want to use it. I want to show you the cleaning products that can help you there. You know what they say, if you want to know how well a restaurant is run, check the bathrooms. What do you think people expect when they come to a pastor's house? I've been cleaning bathrooms for nearly seventy years, and with six kids and Clive, that's no small feat." She beamed. "The last time I hosted the women's auxiliary at my house Ethyl Thompson commented people could eat off my floors."

"I bet that's high praise from Ethyl Thompson."

"You'd better believe it, honey."

Elizabeth rose and held out the catalog. "I better pass on the consultation. A group of students are coming soon to plan the winter retreat."

Mrs. Pellegrino nodded. "You keep the catalog. Let me know what catches your eye. Thank you for having me. It's been a delight."

As Elizabeth closed the door behind Mrs. Pellegrino, she didn't know whether to laugh or cry. *Did that really happen?*



She shook her head as she picked up the tray. At least she was the only one Mrs. Pellegrino was paired with. *But*, She looked up in horror. *What were other women experiencing?*

As she returned the cookies to the Tupperware container, she knew one thing was certain. They'd hear soon enough.

A decorative floral pattern in the top left corner, featuring various flowers and leaves in a light, sketchy style.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

# Trailer Park Treasure

RACHEL

As Rachel pulled into the trailer park, she double-checked the address. Sure enough, the map directed her to the doublewide before her. Rust lined the edges of each panel, and the front porch, loaded with plants, bowed under their weight. *I sure didn't expect this. But don't judge a book by its cover.* She headed to the front door.

"Nice car," a teen called from a nearby lot. She turned and saw his eyes follow the curves of her body.

She stiffened. *Who lives in a place like this?* But she kept moving forward. *I've come this far. I might as well find out.*

Rachel knocked, then waited, wrinkling her nose. *There must be something rotting nearby.* She looked at the slip of paper in her hand, then called out, "Ms. Coralee?" *I wouldn't be too eager to come to the door if I lived in this place.* She heard the rattle of a chain then the door creaked open.

A little woman stuck her head through the opening. She squinted at Rachel through round glasses held together on one side with masking tape. Arched above each lens were brows sketched on a pasty face creased with wrinkles, surrounded by a halo of thinning white hair. She didn't reach Rachel's shoulder.

"Ms. Coralee?"

"That's me. Can I help you, dear?"

"I'm Rachel Cummings. They paired us at Island Community Church for the new Heart to Heart Women's ministry." Rachel held out the piece of paper in her hand.

Ms. Coralee scrunched her nose, "You're here to check my heart?"

Rachel chuckled, "No, ma'am. I think the idea is we meet and share hearts."

"You have a visitor Gran."

Rachel turned to see a familiar face. "Kalea? What are you doing here?"

Kalea shrugged, "I live in the next trailer." She pointed at Coralee, "We've been neighbors long as I can remember."

"And she's your grandmother?" Rachel asked.

"Old enough to be her great-grandmother." Laughed Coralee.

"She's my spiritual mom, but my mom doesn't like anyone else to be called my mom, so I call her Gran."

*This is interesting.* "Your spiritual mom?"

"Yep. Ms. Coralee has hosted a Kids Bible Club each week for years. That's where I first learned about Jesus and came to know Him." Kalea joined them on the porch. "Gran, how about we sit on the steps and visit."

"No deary. You and your friend come inside. I may even have cookies to share." She winked and opened her door. As they entered, she

pointed to the couch. “Just move that pile to the ground and make yourself at home.”

Rachel wasn’t sure which pile she meant. Stacks of papers, candy wrappers, and empty tins covered every square inch of the couch and trailer. In the corner was a mound of clothes.

Kalea raced around, moving things. “Just give me a sec.”

Rachel’s eyes began to water, and she sneezed. There was dust everywhere. She read a recent Behavior Research and Therapy article on hoarding but had never seen anything like this.

“I didn’t realize Gran signed up for the Heart to Heart thing at church. If I’d known you were coming, I would’ve cleaned up.” Kalea stomped on a moving black spot. Rachel shuddered.

“Here we go.” Coralee returned carrying a plate with a few cookies in the center. “I knew I could find some.” She turned to Kalea. “Help yourself, sweetie. I know how you love my cookies.”

Kalea smiled at her. “Thanks so much, Gran. You’re the best.” She grabbed a cookie and devoured it.

Coralee beamed, then held the plate toward Rachel.

Rachel bit into a cookie and quickly lifted a napkin. She looked at Kalea and forced herself to swallow. Her nose started to run. She dabbed it with the napkin.

“How long have you lived in Venice?” She asked Coralee.

“Moved here as a young bride. My husband played the trumpet in the circus. After he ran off with one of the trapeze girls, I stayed. I loved the beach and had a good job cleaning at the El Patio Hotel. When a lion tamer invited me to church, the Lion of Judah changed my life forever. That’s when I knew this trailer park was my mission field. People here need hope.”

Kalea nodded. "That's for sure." She looked at Rachel, "You know how the Bible talks about a light shining in the darkness? That's what Ms. Coralee is for me."

"I was here when Kalea's mom was born. Only she never listened the way her daughter has. I'm proud of you, sweetie."

Kalea reached out and hugged Coralee. "I love you, Gran."

The itch in Rachel's throat intensified. She coughed and stood. "Well, I better run."

Coralee turned towards her. "Why, hello. Would you like a cookie?"

"Oh, thank you, but no." Rachel dabbed her nose again. "I just finished the last one. I don't want to eat too many, or I may not fit in my clothes."

Ms. Coralee lifted a bony finger, "And you are?"

Rachel looked at Kalea, then back at Ms. Coralee. "Uh... Rachel. Rachel Cummings." She held out the letter, "From church."

"Nice to meet you. Thank you for coming to visit me in my mission field. Did you know I was invited to church for the first time by a lion tamer? Met the Lion of Judah, and my life has never been the same."

Kalea looked about to cry.

Rachel picked up her purse. "God writes the best stories. It's been a treat getting to meet you, Ms. Coralee, and," she smiled at Kalea, "to see you again."

Kalea rose, "I'll walk you to your car."

"Come again soon," Coralee called out.

Rachel sneezed. Then waved.

As they approached her car, Kalea shook her head. "I can't believe you were paired with Gran. She is an incredible woman. And the cookies she used to make were amazing."

Rachel took a deep breath and turned to her. "I think it's beautiful the way the Lord has her here for you and you here for her."

“Yeah.” Kalea exhaled. “I don’t know what I’d do without her.”

“What about your mom?” Rachel asked.

“My mom.” Kalea shifted her weight from one foot to another. “It’s a long story.”

“How long has your Gran been losing her memory?”

“At first, it was little things. I’d find milk in the cupboard, or she’d keep asking what day it was. Then she started to pile things - she never used to do that. Her place was always immaculate. Now I never know what she might say next.” Kalea bit her lip. “Are you going to come again?”

*Good question.* Not one ounce of Rachel wanted to return to that trailer or this park. She glanced at the youth still leaning against the street sign. And her allergies hadn’t been triggered like this in ages. But the church ladies did say God did the pairing. Rachel looked at Kalea. What if God paired her with Ms. Coralee for a reason?

“Yes,” she nodded. “I plan to return.”

Kalea threw her arms around her. “I’m so thankful!”

