



Another Kind of Courage

The heartwarming story of a young gypsy girl, and the struggle she faces growing up in a world where her heritage determines what friends she can and cannot have. As she grows up, she discovers her inborn gift to love must grow as well, in ways she might once have never thought possible.

The Writer

As a reclusive stranger in a small town, Edward Olmos is perfectly content to let his life go by with as little human contact as possible. Hidden away in his attic, his only connection to the outside world is through the stories he writes, until a chance encounter sets the stage for him to return to a past he has all but forgotten.

CONTENTS

ANOTHER KIND OF COURAGE	1
Chapter One — A Brave Soul	1
Chapter Two — The Sparkle of Vision	11
Chapter Three — Following a Dream	21
Chapter Four — Memories	27
Chapter Five — To Love	33
Chapter Six — In a Dream	43
Chapter Seven — The Doctor	49
Chapter Eight — The Test	55
Chapter Nine — Puzzled	61
Chapter Ten — In Sickness and Health	69
Chapter Eleven — Till Death Do Us Part	77
Chapter Twelve — A Vision of Hope	83
Chapter Thirteen — Promise to Love	89
Chapter Fourteen — Going On	95
Chapter Fifteen — A Bridge to Freedom	101
Chapter Sixteen — The Patient	105
Chapter Seventeen — Following a Whisper	111
Chapter Eighteen — A Gift of Love	119
Chapter Nineteen — To Let Go	125
Chapter Twenty — Flying Away	133
THE WRITER	137
Chapter One	139
Chapter Two	151
Chapter Three	155
Chapter Four	161
Chapter Five	169
Chapter Six	175
Chapter Seven	183
Chapter Eight	189
Chapter Nine	201
Chapter Ten	207
Chapter Eleven	225
Chapter Twelve	231
Chapter Thirteen	235
Chapter Fourteen	243
Chapter Fifteen	251

Recommended age: 12 years and up.
(May be read by younger children at parents' discretion.)

Cover illustration by Linda and Tamar.

Another Kind of Courage

BY GYPSY WILLOW

Chapter One – A Brave Soul

“Just a little closer, Jeremy. Come a little closer and you’ll be able to reach it!” Arielle called out to the boy who had fallen in the lake and was struggling to reach the wooden plank she held out to him.

“I’ve got the other end, Jeremy! Swim! Pretend you’re cutting through the water with your hands; bring them together and then spread them apart. There, you’re just a few feet away. No! Don’t give up!” Arielle shouted as Jeremy struggled and went under a couple times. Realizing he wasn’t going to make it to the plank in time, she jumped in after him.

True, it did seem foolish for a nine-year-old to jump in after another nine-year-old, but that was Arielle. She always did the bravest things without a moment’s thought. It was more than just a desire to be daring; it was a gift, something angelic.

Finally the other kids who had gone for help brought a couple of teachers from the nearby school building which was less than a block away. By then Arielle and Jeremy had reached the side of the lake and just needed a little help to get out of the water.

All the commotion over this close call soon passed as the kids followed the two teachers and a soaking Jeremy away from the lakeside, leaving Arielle standing there on her own. She was used to it. Her

parents were Gypsies who immigrated to the United States from Romania in their younger years to escape the political turmoil and the repression of their people. They always seemed somewhat old-fashioned, even for 1920, as if they were trying to hold on to a past they had dearly loved while living in a world that seemed to be changing all the more rapidly around them. Her heritage, in addition to being new to this city in the Midwestern United States, and doing things that other kids didn't dare think of doing, made for a combination that didn't always put Arielle in favor with the other kids of the neighborhood.

But Arielle didn't seem to mind. She was an independent soul, perhaps even a loner, if you will, and not lacking in personal conviction. If the crowd ran one way and she didn't think it the right direction, she was not afraid to run the other way, even if she was the only one. That was just the way Arielle was.

It took her a good forty-five minutes to get home, but the muggy weather did not do much to dry whatever wet clothes she had not (for modesty's sake) taken off. Just as she walked up the little path that led to three wide steps and a friendly rug that sat at the foot of the nicely polished wooden door, she saw her mom's concerned face. Not wanting to have to recount the whole story and risk her mom becoming even more concerned (it was, after all, a pretty daring stunt—they both could have gone under), Arielle tried to side-step her mother and go inside. But Mama's firm hand stopped her. Obediently, even somewhat sheepishly, Arielle stood still, waiting for retribution to rain down on her.

"Come here and give Mama a big hug!" her mother said instead, taking Arielle by surprise once again. Her mom was just that type: She knew Arielle too well to try to get through to her with a scolding.

Arielle leapt into her mom's arms. "I love you!" "I love you too, my little Flower. That's why I'm worried."

"You don't need to be, Mama. The angels are always watching, you know that. You told me yourself." Then she proceeded to tell the story of what had happened at the lakeside.

"I'm proud of you for being brave, and Papa is too."

Her father, who had been listening from inside the house, came over and put on a mock-fierce look, then broke into smiles and joined his two girls in a big bear hug.

A little later, true to women's curious nature, Arielle's mother just had to ask the question. "Flower, why did you have to jump in the lake? Wasn't help coming?" Mama inquired, trying to look as casual as possible as she went about her work in the kitchen.

"Mama, I had to," Arielle said as she walked into the kitchen and sat on a little stool. "Some of the kids had gone for help, but I knew they wouldn't have been back any time soon, and Jeremy might have gone under by then—and not while I was standing there watching was I going to let someone drown," Arielle answered in her own grown-up way. Even at nine, she often struck everyone as being much older. It wasn't just her wildly beautiful black curls that dangled around her finely featured, almost womanly, face and down to her waist. It was everything about her. Arielle almost always did the bravest things even when she only had a split second to think about them. In that split-second, selfish thoughts weren't in the picture. Her safety went on the line in an instant in order to help some other more helpless individual.

It wasn't that Papa George and Mama Tamara didn't care about this behavior of hers. They did,

and they fought the normal desire to try to get in the way. But they said angels watched over their little Flower, Arielle. They felt that for a little one to love and care that much for people she didn't even know, just because they were in need, God must have given her the ability and all the necessary protection too. They cared for her the most through their prayers—the best way anyone could care for another.

Of course, dire emergencies weren't the only times Arielle would stand up and out to help someone or think of someone else. Her caring also flowed into the normal everyday things. Not only did Arielle appear like an angel when accidents, or at least potential ones, would happen at school and not much help was around; she was also there every day in little ways. When someone dropped their books, she'd come running to help pick them up. If someone forgot his or her lunch, she'd share hers. She didn't do this to make the other kids like her, and most of them still didn't. Somehow, her background made her convincingly unpopular to most of the kids at school. The little ones loved her and the lonely ones adored and admired her, but the others, well, they were admittedly a pretty tough crowd for anyone to get through to.