Rachel placed her arm around Kalea and knew there was no doubt she’d be back.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

# *Train Older Women*

ELIZABETH

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “When she held out the catalog, I about lost it.”

Nancy laughed and wrapped her arms around her middle. “Ouch. You’re making my incision hurt. That’s one for the books.”

“Then she says, ‘As one of the pastors’ wives, I figured you’d want to help.’” Elizabeth shook her head. “She drives a Mercedes.”

“Guess she doesn’t read the church budget.” Nancy tossed the catalog onto the coffee table. “I’m thankful vinegar works to clean floors. Those products are expensive.”

“What worries me is wondering what other women are experiencing in this new Heart to Heart program. I never imagined this could happen.”

Nancy shrugged and smiled. “I had a great time with my mentor. Did you know Virginia Williams was a founding member of the La Leche League? I hit the jackpot getting paired with her. And she has

the most amazing garden. She sent me home with a ton of veggies. Look at these snap peas.”

Elizabeth sighed. “You may be one of the fortunate few. Suzy Erickson said her mentor Dolores Hankins talked nonstop. She was going to take notes but gave up after the first few minutes. Said she couldn’t write that fast.”

“Ooh.” Nancy shook her head. “I hope she didn’t stay long.”

Elizabeth sat down on the floor. “Two hours.”

“No way.”

“Yep. Probably would’ve stayed longer, but Suzy’s daughter woke from her nap screaming.”

“I bet Suzy was happy for once to have a screaming child.”

Elizabeth shrugged. “Suzy did say it made her consider how much she talks when her husband comes home from work. Ever since that meeting, she’s been trying to listen more to him.”

“Don’t tell Jeff. He might wish I’d been paired with Dolores.” Nancy leaned down and looked into Elizabeth’s eyes, “I expect more benefit is happening than you realize.”

Elizabeth played with the fringe on the carpet. “I hope so.”

Nancy picked up the bowl of snap peas and started pulling the stems and strings off. “Lucy did point out we forgot one key thing.”

Elizabeth bristled. “And what was that?”

“Well,” Nancy looked up from her pea pods, “Titus 2:3 does start with ‘Train the older women.’ We didn’t do that.”

“They are old women!” Elizabeth threw up her hands. “Who’d think they need training?”

“Ooooh, somebody’s touchy.”

Elizabeth crossed her arms. “What gives her the right to criticize?”

“Lucy’s not criticizing, Elizabeth. Just pointing out something we overlooked.” Nancy returned to snapping peas, “I went back and



looked in the Heart to Heart book. There is a whole section on how to train older women. But we didn't look at that."

Elizabeth raised her hands. "Everyone was so excited to start. We jumped right in."

"And some older women don't need training. But," Nancy held up the catalog, "some probably would've benefitted."

"Or been weeded out in the process." Elizabeth exhaled. "So what do we do now?"

"Fortunately, we didn't tell them how long this was going on." She held up a pea pod. "I plan to keep meeting with Virginia Williams as long as she'll let me. But others," she discarded the stem and string, "Well, the ball's in your court how much you want to meet with Mrs. Pellegrino."

Elizabeth scrunched her nose. "How 'bout one and done?"

"Well," Nancy smiled, "if that consultation includes a demo, maybe you could get her to clean your house? I'd take a free house cleaning any day."

Elizabeth pointed to the catalog. "And pay \$60 for cleaning products? That's our weekly grocery budget. I don't think Caleb is game for a week of fasting."

"If nothing else, you have a great story to tell the other pastors' wives at our next gathering. I can't remember the last time I laughed so hard."

Elizabeth looked down.

Nancy laid her hand on Elizabeth's arm. "I'm sorry. I know how much you were looking forward to being mentored. Especially now that your mom is fading."

Tears flowed down Elizabeth's cheeks. "I called last night and had to remind her three times who I was. Every time we talk, there's new evidence she's slipping away."

“She’s so young.” Nancy put the bowl of peas aside. “Remember the care packages she sent us in college? Everyone looked forward to her magic bars and snickerdoodles.”

“Now she struggles to find her way to the refrigerator. It was hard when we moved across the country to come here. But now, even phone calls don’t bridge the distance.”

“How’s your dad handling it?”

Elizabeth picked at her cuticles. “Thinks he will need to put her in a home soon. I don’t know how she’ll do.”

“When I visited you, it seemed everyone in town knew her.”

“She loved to help people. And now she’s the one needing help.” Elizabeth bit her lip. “More help than my dad thinks he can give.”

“I always admired how she dressed up right before your dad got home from work and had him ring the doorbell so she could give him a special welcome.” Nancy resumed snapping peas. “I’ve never heard of anyone doing that.”

“She’s one of a kind. I was and am so blessed to have her as a mom. But I sure do miss her.” Elizabeth pointed to the catalog, “I was hoping...”

“I know. Somehow, someday, may God bring you someone who will care for your soul.”

“We give so much to so many.” Elizabeth sighed. “For once, it’d be nice to be on the receiving end.”

Nancy pointed to her snap peas. “You never know how God will provide. But it might come in a way you aren’t expecting.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

# Women's Bible Study

SANDY

Sandy scanned the room. Every head in the group was bent. *Their hands have to be cramped from taking so many notes.* For the past hour, Marge Wilkinson expounded Mark 4 and the parables of Jesus.

After the final prayer, the woman in front of Sandy exclaimed to the friend beside her, “She is so amazing. I’ve heard that parable a thousand times and never knew it contained such treasure.”

*Treasure?* Sandy rebuked herself for letting her mind wander. It was her first time coming to the women’s Bible study at Island Community Church. She’d been hoping to get to know more of the women but realized quickly this was not a social event, at least not this first portion.

As she picked up her purse to move to the next room, she heard one of the women thanking the teacher, “I can’t imagine the hours you put into preparing each week’s Bible study.”

Marge beamed, "I take seriously the calling of the Lord to disciple women through His Word."

The women were now heading into smaller groups for the second part of the study. *I hope we'll get to interact more during the next hour.* Sandy sat next to the leader of the group who introduced herself as May Arnold. She seemed nice. In her hand was a list of questions. Sandy noted to the right of each she'd written a time. *Wow, this is really organized.*

"Who remembers the first soil the seed fell into?"

Hands shot up, May selected a woman at the other end of the circle, who read from her paper, "The first seed fell along the path."

May nodded. "Very good, Edith. Who knows what happened to it?"

The same woman's hand shot up but May selected the woman next to her.

"Georgia?"

"The birds came and devoured it."

May nodded. "You're right. And what did Jesus say that represents?"

The room got quiet as the women looked at each other, then in their Bibles. When a few hands raised, May reminded the group, "Remember, you are not allowed to answer unless you did your homework this week." Most of the hands came down.

The woman who first answered waved her hand eagerly.

"Yes, Edith?"

"On Tuesday, I wrote," she read from her paper, "those first seeds represent people who hear when the Word is sown but Satan immediately comes and takes away the Word that is sown in them."

"Right again."

May looked down at the list of questions in her hand. "What soil did the second seed fall on?"

“Excuse me.” A woman waved her hand.

May looked at her, “Eloise, did you want to ask something?”

She nodded. “How does he do that? I mean can Satan enter people’s minds and remove thoughts, kind of like obliterating memories?”

*Now that’s a good question.* Sandy looked at May eagerly. *I can’t wait to hear the answer.*

May looked around the group. “Uh... does someone have an answer for that?”

The women looked at each other. May looked at her watch. “We better move on. You can ask Marge later.” She looked down at her paper. “What soil did the second seed fall on?”

Sandy looked over to the other side of the fellowship hall where a group of young women were in a different Bible study. One of the elder’s wives, Sheryl, a young mom herself, facilitated. The women held their Bibles, reading periodically, talking, and laughing. They were all engaged.

The woman next to Sandy shook her head and said in a loud whisper. “They are missing out.”

“How do you know?” Sandy asked.

“They’re having too much fun to be studying the Bible.”

The group leader cleared her throat. “What did the second soil represent?”

Sandy wasn’t sure, but she wished she was thirty years younger.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

# Unexpectedly Seen

ELIZABETH

“I had no idea she’d be here.” Elizabeth rolled her eyes as she saw Lucy standing at the registration table for Bible Study Leader’s training. “Guess she’ll want to lead a women’s Bible study next.”

Nancy looked at her. “Is that bad?”

Elizabeth bit her lip. Throughout the training, she kept glancing at Lucy, sitting in the front row, taking extensive notes. Her eyes were fixed on the speaker.

Elizabeth sighed. She was like that in college. Now she felt beaten down. Being a pastor’s wife was harder than she anticipated. She loved the teens, loved getting to invest in their lives and be part of something eternal, and loved coming alongside her husband to help him, but it was a 24/7 job. A job her husband was barely paid for, so she had to work and...

Elizabeth closed her eyes. She was tired. *Tired of living at a break-neck pace. Tired of all the expectations. Tired of...* She opened her eyes

and saw Lucy in the front row. *Tired of seeing someone new waltz in and take over.*

Every time she turned around, Lucy was there. Caleb said she planned to teach aerobic dance in the Fellowship Hall as an outreach. *What would she do next?*

Elizabeth couldn't wait to leave soon as the training ended.

She grabbed her purse and leaned over to Nancy. "I'll see you later." She headed out the door.

"Elizabeth." She looked up and saw Mrs. Pellegrino head toward her.

*Can the day get any worse?*

"Did you have a chance to look through that catalog?"

"Mrs. Pellegrino, I had no idea you were here. Do you want to lead a Bible study?"

"Heavens, no. I don't have time for that. Mrs. Green purchased a bunch of products and asked if I'd drop them off." She held up a full bag.

Elizabeth gave a half-hearted laugh. "Looks like business is booming."

"There's always room for more." Mrs. Pellegrino reached into the tote on her shoulder. "Did you hear about our monthly specials?" She held out a flier. "It's a great time to purchase a ceiling fan duster. I noticed yours was overdue for cleaning."

Elizabeth took the flier. "Thanks for thinking of me. I've got to run."

She made a beeline for the car and was about to open the door when she felt a familiar gush.

"Oh no." It couldn't be. She looked at the date on her watch. Stink. Of all days to be wearing white pants.

She turned back toward the church and hoped to make it to the bathroom in time, thankful for the extra tampon in her purse. She passed Nancy, whose eyebrows shot up. But there was no time to explain. What a blessing one of the stalls was empty.

Once again, red on tissue. At least she'd made it to the bathroom in time. And there hadn't been time to wonder if this might be the month. But she groaned as cramps began. All she wanted was a heating pad, Advil, and a nap, to sleep through this monthly nightmare.

As she washed her hands, she glanced in the mirror and barely recognized the person before her. She loved to celebrate life, to have fun, and to see the good in any situation. The weary eyes staring back couldn't be hers.

*Why God? Why can't I get pregnant? Why can't I have a baby? Why does this have to hurt so much?* She was tired of trying to find good in this situation. It stunk.

"Elizabeth? Are you ok?"

Elizabeth felt a hand on her shoulder and turned to see Lucy. *You've got to be kidding me.* She wanted to race out the door. But knew she'd better say something.

"Auntie Flow arrived for an unexpected visit." She pointed down. "Not the best day to be wearing white."

Lucy nodded. "I banned those from my wardrobe long ago."

"Good idea." She wiped her hands, then tossed the paper into the trash.

"I always hate it when I get my period. And not only because of cramps. We struggled for years to get pregnant."

Elizabeth frowned. "You struggled?"

"Yes. Struggled is putting it mildly. For four years and then nearly lost Eli. I started bleeding when I was a couple of months pregnant.



Thankfully he hung in there.” She sighed. “I miscarried last month, which was like the worst period of my life.”

“I didn’t know.” Elizabeth couldn’t imagine being pregnant and then losing the baby.

“When I saw you standing there, I wondered... is there anything I can be praying for you?”

Elizabeth bit her lip. How she’d longed to talk with someone who’d struggled with this, but this was Lucy. She always looked like she had it together. *Yet Lucy struggled? Struggled with infertility? Was still struggling?*

Elizabeth took a deep breath. “We’ve been trying for seven years.”

Lucy reached out and hugged her. When she prayed, Elizabeth felt something she hadn’t in a long time... hope.

A decorative border at the top of the page featuring various light-colored flowers and leaves, including what appear to be hydrangeas and small blossoms, arranged in a soft, painterly style.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

# *The Plane*

CLARA

Clara stood on the end of the aisle, restocking Health and Beauty. She'd been excited about this promotion. It didn't bring in much more pay, but at least she wasn't freezing all day. And she loved working through boxes, getting things lined up in order. When so much of life was out of control, restocking brought a sense of calm.

She smiled as she worked her way toward the bakery. The smell of fresh bread filled her nostrils. Her mouth salivated. Did she ever love carbs! What a gift Annie was the bakery manager. Clara always experienced joy (and often great samples) whenever their paths crossed.

"Wanna try my latest creation?" Annie popped around the corner, a cookie in hand.

Clara looked at her watch. "I'm about due for a break anyway." She reached out, "Oooh, it's still warm. What's in it?"

"Guess."

Clara took a bite and closed her eyes. "Chocolate, nuts, coconut, toffee...Everything delicious, including the kitchen sink?"

"You've got it."

She held up the cookie. "This is your best yet."

Annie beamed. "Let's hope the boss thinks so." She pointed to the parking lot. "Looks like somebody got new wheels."

Clara nodded, "Yep, the insurance money finally came in. There was enough to pay off the rest of my loan and buy a new car."

"I can only imagine how relieved you are."

"And get this, you will never guess what they put down for the cause of the accident."

Annie thought for a moment, "Senior snafu? Detached disaster? Projectile Prosthetic?"

"Very funny. No. They said it was an act of God."

Annie crossed her arms. "An act of God?"

"Yep. Crazy, hunh? Though I expect they got that right in more ways than one." She wrinkled her nose, "I was a bit too attached to that car."

"You think?" Annie laughed. "I heard you bawled Todd out on vacation for driving your 'new car' up and down mountain roads."

"That was the nicest car I ever had. I wanted everyone to take care of it." She exhaled, "But I was caring more for it than my —"

Crash! Clara ducked. The building shuddered. A man in the next aisle hit the floor.

*What was that?*

Annie looked up. "It sounded like an explosion on the roof."

Clara shook her head. "But the roof looks fine."

"Do you think someone drove into the front of the store?"

They raced to the entrance. There was no crash scene.