"Arielle! Arielle!" One of the kids began yelling out one day when she had just walked out of the school building for recess. There were a bunch of kids huddled around, with a few echoing the boy's call, "Arielle! Arielle!" It looked as if someone had fallen off of the parallel bars in the playground and was hurt.

She quickly ran over and tried to help, obviously distressed that she hadn't been there earlier.

"Why weren't you here when it happened?" someone challenged.

"I ... I'm sorry. I didn't come outside right away for recess," she answered as she knelt down beside the fallen boy, who she now recognized as Hales, to see what was the matter. Hales was normally the bully of the school.

Suddenly Hales and all the other kids began snickering and laughing at the joke they'd played. Arielle usually steered clear from them unless it was absolutely necessary to mingle. In fact, because she usually stayed pretty much to herself they found it hard to get at her. This was their moment of glory, though, or so it seemed. After they'd had their fill of fun, Hales and the kids ran off.

Arielle remained kneeling on the dirt, her hands were dirty, and now tears were running down her cheeks as she looked dejectedly at the ground. After a few moments of sobbing, she was startled to realize that someone was standing a few feet away, almost behind her. The boy didn't return the startled reaction though.

"Is it true that you're a Gypsy, Arielle?" he asked, innocently.

"Please ... please could you leave me for just a moment?" Arielle asked.

"Oh no, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. I wanted to tell you that I think you're a very brave and kind person, even if you are a Gypsy. I don't know what the problem is that people have with Gypsies."

"You're very kind, but..."

"My name's Herbie Carlin," he said as he reached out his hand to help her up off the ground. "I'm new here. I can walk you home ... if you'd like. I think my house is not too far away from yours. I've seen you walking to school in the mornings."

"Oh no, thank you. I think I can make it on my own. I'm not hurt at all, just a little upset..." She hesitated before she finally conceded, "All right, you

can walk me home. Thank you ... Herbie.”

“All right then, up you go,” Herbie said in a grown-up kind of way. Arielle wondered if that was the way she sounded to everyone else—she knew people often told her parents that she was a precocious child.

“Mind if I call you ‘Elle’? Arielle’s a bit long for me.”

Arielle nodded her head, looking at him in wonderment at his kindness. No one her age had been that kind to her before.

Their walk home was a quiet one, interspersed with pleasant questions and comments from time to time.

Again, there was Mama Tamara, faithful as always to greet her daughter at the door. She had an amazing knack for stepping out onto the steps the minute Arielle came around the corner.

Many people thought perhaps Mama Tamara was psychic and could sense her daughter’s homecoming no matter when it was—early or late. Whenever it was, she was always there. Usually Arielle returned an hour or so after school had closed for the day, but sometimes she would sit on a bench in a nearby park, quietly feeding ducks in a pond, perhaps find another loner to talk with, or visit the homes of the few friends she did have. Some argued that her parents really should have been more protective of their daughter, but Mama Tamara always had an aura of peace and trust around her. She knew that God was in control and that He’d planned things this way. She considered Arielle a special child.

“Mama, this is Herbie,” Arielle said in a somewhat quieter tone than was normal for her wild, buoyant self. “His family just moved into town and they live not too far away from us. He offered to walk me back from school.”

“Well, Herbie, that’s very kind of you. Would you

like to stay for a snack?”

Herbie was quite taken aback by the tall, buxom Gypsy mama with the striking dark eyes. He would have been scared if he hadn’t felt her kindness reach out of her fiery stature and embrace him. Herbie was fascinated.

Once Herbie consented, they entered the house, which was simple but homey and tastefully decorated. After entering the front door, a few steps to the left was a pretty corner where a dining room for four was set up (though it normally served only three), and there was a door several feet behind the end of the semi-long table that led into a nice kitchen. To the right was a cozy living room with a fireplace. After the dining room and living room, which were opposite each other, a long hallway that went from the front door straight to a back door turned into a hallway with two rooms on the right side and one on the left. There were pretty pictures of their family and paintings which hung decoratively on the walls. A comfy-looking throw rug was just a few steps away from the fireplace, in the middle of the living room. It was a one-story house for the most part, but it had one staircase at the end of the living room, that led up to an attic which had been turned into a bedroom. It seemed like a quiet, pleasant place to live—almost like a different world once you stepped inside.

Herbie was suddenly startled by a loud, playful roar that came from the living room just as he was taking in the simple beauty of their humble home. In response, Arielle ran towards the source—her papa—and jumped up into his arms. Herbie finally recovered after he realized that it was just a big joke. Mama noticed his fright though, and put her arm around his shoulder and said in a friendly tone, “It’s okay, Herbie. I get frightened too sometimes with these two wild creatures.”

As Herbie ate his snack, every once in awhile he would lay aside his timidity and ask them a question about their Gypsy heritage—the parents, that is, since Arielle had never known such a life firsthand. It seemed unusual that Herbie directed much of what little conversation he did make to her parents, but then again, they were used to such mature behavior in their house. The more he listened, learned, and watched this happy family, the more fascinated he became with their Gypsy heritage.



Herbie and Arielle fast became best of friends. However, he took care not to tell much about his newfound friend to his parents, for they were as conservative as the Gypsies were free.

But one Sunday Herbie came to Arielle's home with a dejected look and a heavy heart. Mama Tamara answered the door.

"Herbie!" she exclaimed. "Have you come over to see my little Flower?"

"Yes. But I can only stay for a few minutes," he answered sadly.

Mama Tamara was wise enough to understand what must have happened, having heard about Herbie's parents. But not wanting to dampen his last flicker of happiness at seeing his little Gypsy girlfriend, she pretended not to notice.

"Flower, there's someone here to see you!" she called out, and a sprightly figure came bounding out of the attic and down the stairs.

"Herbie!" she called out as she ran to the door to greet him with the customary bear hug. He didn't respond in his usual manner.

"Herbie, what's wrong?"

"Elle, my mom says I shouldn't be seeing you anymore."

"But why?"

"I don't understand it all myself, but remember,

I told you my parents are conservative. When they found out I was going around with a Gypsy girl, they were quite horrified. I told them they should come and see for themselves that you're nice people, but they said that wasn't the point, that it was more complicated than that. I don't know what they meant, but I do know that I'll have to stop seeing you."

Arielle said nothing, but her mama was concerned. She knew by the look in Arielle's eyes that what Herbie had said cut deep into her heart and mind. Arielle had known all along that they, as Gypsies, were considered different, but this was the first time that a real friendship was being taken away for this sole reason.

"And not only that, but I'll be moving to a different school, and a different part of town too. I'm sorry, Elle. I'm so sad."