"Maybe in the store room?"

They headed to the back of the store. Other than the usual mess of boxes, nothing seemed out of place.

Clara tilted her head, "We did hear something, right?"

Annie nodded.

Everything seemed untouched, except for the customers and employees. Fear, confusion, and perplexity were evident in the eyes of each person she passed. A baby cried on the other side of the store.

"So, what just happened?"

"I have no clue, but I've got to return to my ovens."

Clara grabbed a box from the storeroom and resumed restocking.

Ten minutes later, the intercom crackled. "Attention. Everyone. Out of the building. Immediately."

*Now what?*

Clara set the box down and looked at her watch. *10:10 a.m. This has got to be the strangest day.*

She headed to the front door. *At least I still get paid.*

Annie caught up to her. "The office called and said to turn the ovens off. Do they have any idea how many trays of baked goods will be ruined?"

A woman began to sway before her. "I can't... breathe! I... can't breathe."

Clara raced forward

"Annie, help me!" They put their arms around the woman and assisted her toward the doors. *Good thing it's Tuesday and not a lot of customers.* But the entrance was crowded as nearly a hundred people tried to funnel through.

Annie looked up. "It is starting to smell funny."

The woman groaned.

"Let us pass. This lady needs help."

Some stepped back. Clara pressed forward.

The moment they reached outside, fresh air filled her lungs.

An ambulance raced into the parking lot, followed by two firetrucks.

While Clara held onto the woman, Annie waved down the paramedics.

In front of them, one of the baggers was pointing at the building. "No way. No joking way."

Clara looked back as the paramedics put oxygen around the woman's face. *A plane? What was a plane doing on the roof?*

Smoke cleared to reveal a man hobbling out of the wreckage tottering precariously on the roof's edge.

"A plane landed on top of the store?"

Venice airport was only a mile away. *What was a plane doing landing here?*

"That's not any plane. It's a Cessna 127. Or was." One of the bag boys reported.

An elderly customer shielded his eyes and squinted. "Looks like it skidded along the top then crashed into the parapet."

"That must've been what we heard." Annie pointed. "It's right over the bakery."

Soon as the pilot climbed down the ladder, firetrucks started spraying foam.

A mom carrying a toddler passed as she sought to get further away. "I hear it's leaking gas."

Clara rolled her eyes, "Probably the only reason Mr. Bothwell agreed to empty the store."

"Oh my goodness! Channel 40 is here!" Annie grabbed Clara's arm. "I bet they're going to interview the pilot. Let's go hear."

"You go."

“What? Oh... oh, right.” Annie jumped to her feet. “I’ll come back and tell you.”

Clara shook her head. *What next? At least the pilot survived. But the roof?*

Clara walked to the far end of the parking lot where she’d parked her car a few hours ago. These days she parked as far away from the handicapped spots as possible. She sat on the hood.

*How in the world would they ever get the plane off the roof?*

The lot filled with cars as people stopped to gawk.

*This is the most excitement this town has seen in a long time.*

Annie hopped up on the hood beside her. “There’s a huge hole in the top of the roof. Think they’ll let us go home?”

Clara shrugged, “Knowing Mr. Bothwell, not unless they make him close the store.”

Annie slid closer. “Ready to hear one crazy story? The pilot says he took off from Venice airport and was about five miles from here when he noticed he was losing oil pressure.”

“What’s that?”

“I have no idea. But it must be something important for flying. When his engine suddenly stopped, he turned back and tried to reach the airport. He saw the store roof and figured he was less likely to hurt people if he landed there rather than in a parking lot. The sheriff keeps saying what an incredible job he did landing the plane.”

Clara pointed to the wreck on the roof. “That’s an incredible job?”

“They said the plane could’ve plunged into the store. But apparently, he was a former military pilot who managed to stall the plane and drop it ten feet to the roof, where it skidded seventy-five feet and then crashed into the side. The roof damage is only on top.”

Clara turned to face Annie. “So that’s why we didn’t see anything?”

“Right. The store has to remain closed until the plane is removed.”

“How are they going to do that?”

“They are trying to find cranes to lift it off now.”

Clara furrowed her brow. “In Venice?”

“Smile ladies.” A camera clicked.

Clara put up her hand, “No!”

“Fred Jones from the Venice Gondolier.” He held out his card.

“Were you ladies inside the store when the plane hit?”

Annie nodded.

Clara shook her head, “No comment. I do not want my picture in the paper.” Then ducked into her car.

Before the door closed, she heard him ask Annie, “May I ask you what it was like?”

As Annie answered his questions, Clara laid down across the back seat of her car and covered her head. *What a blessing he doesn't recognize me from last month.*

The last thing she wanted was more publicity.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

# *Lawsuit*

RACHEL

As the elevator doors opened, Rachel saw Dr. Arlington talking to several physicians. She reached to hit the close button but halted. *This is my hospital. I will not let him intimidate me.*

His hands were raised. “If they do it to me, they can do it to you. We, physicians, need to stand together.”

Dr. Arlington’s back was to her, but she nodded to the other physicians as she passed. They quickly moved on.

Dr. Arlington turned and scowled. “You money-grubbing admin.”

Rachel knew it was risky when she created an exclusive contract between the hospital and Venice Radiology. She fully expected some doctors to be put off, especially the ones who weren’t affiliated with that group. They would lose that part of their business. But she never imagined a doctor the local practice let go would be the one to take them to court.

The hospital’s attorney met her in her office.



“He’s filed ten counts, six of them plus the anti-trust are against Venice Hospital.”

Rachel leaned back in her chair. “Do they have any merit?”

“Doesn’t look like it.” Frank explained, “Dr. Arlington claimed Venice Hospital along with Englewood Hospital, his former employer Venice Radiology and two former co-workers conspired to illegally boycott him, restrain trade and monopolize the Venice/Englewood market.”

“Like we don’t have better things to do?” She jotted notes on her pad. The Board of Directors will need an update, “And the anti-trust?”

He pulled out his notes and read, “Courts throughout the country have interpreted the federal anti-trust laws as allowing hospitals to enter into exclusive provider contracts. And Florida courts have also held that “it is standard practice to award exclusive franchises to perform all of the hospital’s work, on a contract basis, in such areas as pathology, radiology, and anesthesiology.”

He looked up, “And Rachel,”

She leaned in.

“This is his second hospital lawsuit.”

“His second?”

“Yes, he sued the first hospital he worked at four years before moving to Venice.”

“And?”

“He lost.”

What a gift to have Frank on staff as her legal advisor. She never dreamed a hospital could face so many lawsuits, even for trying to do good. There was no doubt Frank was earning his pay.

“I need you to be at the next Board of Directors meeting.”

“I’ll be there.”

"I'll put you first on the agenda." Rachel made a note on her calendar, "By the way, what were the issues with his co-workers?"

"He got upset because one didn't recommend him for a residency at Harvard, and the other allegedly told a pharmaceutical rep he couldn't read MRIs."

*A radiologist who can't read MRIs?* Dr. Arlington may or may not know how to read them, but he knew how to generate trouble and work the media.

He wasn't only seeking to stir up other doctors to question her motives and leadership; he'd even gone on TV trying to make hospital administrators sound like villains.

He didn't tell how repeatedly he refused to sign contracts with insurance providers. This act often resulted in patients paying enormous amounts out of pocket unexpectedly. Or how poorly he treated the staff around him.

Rachel looked at Holly. "Any ideas for damage control?"

"Internal or external?"

"Both"

"Do you still have that stack of patient complaints?"

Rachel handed them over. "Here you go."

"I'll see what I can do."

Holly was a Public Relations whiz. She could write press releases with the best of them. And create campaigns that resulted in patients choosing Venice Hospital over others in the area. She was adept at assessing public attitudes about the hospital, which currently weren't positive.

Rachel sighed. In truth, she understood. This hospital had been created in 1951 when a local businessman gave \$10,000 so he wouldn't have to drive his niece 25 miles north to Sarasota for treatment. Spurred on by this investment, four doctors went door to door so-

liciting donations. It started with fourteen beds in an apartment and had always been a true community hospital.

But a year ago, the community sold the hospital to Bon Secours, a nonprofit mission started by nuns in Maryland, which now included seventy-four hospitals nationwide. The sale had been hotly debated. People were still on edge, afraid the hospital would stop offering what they needed and only pursue more lucrative medical services.

Yet what a conundrum. The average age in Venice was sixty-eight. So most of the patients were on Medicare. Medicare only paid seventeen percent of what services cost. Rachel sighed. It was hard to provide quality care without adequate revenue.

How could you win when people wanted top care without paying for it? For years the hospital had been losing money. Rachel pulled out the recent stats. To break even, 160 of the 197 beds needed to be full. Since she took over in March, they'd been averaging 133 daily.

She chose this profession to help people, but as the executives of Bon Secours liked to quote, "Without a margin, there is no mission." She loved having the responsibility of the hospital rest solely on her shoulders, but now...?

*Oh Lord, I feel so alone. Please help.*



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

# *Cover Girl*

CLARA

“We’re in the New York Times.” Annie waved the newspaper over her head.

Clara grabbed the paper and groaned. In the middle of the page, along with a picture of the plane hanging precariously off the roof’s edge, was a photo of her and Annie in their Publix uniforms sitting on the hood of her car, a look of terror on her face. Only it wasn’t because of the plane.

“I told him I didn’t want my picture in the paper.”

Her throat began to tighten; if it was in the New York Times, it was in newspapers across the country. So much for keeping her location secret.

A wave of nausea hit. Her hands trembled. She returned the paper to Annie. “You had to talk to the reporter.”

“What?” Annie’s face fell, “Oh, Clara. I didn’t think.” She looked up. “It’s been over seven years. Brent’s probably moved on. Do you even know if he’s out of prison?”

Clara broke out in a sweat. “I heard he got out a year ago.” Her heart pounded. The room started to close in. “I need to get grounded.” She sat on the floor.

“A panic attack?”

Clara grabbed her chest.

Annie kneeled beside her and fanned her with the paper. “What can I do to help?”

“Breathe.”

“What?”

“Help me breathe.”

“Oh, right.” Annie took a deep breath. “Slow breaths, remember? Focus on your breath. Inhale... Slow... Exhale... Breathe with me.... Inhale deep.... Exhale slow.... Maybe he won’t read the paper? I mean, he never seemed like the reading type.”

Clara pulled a row of baking soda boxes off the shelf and put them back in place. Straighten... Order... Repeat... Calm...

Annie lowered her voice. “Remember, this is going to go away. Can you make it to the break room?”

Clara shook her head. “Dizzy. Everything is spinning.”

“What else can I do?”

“Help me count backward from one hundred.”

“99...98...97...”

She’d always hated math, but this often helped.

“96, 95,” Annie prompted.

“Is there a problem, ladies?”

*Oh great, Mr. Bothwell.* Clara’s heart beat faster.

Annie pointed to her watch. "I'm on break, Mr. Bothwell. Clara is just finishing up before she takes hers." She winked at him. "Is that ok?"

He nodded and walked on.

Clara pulled the next row off and re-shelved. "Baking soda... Dust on floor.... My hands.... Shelves... My watch."

"What?"

"Help me get grounded."

"Oh yeah, right." Annie bit her lip. "Um, What are five things you can smell?"

Clara inhaled. "Perfume... bread baking... sweat... spices... rotisserie chicken."

"What are five things you can feel?"

"Excuse me, could I get a box of baking soda?" A woman in a Mart Cart pointed to the shelf in front of Clara.

Annie handed her one. "Here you go."

"Thank you." She put it in her basket, stepped on the accelerator, and headed toward the cake mixes.

Clara re-stacked more baking soda on the shelf. "Boxes... tiled floor... wet pits..." she nodded at Annie, who'd resumed fanning, "Paper's breeze." She reached over. "This bottle of vanilla."

"What? You shouldn't be able to smell that." Annie reached for it and rolled her eyes. "It's open. Looks like another alcoholic took a swig. Better check the rest of the row."

Clara groaned and grabbed her chest. "This world is so messed up."

Annie leaned forward. "What are five things you hear?"

"You... people in next aisle.... the a/c.... My voice... bakery oven beeping."

"Oh, stink." Annie jumped up. "I've got to get those trays out. Will you be ok?"

Clara waved her off.

“I’ll be back soon as I can.”

Clara leaned her head against the shelf. Her body ached. *Oh God, I need strength.* She hadn’t even seen Brent, but he still tormented her. Would it be like this forever?

*Please help. I don’t want to live the rest of my life in fear.*



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

# *The Offer*

SANDY

The bell rang.

Sandy looked up to see a young mom with a little boy on her hip in the doorway. “Can I help you?”

“Hi! I’m Lucy. My friend Sheryl and I would like to start an aerobics class in the fellowship hall to reach out to women in the area. When we mentioned it to Pastor Bob, he suggested I check to see if we could get something on the calendar.”

“Karen?” Sandy called to the next office. “You need to handle this one.”

“Come on in,” Karen called. Lucy crossed to her office.

*Aerobic dance?* Sandy never knew what was going to happen next in this church.

She shook her head, then resumed stuffing envelopes. Her volunteer work didn’t take a lot of thought, but she loved how being in the



church office put her in the center of activity. From her desk in the front room, she could hear everything.

“Are you thinking mornings or afternoons?” Karen asked.

“We better plan on mornings. Motivation is higher. By afternoon if it’s a contest between working out and the couch, I’m pretty sure we know who’d win.”

Sandy laughed. Lucy didn’t look like she spent much time on the couch.

“On Wednesdays, the women meet in the fellowship hall for Bible study, and on Fridays, a men’s group hosts a breakfast, but the other mornings look available.”

“Great.” Lucy smiled. “Why don’t we plan on Tuesday and Thursday mornings at 10 am? I can post a sign. Do you think we could put an announcement in the church bulletin?”

“Sure,” Karen agreed. “How much will you charge?”

“Nothing,” Lucy said, “I’m hoping it might draw women into the church who normally wouldn’t come.”

Sandy peered around the doorway and pointed to the toddler on Lucy’s hip. “What are you going to do about children?”

“We’ll let them play at the back of the room.”

*Sounds like chaos.*

“I so appreciate you doing this. If I create a flier would it be possible to get copies made?”

“Sure,” Karen said. “Sandy, could you help Lucy with that?”

Sandy nodded. “I’d be glad to. I try to be here on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10 to 2.”