Arielle reached out and hugged Herbie, while both their eyes filled up with tears. They'd spent most of the last two years together, ever since they had first met—both filling a big need in the other for companionship and love from someone their age.

Arielle stood at the front door for a long time and watched Herbie until he was totally out of sight. She said nothing, but as her mother had already noticed, these things had been burned deep into her impressionable young heart.

As she lay thinking on her bed, Arielle kept repeating what Herbie had said in her mind. *But we aren't really Gypsies anymore—that's just our heritage*, she argued inwardly. The tears rolled out of her eyes and down the side of her head. She couldn't understand why love had to be governed by fear and prejudice.



"I'm concerned for Arielle, George."

Papa George put down the newspaper and sighed as he put his face into his hands and then looked

up at Mama Tamara as if to say, “Go on.”

“I’ve never seen her cry like this. You should have seen the look in her eyes this afternoon, George. They were almost burning, like she hurt so much and didn’t know what to do.”

“She really loves Herbie, doesn’t she?”

“Yes, but it’s not only losing Herbie. I think she’s realizing how this all sets her apart from the other children sometimes, children being how they are. She’s just not sure how to cope. Before, when she had nothing to lose, she was content and was brave about it. But it’s always different when something beyond your control causes you to lose something you love so much. Let’s pray that her gentle heart doesn’t become hard, but that our Heavenly Father’s love will reach down and comfort her.”

The two parents knelt and prayed for their daughter’s heart, for her strength, and for her conviction. She was only 12 years old, but all the closer to being a woman and needing to stand on her own, and they wanted her to be prepared in spirit and heart.

Chapter Two – The Sparkle of Vision

Arielle recovered in time, though the experience with Herbie left many questions in her mind. And as the years went by, less and less would she accept things her parents told her of the Gypsies and of their beliefs at face value. She picked their ideas to pieces and analyzed them. That was hard enough for her parents, who at heart were still very much a part of the golden days of freedom, as they called them. They often seemed to be living in another time, a bygone era—and Arielle started to recognize that fact more and more.

In many ways Arielle was still the fiery girl that she had been as a child, but in other ways she distanced herself from the values that she had once held dear. As she grew, her buxom, wild, natural beauty earned her a good deal of attention from young men, and she wasn’t too haughty or hardened to enjoy their company in every way that she could. But her heart was still deeply hurt by the rejection she had felt years earlier when she had found that her heritage had separated her from the only one she had ever deeply loved, besides her parents.

And so, although she didn’t shun company, she kept her distance from most everyone. She still tried her best to be a friend to the gentle hearts, those little ones who were at the stage she was at once—

impressionable, tender and vulnerable. She tried to help them keep their hopes and dreams, their fight and will alive, even if it looked like there wasn't much going for them.

Her delightful nature, though sometimes tough, made her teachers and most classmates take a liking to her. Sooner or later they all discovered that the little Gypsy flower had determination, and they respected her for it.

As time went by, Arielle grew apart from her parents. She held to their convictions only loosely and struggled within herself, wondering why it was—or rather what it was, that made the earlier Gypsies cling to their way of life, even when they were despised by all around them.

Freedom? Love? Those are beautiful things, but only when convenient, she often thought to herself.

Sometimes at night she would snuggle up with her pillow and remember the times when she was little and Papa would take her up on a hill. He would tell her to raise her hands up and feel the wind blowing through her fingers and hair, making her skirt dance wild and free. He'd reach his hands out and take hold of hers, swinging her around in a playful way and say, "This, my child, is only a small taste of the freedom of spirit that we Gypsies possess. It's not inborn, nor can it always be passed on from parent to child. Each person must reach out and discover it for themselves; they must want the freedom." It was words such as these when she was growing up that had both fascinated her and made her proud of her heritage.

Now it was all different. Young as she still was, it was difficult to understand that true freedom did come with a price. It cost different people in different ways, but it cost everyone something. Oh, it was easy to be free when life was happy and fair, but the true test came when something would happen—

and it would happen to everyone—to either drive that freedom from the surface into the inner wellsprings of the heart, or to scatter it completely. She was starting to understand.

Her heartaches were those that are borne deep down inside, like "groanings that could not be uttered." Everyone has them, and most trudge on—some become hardened and bitter while others smile through their tears, enduring until such a time as the One, who knoweth all things, sees fit to lift that particular burden.

Arielle was still the same angel she had been as a child, in the sense that she always seemed to be around to help when something unfortunate would happen. But it wasn't the same. Though she did her best to help and was brave and full of courage, the compassion and sympathy, the love that she'd had as a little child, just wasn't there anymore.



It was almost her eighteenth birthday, and Arielle thought to get away for a little while by the lake, where as a young girl she had pulled little Jeremy to safety. As she walked toward the lake, she passed the building where Jeremy had been taken after the near-drowning ordeal. Her heart softened a bit. Hearing the little children's voices laugh and sing and talk reminded her of her own childhood—those beautiful days when she was happy and joyful, when that sparkle was still in her eyes and she felt free, not yet weighted down by the burdens she'd picked up over the last seven years.

I've grown up too fast, she thought to herself. *Where's that childlike freedom gone? Perhaps as you grow you lose it. There are more questions, the complications of life set in, there's so much more to think about, and it all just crowds the childlike faith out. I guess that's just the way it is.*

The wind that brushed her hair across her face

seemed to be a gentle hint to the contrary, but Arielle responded aloud, almost as if the wind could hear her, “How would you know? There aren’t any complications in what you have to do—just blow gently or fiercely over the countryside, through the cities and into the houses. You just flow. If something blocks your way you either go around it or through it. Nothing threatens to stop your invisible play. You just keep dancing and dancing.”

Her own remark seemed to hold the simple answer she herself was looking for, but she just smiled and shook her head. *It can’t be that simple.*

As Arielle stood on the sidewalk, about to cross, out of the corner of her eye she saw an automobile racing from another street into the one she stood by, turning abruptly—too abruptly to notice what Arielle noticed: wavy dark curls crowning the frame of a lively little girl skipping recklessly across the street, completely oblivious to what was going on around her.

“Oh God! Please help us!” Arielle said aloud as she dashed to push the little girl out of the way of the oncoming car. It was a small street, so it didn’t take long for Arielle to reach the girl, pick her up and then jump over to the sidewalk. The whole ordeal seemed to happen in slow motion for Arielle. She wished she could move faster. The little girl turned her head in surprise at the oncoming car and let out a cry, just as her little body was swept up by this kind stranger’s arm, missing the car by, as it were, a hair! The girl buried her head in Arielle’s chest as they both braced themselves and prayed for a safe landing.

By the time Arielle and the dark-haired little girl she had just saved recovered from their fall on the side of the curb, there was a huddle of people around. The driver had managed to stop and come to see if they were okay. The parents knelt by their

little girl, one putting her head on their lap, and both stroking her hair and crying tears of gratefulness. It was surely a close call.

In the midst of all the confusion, Arielle got up and hobbled home. She had sprained her ankle, but that didn’t really matter much. For some reason the whole experience had a much greater impact on her than her other rescues had. The little girl looked so much like Arielle had when she was young; there was that sparkle in her eyes that was almost snuffed out except for God’s mercy.

I wonder about the sparkle in my eyes. It’s gone, isn’t it? she thought as she continued to hobble along the sidewalk, back towards her home. *Only someone else or some accident didn’t snuff it out. I let it fade and the fire died. Oh God, help me get my fire back. Put that free spirit back into my heart so I can love fully again,* she prayed silently, almost amazed at the words that were coming into her heart and mind.

She finally made it home, and there was Mama to greet her, as always. Things hadn’t changed just because her little Flower had gotten older. Good thing she was there, because Arielle definitely needed a little help up the steps.

“Goodness, little Flower! Did you help someone?” Mama asked, looking straight down at Arielle’s swollen ankle.

“You mean, how did I sprain my ankle?”

“Yes, yes. But if you did help someone, I’d be interested to know...” Mama replied quickly as she looked at the swollen ankle, then looked up at Arielle’s knowing smile. “Oh, you rascal,” Mama chuckled. “Come inside and I’ll help you take care of that.”

“I’ll really be okay. I’ll just get some ice and...”

“I’ll get some ice. You sit over there on that couch. Your ankle looks like one of those spiky...”

“Puffer fish?”

“Yes. Only without the spikes. It’s very big, very big. You can’t walk on it for a little while.”

“But...”

Mama held her finger up to indicate that that was the end of the discussion.

Arielle sighed. She didn’t like just lying around and Mama knew it.

“You won’t have to just lie around. You can do your school and homework. I’ll even go and find out what it is you should do for the next little while, if you like.”

“It’s okay.”

There was a long silence before Arielle asked, out of the blue, “Mama, did you ever lose the sparkle in your eyes? Or has it always been there? I mean, do real Gypsies never lose it?—Or do they just have it always and always?”

“Yes, yes, I’ve lost it sometimes. It wasn’t always there. Little children always have it, but then as they grow older, sometimes it looks like it’s gone. The little embers of the fire are still there somewhere, though, and once people let it back into their hearts—the spark, the fire—it comes back brighter and deeper than before. Some people lose it many times, but they always let the light in again.

“My mother was like that, bless her soul. Many sad things happened to her, and for a little while she would be under the biggest cloud you’d ever seen. But then the sun would come through and it would be all the more beautiful because it wasn’t just making light, it was using the tears, the rain, to make a rainbow. Oh, she was an old Gypsy saint with many rainbows to her name.”

Arielle wasn’t going to get specific and relate her own thoughts just yet. She needed to grow a little more, and Mama knew that. But this brief exchange left hope in both their hearts—in Mama’s because

she knew that Arielle wanted the sunshine back, and in Arielle’s because she knew it wouldn’t be cloudy forever if she’d only let the sun break through.



Things did start looking up for Arielle, but only because she started looking up. She didn’t do much of anything different from what she’d been doing those last seven years or so—there wasn’t that much else to do anyway with school to attend and all the other activities that kept her busy. But there was more of a spring in her step, an enthusiasm for the things she was already involved in, and when anyone needed help, she had the love to go along with the courage. Mama and Papa were happy too; it was as if their little Flower had once again come out to play in the sunshine after a very long winter. The sparkle was back.

Even though she wondered about Herbie and if their paths would ever cross again, in her heart she’d let him go. She didn’t resent the experience anymore. Mama’s words had finally sunk in, that loving someone is always a good experience. She and Herbie did have a special kind of friendship, and she knew it did her good to have been loved like that. Now she wanted to love others that way. She didn’t know how, but she did want to, and that was a start.

Arielle graduated from high school, and had done exceptionally well. Her parents were so proud of her and they were all discussing what she was going to do. Her parents had saved some money that could be used to help her to continue studying, and they knew she could probably work part-time to increase the sum.

Mama did hope, though, and Papa shared this hope, that Arielle would choose to do something that would be of help to others. Perhaps it was their passion to not just live for oneself that made them

want her to reach out and find whatever it was that God wanted her to do. It had to be His best.

“Mama and Papa, I’d like to go to medical school and become a doctor,” Arielle announced quietly at the dinner table one evening. Both Mama and Papa looked up from their plates, not surprised in any way, but anticipating the explanation which was soon to follow.

“The other day I was walking home from visiting that lake where Jeremy, um...”

“Yes, we remember, Flower,” Mama encouraged her on.

Arielle’s eyes started to well up with tears. “I’m sorry. This is really not meant to be an emotional announcement...” she laughed through her tears. “I just wanted to tell you...”

“Go on, darling Flower. You know we’re listening,” her Papa reassured as he reached over his plate and stroked her arm and shoulder.

Then she continued her story, in between tears and stifled sobs. “I took this shortcut through the cemetery. It was so peaceful and quiet and I felt so serene at first, but then I started to feel sad. There were so many who had barely a stone for their tombstone, some little children. You knew it was because they were poor, and you couldn’t help but wonder if it would have been different had they been able to afford help.

“I kept walking this way—I’d never been through it before. It led to a small alleyway that opened into this poorly kept street. I’d never been there before or seen anything like it. There were all these poor little children walking around with hardly any clothing on. They must have been freezing. Mothers and fathers were also there, some with sick little children in their arms, all looking almost like ghosts. It was so dreadful—but I wasn’t revolted, I was just overwhelmed with sympathy.

“They all looked at me as if I was from another world—I guess not many people pass through there. I wanted to help them. They looked at me with questioning eyes, maybe wondering what my reaction would be—if I was going to be appalled. I walked slowly through, and my eyes filled with tears. A little boy with a dirty bandage on his head tugged on my dress and I tried to smile, but the tears just kept flowing and flowing. I had to run, I wasn’t sure what else to do. I want to help them—they and anyone like them.”

Mama and Papa were happy and touched to tears. They both reached over and held her hands as their hearts communed silently together.

Chapter Three – Following a Dream

This new prospect gave Arielle a feeling of purpose in her life, and she prayed day and night that things would work out for her to attend a good medical school. In the meantime, she visited that little destitute slum and tried to help those poor people she had seen, in whatever way she could. She hoped that she could go to a medical school nearby so that she could use what she would learn to help them.