“Perfect.” Lucy headed toward the door, then turned back. “By the way, if you ever have women call the church who’d like to know more about Jesus, feel free to give them my number.”

Karen walked into the front office. "We do get calls like that occasionally."

Sandy looked up. "We do?" She made a mental note to be more careful when she answered the phone.

Karen shrugged her shoulders. "Makes sense. People start getting interested in God, they contact a church."

"I wondered if that might be the case." The young mom shifted her son to her other hip. He nuzzled deeper into her shoulder. "If you need someone to meet with them, just let me know." She tilted her head toward Eli. "Gotta run. Somebody needs a nap." And she was off.

Sandy watched out the window as Lucy headed to her van. "She's a bundle of energy."

Karen nodded. "I haven't decided if it's a blessing or a tornado brewing. Either way, she's certainly getting a lot going. May the Lord pour on the grace. She taught the two and three-year-olds for the first time last Sunday. The kids and parents loved it. But Justin said it took him a whole morning to put the room back together."

"What did she do?"

Karen shrugged, "I haven't heard the details yet. But I'm eager to. When one of the moms called the office to say Lucy was great, Justin shook his head and said, 'She's great all right, great at making messes.' Let's hope that's only true regarding finger paint."

"Finger paint?"

Karen nodded. "I peeked at the room. Fortunately, it was washable."

As she returned to her office, Sandy saw Karen smile and shake her head. "Aerobic dance outreach. What'll she come up with next?"



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

# *Running A Hospital*

RACHEL

“**W**ow. So this is where you work?” Kalea turned around, her eyes wide. “This place is amazing.”

“Well,” Rachel smiled. “This is my office, but I spend more time out of it than in it.”

Kalea sat down. “I had no idea you ran the whole hospital.”

Rachel shook her head. “Sometimes I think it runs me.”

Kalea pointed to the papers on Rachel’s desk. “Those look pretty intense.”

Rachel nodded. “Yes. We’re getting ready for an inspection to maintain our accreditation. It is a lot of work.”

Kalea picked up the nameplate on Rachel’s desk. “So what does the CEO of a hospital do?”

“It’s a Heinz 57 job.”

Kalea’s forehead wrinkled.

“You know, the steak sauce?”

Kalea shrugged. "I've never had steak."

"This job has a bunch of variety. We are a for-profit hospital, so I have to ensure this place stays financially viable like any business. There's a saying, 'You've got to do well to do good.' If we aren't running a profit, we won't be able to help the poor patients who can't pay. It's a very complex job."

"I bet."

"The hospital runs three hundred and sixty five days a year, twenty-four hours a day. And when there are emergencies and natural disasters, you can't stay home. We have to weather the storm in more ways than one."

"So when hurricanes come, you have to be here?"

Rachel nodded. "I am responsible for keeping this hospital running, and there are many different departments - housekeeping, laundry, central supply, purchasing, HR, and then there are the clinical departments."

"Like the kids' cancer floor?"

"Yes. There are Vice Presidents who oversee each area, but I still need to ensure everything and everyone works well together. That's the hard part."

"So you're like the doctors' boss?"

"Well, the hospital employs only four medical specialties: the ER and radiology physicians, anesthesiologists, and pathology. The rest work on a contractual basis. So they have hospital privileges."

Kalea's eyebrows went up. "Privileges?"

"Yes. Not all doctors can come into the hospital and do surgery. They must go through an application process and be approved by a committee. And those privileges need to be renewed every two years."

Kalea rubbed her forehead. "Wow, I had no idea all that went into running a hospital."

“Most people don’t. If they did, they might appreciate hospital administrators more.”

Kalea tapped her finger against her lip. “So some physicians don’t get privileges?”

Rachel nodded.

“And do some who get privileges lose them?”

“It doesn’t happen a lot, but yes. The farther physicians get away from training and being under authority,” Rachel sat back in her seat, “well, their egos can grow along with their wallets. Some think they can say or do whatever they want; some are temperamental and mistreat the staff. That’s not acceptable.”

“Like sometimes they yell at people?”

“Yell, throw things, make people cry, then there’s also incompetency, wrongful death. That’s when we need to step in.”

“Wow. That must be hard to ‘step in.’”

“You have no idea.”

“I bet that gets them mad. Do they ever try to get back at you?”

Rachel paused. “It can happen.”

Kalea leaned in. “What did you do?”

Something about the way she asked made Rachel wonder. *I don’t think this is about understanding my job.* She chose her words carefully, “You need good people skills and a lot of patience. Do you know the verse, ‘A soft answer turns away wrath?’ I had to learn that the hard way. But it’s true.”

“Learn it the hard way? What happened?”

“My first job in hospital administration, I was an assistant Vice President. One of the doctors I was overseeing was being a jerk, and I let him have it. He went straight to the CEO of the hospital and complained. They didn’t fire me immediately, but shortly after, when

they were downsizing, I was one of the first they let go.” She shook her head. “That’s when I learned it’s better to hold my tongue.”

Kalea flipped her pen in her fingers. “I’m still learning that.”

Rachel looked up. “How so?”

“You know those doctors you described? The ones who lose privileges?” She looked down and sighed. “That’s my dad.”

“Meaning he yells and throws things?”

Kalea nodded. “And makes people cry. Only his ego is even bigger than his wallet.”

“Wait. What?” A picture of Kalea’s run-down trailer next to Ms. Coralee’s came to Rachel’s mind. “His wallet?”

Kalea whispered, “My dad is a doctor. A surgeon. He moved away after he lost ‘hospital privileges.’ I never knew what that meant, but I heard my mom say it was because of bullying.”

“Doesn’t he pay child support?”

“He does,” she shrugged, “but it doesn’t make any difference.”

“What do you mean?”

“My mom,” Kalea sighed, “uses it for other things.”

“Other things?”

Kalea grabbed her backpack. “I better go. I’ve got a ton of homework to do. Thanks for letting me see your office.” And she was out the door.

*Her dad’s a doctor?* Rachel shook her head. *I didn’t expect that.* She watched out the window as Kalea unlocked her bicycle and headed down the street. Kalea’s volunteer badge stated her last name was Kahale. It stuck with Rachel because there was a musical ring to it. Can’t be too many of those.

*What’s your story, Dr. Kahale?* She picked up the phone and called HR.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

# Power of Prayer

Sandy opened another binder and slid the collated copies for the upcoming women's retreat into it. Thank God for mindless work and something to do with her hands. Otherwise, she might go crazy.

Each time the phone rang, she pounced on it. What could be taking so long?

Ever since Robert got the report that his PSA was elevated and he needed to go back for a biopsy, she'd been anxious about his health. His father died of prostate cancer at the age of 56. Robert was now six years past that.

They'd only been married a little over ten years when his dad was first diagnosed. No one ever dreamed how quickly the cancer would spread. He was dead within the year.

*Oh Jesus, please, please don't let it be cancer. Please don't let Robert die without knowing you.*

"Time for another cup of coffee." Karen walked into the front office, held up her mug, and then pointed to the growing stack of

finished binders. "Thanks so much for doing those. It looks like it's going to be a great conference. It's not every year we have an author come speak."

Sandy looked at the pages she was putting into them. *Becoming A Woman of Prayer? Oh, Lord, I sure could use some help in that department.* "Are you going?"

Karen laughed, "Nope. It's our anniversary. I don't think Jeremy is game for celebrating alone."