She ended up having to move to another town to attend the college that had an opening for her, and the little community of poor did their best to scrounge up their pennies and bake her a small simple cake to present to her on the last day she visited. She was touched. Life certainly has its ups and downs, and this past little while had just been one long “up” for her. She’d let the sunshine into her life in every way.

The day finally came. She was going away to fulfil her dream. She kissed her parents goodbye and boarded the bus that was going to take her into a new chapter of her life. She found herself seated next to a cheery-looking young fellow, though she was a little bit disturbed at the way he looked at her. He was staring.

What could it possibly be? she thought to herself. She tried to look straight ahead, all the while wondering what his problem was.

"What's your name?" he asked in a friendly way, after he finally stopped staring.

"Arielle Romini," she answered, still looking straight ahead and glancing at him now and then out of the corner of her eye.

He went silent after that.

He didn't even introduce himself! Oh, why get so worked up, Arielle, she chided herself. He probably is just wondering about that last name. Then she chuckled to herself, *Silly me! I'm just being too nervous.*

Their ride continued with barely another word. They arrived at the school which was to be their home for the next few years of study. Arielle was tired from the long ride, but excited with anticipation for all that was ahead of her.



A few days later during lunch break, Arielle nearly dropped her fork right into her plate as she was eating. She thought for sure she heard someone call "Herbie!"

Oh no, you don't, she thought to herself again. That's all in the past. There's no reason to begin thinking about...

"Herbie! Over here!" the voice called out again, and Arielle spun around in the direction the voice was coming from. She couldn't believe her eyes! There he was, standing tall and strong, crowned with that thick reddish hair, at the other end of the dining room—it was the same young man she'd sat next to on the bus. She blushed. *But of course! Why didn't I recognize him?*

Overwhelmed somewhat by the excitement of realizing that he'd come to the same school she had, by total coincidence, yet unsure of what to say or do next, she turned back around in her chair. Feelings were beginning to well up inside her as thoughts and memories rushed to the fore.

Whoa, Arielle! Slow down, girl! she thought to herself. *You'll have to mull this one over in your head for the rest of today and maybe tonight, and then find some way to approach him. I can't believe you're being so ridiculous. You're never like this.*

Well, she wasn't going to get an afternoon and a night to mull this over. Herbie had noticed her turn around and look in awe at him, and realized that she'd just recognized him. He also figured she'd probably be embarrassed for not recognizing him on the bus, but he couldn't resist surprising her.

"Aha!" he said as he clapped one hand down on her shoulder, almost making her hit the roof.

"You almost made me choke on my food!" she said, half in jest (though the surprise did have just that effect), before yielding to an embarrassed giggle.

They both looked at each other for a second, smiling nervously, until Herbie said, "Come over here, Elle! I need one of those old bear hugs!"

She, of course, relieved that he had done something to diffuse that awful feeling of awkwardness, jumped into his arms. Come to think of it, they actually looked quite similar to the way they had when they'd last seen each other, and they both secretly wondered why the other had not noticed for certain on the bus. Perhaps it was because they had both let go—and they had.

It was a pretty thrilling turn of events, to say the least. They had lots of stories to tell, and had by some simple twist of fate gone through somewhat similar experiences that led up to their decisions to become doctors. Arielle was totally enthralled, and so was Herbie. They spent their lunch breaks together, sat near each other during classes, studied together afterwards, and spent almost every moment they had together before they had to retire for the night to their separate dorms.



In all her excitement Arielle nearly forgot to tell her parents. The postman's announcement of a letter from the school where Arielle had gone brought them both running to the porch where the letter had landed.

There was a little tussle as to who would read the letter first, but Papa ended it by jokingly "reminding" Mama that she wasn't wearing her glasses and so he should be the one. She didn't wear glasses, so they both gave a hearty laugh at their childish anticipation to read their daughter's letter first, and Mama let him read it aloud.

"Okay Mama, here goes."

Dear Papa and Mama,

Everything is so wonderful here. It's a very detailed profession—more so than I had imagined—but learning is so much fun. There are so many things I can see would be very useful, and I can't wait to begin putting them into practice, though of course that is still quite some time away, since we've only been here three months.

Papa, Mama, the most wonderful thing has happened! Herbie is here too! I never thought I would see him again, but he's here! He's really here! We do so much together and help each other with our studies; it's all so wonderful. When we get our first chance for a visit, we'll come to see you both. It will be so fun!

Class is in just ten minutes, so I'll have to finish for now, but I love you and I pray that the angels will watch over you as they do over me.

Arielle

P.S.: Mama, I'm so glad I let the sunshine back in last year. I don't think this would have happened if I hadn't. At least it wouldn't have been as wonderful.

Before Papa looked up from the letter, Mama, who was standing beside him, whispered, "It's true, George. It wouldn't have happened if she hadn't let the sunshine back in. She wouldn't have been ready. Our God does work in mysterious ways."

Chapter Four – Memories

“Herbie, can I ask you something?” Arielle asked him one evening as they sat at the edge of the lake, bathing their feet and watching the first stars come out.

“Sure, Elle. What?” he said without turning his eyes away from the starlit sky.

“Did you recognize me that day on the bus?”

“I thought I did, but I wanted to ask your name first, to be sure.”

“And then why didn’t you say anything when you found out?”

There was a long pause before Herbie responded, and Arielle wondered if he’d heard her, or if she’d said something wrong.

“Elle, before I answer your question, let me tell you what I’ve been wanting to tell you for a long time. When I was a little boy, kids used to make fun of my red hair. They called me all sorts of names. So when I met you and knew that they made fun of you too for being a little bit different, I felt like I already knew you, even though I’d only seen you from a distance during those first days at your school.”

“Yeah, I didn’t go out of my way to meet people.”

“When you meet someone who’s gone through the things you have and felt the same feelings, you

almost feel like they know a part of you and you know a part of them, before you ever even get to know each other. That's why it was so easy for me to open up to you when I was younger. We were both in vulnerable circumstances when we first met, and then found we had so much in common, so opening our lives up to each other just made me feel so much a part of you. I really loved you, Arielle. I never wanted to hurt you."

"I know."

"I'll get around to answering your question; I just want you to understand everything behind it. I felt comfortable with you and I always wanted to keep that, I didn't want to lose it. We had conviction together and we believed in the same things, but by myself I wasn't sure I'd be the same. Then one day my parents had a visitor. He looked like a fairly well-to-do person. He was a friendly man, and had come to discuss some sort of business deal or arrangement with my parents. In the course of his visit, he also spoke with me, and asked me how school was, about my friends, how I liked this town and such things.

"I talked freely with him, and told him about you, and the things we would do and places we would go together. He didn't seem to have a problem with anything I said, but I guess whatever it was that my parents were trying to get from him didn't come through, and they blamed it on my talking about you too much. It was my mother, really. She's always been so conservative and paranoid. She grew up poor and has always wanted to become rich; I guess the pressure was just a bit too much for her."

At that point Arielle's eyes lowered. Herbie noticed. He scooted closer to her, put his arm around her and gently rubbed her shoulder.

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No, please. I want to hear the whole story, Herbie. I ... I've always wondered."

"That's what I thought, and that's why I wanted to explain," Herbie continued gently. "Anyway, I think my parents weren't doing so well financially and so this prospect falling through really got my mother scared and upset. I don't think it really had anything to do with you, as the visitor didn't seem like the overly prejudiced type of person my mother is. But after finding out that this business prospect wasn't coming through, she became upset at everyone and everything that day, and began talking about having to move to another part of town. In the middle of it all, to my surprise, she told me I couldn't see you anymore.

"My whole world crumbled around me at that moment. It was like she'd just gone and told me to blow out my only candle. I argued and pled, and my father did too. But my mother had always been a little uncontrollable, and father just nodded that I should go through with it for now. He told me later he only meant to do it to just make her stop being so upset, and that he didn't mind. That afternoon my mother had told me to run along and tell you. I thought it was very cruel of her to make me do that, but I was scared and so I did it.

"The answer to your question now..." he said with a sheepish smile, knowing his story had been a longer answer than she probably was looking for. Arielle looked up with a hopeful, curious smile. "...I was just afraid that you had been embittered by the whole experience, and I just wasn't sure if you would..."

"Want you again?"

"Yep. I guess that's it." Now it was time for Herbie's eyes to lower.

There were a few moments of silence. Arielle wasn't sure what the perfect response would be, but she did want it to be a perfect one, so she stopped to ponder it for a few moments, while Herbie grew

ever anxious. She leaned her head on his shoulder, as if to say that she did love him. But she didn't put it into words just yet.

Then she asked, "Herbie, do you still believe all the things my parents told you about the Gypsies?"

Herbie nodded, puzzled that she seemed to be changing subjects.

"All the things?" she asked. "Did they tell you *all* the things?" she said temptingly, while she reached her hand around his waist and started untucking his shirt.

This is good, Herbie mused, for lack of any other way to express the funny mix of feelings that came over him when he realized what she was suggesting.

Herbie looked down at those curiously delightful big brown eyes looking up at his.—They seemed to ask if he was in agreement.

He reached over and pulled her onto his lap. She leaned her head back on his chest and relaxed for a moment, her feet playing in the water beside his, appreciating the moon's peaceful reflection on the lake. Herbie, on the other hand, was appreciating Arielle's reflection in the lake, whenever she would lean forward.

"Did my papa tell you *everything* the Gypsies believed. I mean, *all* their beliefs and practices?" she asked again, playfully, kind of wondering how Papa could have told a 12-year-old all these things.

"Not straight out, but he did hint at one topic of interest one of the many times he was telling me his old Gypsy stories," Herbie whispered as he brushed his lips against the back of her neck and began unbuttoning her dress in the front. "We'll have to take these off so they don't get wet," he whispered.

Before too long they were bathing in the lake, the moonlight, and the love that was sweeter than either of them had ever imagined. After what seemed

like many ecstatic moments, they stood opposite each other, their hands pressed against the other just above the chest-deep water.

"Let's be Gypsies, Arielle," Herbie said as he leaned over to kiss her.

"Doctor-Gypsies?" Arielle joked and then broke the gentle moment by jumping into his arms and ardently kissed him. They couldn't help but start all over again.

The lake became a favorite spot of theirs for awhile. It was quiet and somewhat deserted, off to the side of the campus—the perfect place.

After that there was no hiding that the two were very special friends. No one knew about the lake episodes, but no one would have questioned the thought that those two would most likely be partners in work, in life and in love.

Chapter Five - To Love

The years flew by. Being the bright students that they were, both Herbie and Arielle had excelled in their studies and graduated with honors. After having fulfilled the required time as interns in local hospitals, they finally received the degrees that fully qualified them both to work as doctors. This encouraged both of them a great deal and the promise of good jobs wiped away the last bit of low self-esteem that each had possessed in previous years. They returned to the town where Arielle lived, Arielle staying with her parents, and Herbie close by—both working as doctors in nearby but separate clinics.

Arielle felt confident that now she could help others even more when put into situations like she always had been—Jeremy at the lake; the little curly-haired girl that had almost been hit by a car; and the many other smaller incidents. Now she felt she could do it right—the professional way. She would not only be able to help little Jeremys out of a lake, but she'd be able to take the necessary precautions and foresee any complications afterwards. But slowly she started forgetting the love part of it all.

Once when coming back from work she saw a note from Herbie on her parents' door.

Arielle, if you want to find me, I'm at a little street behind the cemetery. Love, Herbie

A feeling of embarrassment swept across her as she remembered what she had forgotten—the poor, lonely people who had been her reason for going to medical school. Herbie was good for her, she acknowledged. He remembered the things she, in all her enthusiasm to be the best, had forgotten—the things that mattered most.

She dropped her bags at the front door and raced over to the slum. As she ran a funny thought struck her: *Mama wasn't at the door to greet me. She's always been there ever since I was little, and even just yesterday, no matter what time it was. She wasn't there today. I wasn't supposed to go home!* She ran all the faster—she couldn't wait to reach the little alley. She felt embarrassed that she'd promised the people she'd come back, but had forgotten, and wasn't sure what to do. She slowed down as she reached her destination and timidly stepped into the muddy street the alleyway opened up to.

A little kid spotted her and alerted everyone else, "It's her! It's..." Before he could get the words out, everyone had gathered in an informal semi-circle, singing, "Arielle's a jolly good fella, she's a jolly good fella!" Then different people called out, "We missed you!" "So happy you're back!"

Arielle was overjoyed. She quickly wiped away a few tears that threatened to roll down her cheeks and ran towards her old friends, arms outstretched. Herbie was there too. He had a huge smile on his face, so happy to see his angel coming back. She'd been away recently in spirit, and he had hoped that a boost of love would re-ignite that spark he always loved about her. It just had.



After rejoicing together for an hour or so with the hot chocolate and cookies that Herbie had brought with him for everyone, Arielle and Herbie waved goodbye to everyone, leaving them all to enjoy the leftovers.

"We'll be back! I promise!" Arielle called out enthusiastically.

As Herbie walked her home she asked, "Herbie, how did you know about this place—that I used to go there?"