"That would definitely miss the point."

As Karen returned to her office, Sandy looked closer at the hand-outs. They sure looked interesting. *But who wants to go to a women's conference alone?* Still, it might be a good opportunity to meet other women in the church. *Oh Lord, what would you have me do?*

The bell rang over the office door. Sandy looked up to see a slim gent in a Captain's hat saunter in.

"Morning," he said, holding up a jug of orange juice. "Just stopped by with a little something for Karen."

Sandy's eyebrows raised.

"Squeezed it myself this morning."

"Wow." Sandy replied, "I bet it tastes amazing."

He leaned in, "When Lord made my orange trees, he smiled and said, 'It is good.'"

"Eldon!" Karen walked into the room and hugged the man.

Eldon beamed and held out his gift. "It's that time of year again."

Karen turned to Sandy, "You should see the trees in Eldon's backyard."

Eldon nodded, "Orange season just started this month. My trees are loaded with fruit."

Karen pointed to Sandy, "Eldon, this is Sandy. My latest gift from Jesus."



“Pleased to meet you. I bet there’s a story behind that introduction?”

Sandy blushed. “I’m the one who is blessed to get to volunteer here.”

“She’s been coming in every Tuesday and Thursday to help.” Karen smiled at her, “I can never thank you enough.”

“I am so pleased to meet you.” Eldon said, “While I’m here, is there something I can help you ladies with?”

Karen pointed to the pile in front of Sandy. “The women’s retreat is happening this weekend. All those binders need to be filled with that stack of collated content.

Eldon pulled up a chair, “My hands are at your service.”

Sandy held up a bunch of slide grip binding bars. “Would you be willing to slide these on the edges after I insert the content?”

“Slip n’ Slide was one of my favorite things to do as a kid on a hot summer’s day.”

“I will leave you to it.” Karen said.

“So, what’s your story?” Eldon asked.

“My story?” Sandy slid a stack of handouts into a binder and handed it to Eldon.

“Yes. Are you originally from Venice?”

“Oh no,” Sandy said, “We recently moved here from Colorado.”

“We?”

Sandy nodded, “My husband Robert and I moved here a few months ago to be closer to his job so he wouldn’t have to travel as much.”

“I look forward to meeting him.”

Sandy shook her head, “He doesn’t come to church.”

Eldon paused, sliding a binder on. “Why not?”

“It’s complicated. But basically, he’s mad at God for taking our daughter. And thinks religion is a waste of time. As a businessman, he’s dealt with churchgoers who lack integrity. Whereas he’s a good man who doesn’t see a need for Jesus.” She sighed, “At least not yet. I keep praying.”

Eldon reached for another spine, “I was reading in my Bible this morning, ‘The prayers of a righteous person are powerful and effective.’ I know we often don’t feel righteous, but thanks to Jesus, that’s how God sees all Christ-followers.”

Sandy paused, “I never thought of it like that. I often wonder if my prayers make much difference.”

“Would you like to hear a story about the power of prayer?”

Sandy nodded, “I could use some encouragement in that department.”

Eldon pointed to his hat. “I served in the Marines during World War 2. During one of my tours, I was on a ship when it was torpedoed and spent the night in the water waiting to be rescued.”

Sandy looked up, “Really?”

Eldon nodded.

“What was that like?”

Eldon shook his head. “At first, I couldn’t believe it. Everything happened so fast. Before I knew it, the ship started sinking, and men were jumping overboard. You better believe I was praying.”

“I would imagine so.”

“First, I prayed to get away from the ship. When a ship sinks, you can get pulled down with it. But as I was swimming, trying to get as far away from the ship as possible, I had to dodge puddles of oil, many aflame from the explosion, so we were swimming like crazy to get away from that too so we wouldn’t get burnt.”

Sandy raised her eyebrows, “You can get burned in the water?”

“Yep. Happened to a lot of guys around me. So I asked the Lord to protect me from being burned.”

“That had to be harrowing.”

Eldon nodded, sealing another envelope. “Certainly gave me a picture of what hell might be like. Then after the ship went down and I made it past the burning oil, I started praying that sharks wouldn’t get me. A lot of men were injured and bleeding. We were a floating feast. Some men were attacked, others pulled under and never surfaced again.”

“What a nightmare.”

Eldon shook his head. “I can still hear the screams.”

The phone rang, and Sandy jumped, “Hold that thought. Hello? Island Community Church, may I help you?” She looked at Eldon and mouthed, *It’s Robert*. He nodded and kept putting spines on the binders.

“Oh honey, I am so thankful to hear that. Thank you, Lord. Ok. We’ll talk more at home. Thank you for letting me know.”

She hung up the phone and exhaled.

“Is everything ok?”

She nodded, “Yes.” She wished she could share the good news, but Robert was a private person and wouldn’t appreciate her telling anyone, especially not about anything so personal.

She returned to the pile before her. “You were telling me about the sharks. What a nightmare. But you weren’t attacked?”

He shook his head, “Thank the Lord, nothing came near me. But there were still dangers. Back then, life preservers weren’t what they are today. After fourteen hours, mine was waterlogged and heavy. I had to pray it wouldn’t pull me under.”

“The life preservers that were supposed to help you—”

“After hours in the water often drowned people.”

Sandy shook her head.

"And, of course, we prayed the whole time that we'd be found by rescuers. And that those rescuers wouldn't be the enemy."

"What happened?"

"Fourteen hours later, help came. We were so relieved when they got close enough for us to see they were our guys. But let me tell you, that was one long night. The rescuers had to wait till daylight to find us."

"That was a lot of answered prayer."

"And not just mine." Eldon placed his hand on his heart. "I was blessed with a praying mom. But that's a whole other story." He stood to go. "I've got a doctor's appointment." He pointed to the mess on her desk. "I'm sorry I can't help more."

Sandy smiled, "The help you gave was exactly what I needed." She pointed to his cap, "Thank you so much for your service. It's an honor to meet you."

"And thank you for your service," he pointed to her desk, "for all you are doing to help Karen in here." As he headed out the door, he looked back, a sparkle in his eye, "Would you like me to bring you a jug of orange juice next time?"

Sandy nodded. "Yes, please. Robert loves orange juice."

"Consider it done. And I will join you in praying that one day Robert will love Jesus, too."

Sandy smiled. What a gift to have a man like that praying for her husband. She looked back at the contents she was stuffing into the binder. Becoming a woman of prayer? Maybe if she went, it might help her grow in prayer and experience stories like Eldon.

She'd have to ask Robert. Her face broke into a smile as she thought of him. She couldn't wait to get home and tell him about her day and celebrate his good news from the doctor. *If nothing else, I expect he'll*

*be excited to hear some fresh squeezed orange juice will soon be headed  
our way.*



## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

# Harvest Festival

CLARA

A line of witches, superheroes, and princesses stretched around the block. Clara was thankful they'd come early. Twelve more people, then they'd be inside.

"Mommy, I see Heather. Can I stand with her?"

Clara shrugged. "Sure." Heather was the reason they were spending Halloween at Island Community Church. She'd given Ashley a flyer at school for this Harvest Festival. Clara's other kids opted for traditional Trick or Treating with Todd, unwilling to risk guaranteed bags of loot for an unknown event. Clara wasn't sure what a Harvest Festival was, but anything this popular couldn't be too weird.