"I didn't. At least, not until one day recently when I was passing through the cemetery and heard noises and laughter coming from a little street. I wandered over to see what it was, because whatever it was, I figured it couldn't be very bright and cheery; it's such a dark little alley. It led into this street, and when I got there I talked to a few people, and by and by someone said that a young girl used to come over in the afternoons often and give food and clothing, little things she'd collected for them. By their descriptions I figured it must be you, and then someone said your name. They said you'd gone off to medical school because you wanted to help others more, people like them."

"Yes. That was why I went to medical school. I was so heartbroken by their plight. I guess I've just gotten a little selfish the last few years. I've been so happy in my own little world, and I've forgotten about other people who are in need like I was for a long while. I guess I should share my blessings, huh?"

"Yep. If we don't keep giving, we'll die young. Isn't that something Papa George used to say?"

"I promise to do my best. Can we do it together?"

"What do you think?"

Arielle giggled. "I love you, Herbie! I need you too!"

Herbie stopped her right there on the sidewalk, pulled aside one of Arielle's dark curls that was

hanging in her face and kissed her. "Race ya' home!" he challenged, and they both sped down the sidewalk and abruptly turned into the little driveway that led up to the house. There was Mama waiting. Herbie got there first, but only a second before Arielle, who joined Herbie and Mama in a big bear hug. Papa came out to see what all the commotion was and joined in too.

"All right, all right!" Mama said as the bear hug ended. "Herbie, are you staying tonight? At least for the evening? You can stay the whole night if you like, actually. We're going to be putting up Christmas decorations a little earlier this year, starting tonight. We always do it so late and then hardly enjoy the magic long enough."

Arielle looked at Herbie hopefully. Her eyes tried to remind him that there weren't any secluded spots nearby, such as they had found at the lake on the campus, and this might be one of their few chances.

"Okay, I'll stay the evening and then see if I want to stay the night," he said casually to Mama, and turned a teasing glance towards Arielle.

Arielle pretended not to notice, but just when Mama and Papa turned their backs, she put on her little puppy-dog look at Herbie. He tickled her into the house. It was going to be a fun evening.

The hours flew by. After a delicious meal, they helped Mama with the dishes and then dashed around decorating the house. It was a delightful sight! By the end, the quiet little home looked quite picturesque, and the four of them went around commending each other on the decorations each one had put up. It was always Mama's great honor to decorate the Christmas tree, and she did it with such glory! It almost looked magical—the little white doves and baubles, tinsel, ornaments hand-carved by Papa, and the gorgeous angel at the top.

Papa had also carved a little wooden manger set

when Arielle was a little girl, and he had kept it looking beautiful all those years. Every year he would bring out his creation with such a sense of fulfillment and pride. The carving was very skillfully done. Each feature of the manger, the animals, the stable, and the figures—they were all so pretty.

Herbie helped Arielle with her usual job of putting up decorations on the doors, the shelves, windows, etc.

"Papa and I had to do your part while you were gone those last six years, Arielle," Mama said, somewhat melancholically. "Are we ever happy you're home to do it your special way."

"Oh, thank you Mama. You should've left it for those days I would visit."

"No, Flower, of course we couldn't. We had to have it all ready for you when you came!"

Another big bunch of bear hugs followed—Herbie loved how hugs would just abound at any moment of the day with Arielle and her mama and papa.

After all was said and done, Mama and Papa went to their room, leaving Herbie and Arielle by the fireplace. Arielle lay her head on Herbie's lap while they softly sang songs together. It was such a warm and comfy feeling to have hardly any cares, to be enveloped with all this love—not only the love they had between them, but Mama and Papa's too.

"Your parents are so special, you know."

"I know. Sometimes I forget; I've lived with them for so long. But when I stop to think about it, or see other families, I do thank the Lord very much for them. They're so young in spirit."

"Yes. I'd like to be like that when I get to be their age, Arielle."

"Me too. Sometimes it all seems too good to be true, but it is the way it's supposed to be, isn't it? It feels so right."

"It does."

"Herbie?"

"Yes."

"Please don't ever leave me."

"Oh Arielle, you know I would never want to do that," Herbie reassured her as he played with her hair and stroked her face.

"Thank you," Arielle answered as she snuggled her head comfortably on his lap and squeezed his hands.

"You remember..." Herbie started, and then hesitated.

Curious, Arielle nudged him, "What, what is it?"

"You remember what your father said about love?"

"He's said many things."

"About how love is something that's always in your heart, and even if people fail or aren't always there for you, the love you had for them can strengthen you.—That it depends on what you do with the love after they're gone. ... You can either close up and stop the flow, or re-direct it to others. It's all God's love, you know. Oh, I'm not making sense."

"Please, Herbie, keep talking. It must be something I need to hear," she said gently.

Finally Herbie mustered up the courage, "Arielle, I love you so deeply I don't think anything could ever take it away. If anything happens to me, don't stop loving. Please? Don't close up and get hard and bitter. You just have to keep loving even when it hurts the most, and one day it'll stop hurting and you'll be happy again."

"I couldn't be happy with anyone else, though, Herbie."

"I'm not suggesting that anything will happen, but when you asked me to never leave you, I was worried that if something happened beyond my control you might go into your shell again. You wouldn't be that same fiery, wonderful and sexy

Gypsy girl. You have so much to give, Arielle. Please don't ever let anything make you stop giving. Will you promise me that?"

There was a long pause while Arielle looked at the flames dancing in the fireplace. She remembered how her fire had well nigh gone out before. She didn't want that. But then again, she couldn't promise Herbie unless she believed it, and she wanted to so badly. It wasn't easy, but she knew he was right and she wanted to be brave. "Herbie, I promise. I promise that if anything happens to you, I won't stop loving."

"Even when it hurts?"

"Even when it hurts."

"Even if you're scared?"

"Even if I'm scared."

"Even if I ask you to come away from this delightful, picturesque scene and take me to your room?" Herbie knew that what he had said up until that point was weighing heavily on Arielle's heart—it was a soft spot, after all—and he needed to help her lighten up a little. Plus, he didn't want to spoil such a perfect opportunity, even though deep down they both knew her parents wouldn't mind if this was a more regular occurrence. Papa and Mama trusted them and knew that Herbie would take good care of their little Flower.

Without looking up Arielle repeated, as she had the other times, "Even if you ask me to come away from this delightful, picturesque scene and take you to my room." Then she bolted up in a playful way, as if she had just realized what she'd said and shrieked, "It's a mess!" before darting up the stairs, Herbie following close behind.

They got to the door before Herbie was able to hold her and keep her from running in, long enough for him to say, "I don't care.—I'll only be looking at you."

That was it. The spark had been ignited. There, at the top of the stairs began a passionate declaration of love—the kind declared without words.