Besides, the pastor who'd come to her door encouraged her to attend church. Clara wondered, *Did this count?*

"Got to love how excited the kids are."

Clara turned to see a young mom behind her. "Yep. And they aren't even jacked up on sugar yet."

The mom laughed as a little shepherd squirmed in her arms. "I'm hoping this guy sleeps well after all this excitement. I could use a good night of sleep."

Clara nodded. She remembered those days. At least she no longer dealt with diapers.

"My name is Lucy." The young mom said. "I'm new in town. Do you go to this church?"

Clara shook her head. "I have never set foot in a church before."

Lucy handed the squirming shepherd to the man behind her. "What brought you here?"

Clara glanced ahead. The line wasn't moving fast. She told about her walk on the beach, her prayer, and the guys who came to her door.

"That is the best story ever! I became a Christian ten years ago, my first week in college." Lucy leaned in. "I'm the great great great granddaughter of a pirate."

Clara raised her eyebrows, "Really?"

"Really. Only he wasn't cool like Westley."

Clara's face broke into a smile. "I loved 'The Princess Bride.'"

"Me too. But my ancestor didn't leave any buried treasure. Just a legacy of alcoholism, adultery, and abuse."

*Now that I can relate to.* Clara reached for her cigarettes, then remembered where she was and sighed. "So what happened?"

"There were these guys who lived in a scholarship house next door. At dinner the first night, they asked if anyone had anything they could pray for. One of my roommates shared she needed a class to graduate, but the wait list was three hundred people long. They prayed, and the next night she came home all excited. She'd got the class. Did that ever catch my attention. I mean, God cares about classes?"

Clara laughed. "Yeah, you think he'd be too busy running the Universe."

“Exactly. Then the guys asked if there was anything else they could pray for. Another roommate shared an impossible prayer request. They prayed, and the next night I heard another wild story of how God provided.”

“Again?” Clara asked.

Lucy nodded. “This happened every night that week. On Friday, I went upstairs to my room, got down on my knees, and cried out, ‘If it’s true. If you want a personal relationship with me. I want you.’ I had this physical sensation of being purified from the top of my head to my toes. There was no doubt in my mind I was a sinner. Suddenly it all made sense that Jesus died to pay the penalty for my sin. When I picked up the Bible, I could understand what I was reading for the first time. And I felt love like I never had before.”

“That part I get.” Clara glanced at her wedding ring, then thought about her totaled car and sighed, “I only wish all of life could be so wonderful.”

“Mom! Heather and her family are about to go in. I need my canned good.”

Clara handed Ashley a can of stewed tomatoes. She grabbed it, then raced to the front of the line, her red Wonder Woman cape flapping in the breeze.

“Is that your daughter?”

“Yep.”

“She’s beautiful.” Lucy tilted her head, “Like her mom.”

Clara raised her eyebrows. “She’s also a handful.”

Lucy pointed to Eli. “I get that. When he turned two, I wrote a poem sharing how I wondered if an alien had possessed him.”

“Really?” Clara stepped back

Lucy held up her hands, “Not literally. But being a mom is not for the faint of heart.”



“You can say that again.”

Lucy sighed. “We live in a broken, fallen world. Life sure can be hard.”

Clara crossed her arms. “Life is hard for you?”

“You better believe it.” Lucy shook her head. “I don’t know where I’d be if an older woman hadn’t met with me to help me get to know God and figure out how to navigate life with him.”

Clara sighed. “Wish I had someone like that in my life.”

Lucy shrugged. “If you’d like, I’d be glad to get together and show you what that woman showed me. It helped lay a foundation for my new life with Jesus and has made such a difference in my life.”

“Really?” Clara looked at her closely.

Lucy nodded. “Really.”

Clara’s shoulders relaxed. “I would totally be game for that.”

Lucy pulled out a pen and wrote down her number.

As they reached the door to enter the Harvest Festival, Clara smiled. She just might like this church thing.

# Discussion Questions

## PART 1

1. What has been your favorite part of the book so far? (There are still six more parts to come!)
2. Of the four main characters (Elizabeth, Clara, Rachel, and Sandy), which do you most connect with? Why? What do you think are the longings of this character? How is she seeking to get those longings fulfilled? How is that working out for her?
3. In chapter 7 Pastor Dan says, *"Do you hear that? We're an answer to prayer. Now I know why God told me to do this today. I'm not even from this area. I was visiting Harry when the Holy Spirit said, 'Get up and go.' So, we did. I wondered if I'd heard right. Then you answered the door."* Have you ever experienced the Lord nudging you to step out of your plans or comfort zone when it didn't make sense, only to discover he really was at work? If so, what happened? What role does

listening to God play in sharing hope with people who don't know Jesus? How does John 5:17 relate to this?

4. In chapter 8 Sandy reflects on how she came to know the Lord through attending a Bible discussion group. What thoughts come to mind as you hear her describe this?
5. In chapter 16 while Rachel waits to sign up for a discipleship program, she observes as Lucy listens to a teen and prays with her. Why do you think she describes this as a beautiful moment? Does discipleship have to be a program? Why or why not? How might it occur organically?
6. In chapter 19 what do you think is going on inside Rachel as she considers, *'But the church ladies did say God did the pairing. Rachel looked at Kalea. What if God paired her with Ms. Coralee for a reason?'* What happened as a result? What role can recognizing God's sovereign purposes play in the formation and acceptance of discipleship relationships? Do you think it's good to pair people by putting names in a hat? Why or why not. How do you think Elizabeth might answer that question after being paired in chapter 18 with Mrs. Pellegrino?
7. In chapter 20 Nancy shares they forgot to train the older women. What do you think might be important to include in such training?
8. In Chapter 22 what difference did it make when Lucy shared her struggle with Elizabeth? What have you found helps you connect better with women – sharing successes or struggles? Why?

9. In chapter 24 Lucy offers to meet with any women who call the church office wanting to know about God and starts teaching free aerobic dance classes to reach out to women who live near the church. What are some creative ways you've reached out in the hopes of sharing the gospel? What ideas do you have for doing this?
10. In chapter 25, Lucy shares an older woman disciplined her when she was in college and this helped lay a foundation for her life. Have you ever been disciplined? If so, what has that looked like? If not, what comes to mind when you hear Lucy say this?
11. What do you observe in the book about how discipleship relationships can start?
12. What did you sense the Lord highlighted for you as you read? How do you sense him inviting you to respond to this?

# About the Author

## ISAIAH 26:12

Debbie Entsminger came to Christ her first week in college through a bunch of Navigator guys who lived next door. She was discipled by Barb Choat who loved her well and laid a foundation that continues to bear much fruit. For the past forty-one years, Debbie has been meeting with women one-on-one helping them come to know Jesus, keep growing in a relationship with Him, and learn how to pass on to other women what she's passed on to them for life. She serves with the Collegiate Navigators despite being deaf. Five years ago, the Lord did a miracle and restored her hearing through cochlear implants. What a mighty God we serve!

Deb has been married to Jim, her best friend and ministry partner, for 37 years. When she isn't meeting with women one-on-one, writing or creating in her art room, you will either find her exploring, enjoying kayak, bike and elliptigo adventures with Jesus, or with a book in hand, savoring a good story. She is convinced Jesus writes the best ones!