Lying in each other's arms later that evening was such a warm and comfortable feeling—not only to the senses, but to the heart too. Herbie looked over at Arielle lying peacefully beside him, and decided that this was the time. Trying not to wake her just yet, Herbie reached down and struggled to find a gift that he had hidden underneath her bed. Just when he thought he found it, he nudged Arielle.

"Uh huh?" She responded without opening her eyes.

"I have something for you," he said, fumbling around all the more, trying to feel for where he had put his prized gift.

At the suggestion of a gift, Arielle sat up suddenly. "Herbie! I love presents!" That action sent them both rolling onto the floor, in a torrent of sheets and pillows, Herbie having been struggling for quite some time now to find the gift without causing a stir.

"You're such a sweet and silly girl!—Look what you did!" Herbie said as he looked down around him at the mess she'd just caused.

"Herbie. What do you have? I'm dying of curiosity!" Arielle begged.

He looked searchingly into her eyes, then pulled a little box from behind his back.

Arielle's wild curls hid her tear-filled eyes as she opened the box and saw the pretty ring. It was shiny silver, with tiny diamonds that formed a flower in the middle.

"For my little Gypsy Flower."

"You really love me, Herbie?—This much?"

"Of course I do," Herbie said as he helped her put it on her finger. "I've been carrying this around with me for the last little while, wondering when I should give it to you. Then I saw you lying here so

peacefully beside me, with nothing but the soft sheets and silver moonlight covering you. I had to give it to you. Would you like to..."

"Of course I would!" Arielle exclaimed, before Herbie was even able to finish his sentence, and then she threw her arms around him.

"You didn't even know what I was going to say..." Herbie quickly added, with a playful twinkle in his eye, pretending as if he was indeed going to say something else.

"Oh, don't do that, you rascal!"

"Yes, of course I was going to ask you that. Who else would I ask? You're the perfect girl for me. I think you were ordered straight from Heaven."

"Herbie, I really love you," Arielle said softly as she sat on his lap and hugged him, resting her head on his shoulder. "I really, really love you."

"I really, really love you too, Elle."



The next morning was a Sunday. Mama, Papa and Herbie were already up, enjoying the leisurely weekend pace, when Arielle crept out of her room and down the stairs to join them in the living room. She still had the dreamy look in her eyes from the long night before, but as Herbie walked past her and squeezed her hand before going to the kitchen for a moment to give her parents and her a little privacy, reality dawned on her. She was getting married! She knew Mama and Papa would be more than happy for her, but she was excited to see what their reactions would be. Would they be surprised?

"Papa, Mama. I have something to tell you."

"Herbie already told us, Flower," Mama answered, and smiled.

Arielle smiled and blushed. "And?"

"And we're happy for you!" Papa burst out and the three of them dissolved into one massive hug. Herbie figured it was about time for him to return,

and he walked calmly back into the room.

“Come, come!” Mama called out to him. “Come and join us in our celebration!”

That was the cue. Herbie walked over and added himself to the hugging scene.

“You can live here with us and we can be one big happy family!” Mama exclaimed.

“I think young married people these days like to get their own house,” Papa interjected with a smile.

“We’re not exactly living in big spacious Gypsy caravans and tents, Mama!”

“Oh, I know! I know! But at least for a little while, till you find a house?”

Herbie and Arielle looked at each other, and Papa and Mama looked at Herbie. Herbie nodded to Arielle, giving his approval, and they all went around for seconds on hugs.

Chapter Six – In a Dream

They decided to have their wedding in the spring. The next few months went by quickly. Herbie and Arielle informed the staff at their clinics about their wedding, and everyone promised to come. Papa and Mama wrote the few relatives they had close by, and invited some of the neighbors. The little community from beyond the alleyway was invited too.

It was a mixed crowd, but a happy lot of people who attended their wedding. They decided to have it up on the hill where Papa used to take Arielle as a little girl—Arielle had pleaded and lobbied with everyone for that. It was a breathtaking sight up there on the hill, the smallest one in the range of hills that it was a part of. There were pretty dandelions growing wild and beautifully everywhere, and the sun put a joyful glow on everyone there. Even Herbie’s parents came. They had mellowed over the years; there’s just something about the experience and understanding that comes with time.

For a moment Herbie wondered if he was marrying an angel—Arielle looked an unearthly beauty. She wore a simple, crepe-like white dress that barely covered her shoulders and hugged her buxom frame down to her waist before bursting into flowing, angelic waves of white. The beautiful band of flowers Mama had made to hold the pretty white

veil in place looked magical atop Arielle's gorgeous black curls. To Herbie, she was the most beautiful thing he thought he would ever see. It was the closest thing to perfection in his mind—the pure white that made her look like an angel, combined with that Gypsy spirit Herbie loved so much which was suggested in her semi-transparent dress.

Herbie didn't want to be traditional about his dress either. He had persuaded Papa to let him borrow boots, and pants that puffed at the bottom before tucking into his boots. His costume wouldn't have been complete without Papa's vest to wear over his specially chosen white shirt with loosely-hanging sleeves that gathered at the wrist, and a V-neck with strings that crisscrossed up a few inches before the collar. He was a handsome sight! They both looked so pure and untainted in their love that those who attended marveled and almost envied them.

It only took a little persuading to convince the local minister to perform the marriage up on the hill, rather than inside the church building, as would have been the custom. But he kindly agreed, and so the wedding was performed. Papa had never looked prouder than he did in that moment when he walked down the "aisle" with his daughter, as Mama looked on with tears of joy in her eyes for her little Flower.

The ceremony ended in a rapturous embrace and kiss for Herbie and Arielle, after which they joined everyone in the refreshments and picnic that they'd all decided to have. Everyone had brought what they could, even those from the poor little community on the other side of the alleyway. It was a blessed time. Someone from almost every different class of life was present, yet they mixed together so happily.

Then the head doctor and owner of Arielle's clinic, Dr. Bob Curtney, clapped his hands to get everyone's attention. Everyone was busy feasting

at their respective picnic blankets, but all stopped to listen.

"I would like to congratulate these two very bright, very fine, but most of all, very kind, young people. Herbie I know somewhat, Arielle I know well, but both have struck me as very giving and selfless individuals. I know you'll be very happy together for a long, long time.

"Because I failed to prepare something to bring to this delightful picnic, I wanted to present my gift now. Come, come you two."

They both walked up and stood on either side of Bob (who was as wealthy and kind as he was round). Arielle cast a quick glance at Papa and Mama, who stood at the back like two old saints observing the occasion from another world.

"I imagine that you would need a home—or have you got that all worked out? Tell me you don't, please? Otherwise my gift will be spoiled."

Arielle smiled and shook her head. "No, we don't."

"Good then! I have a pretty little house that I bought once for someone, but it hasn't been used in the last 10 years. It has been kept up though—wonderfully, in fact. And I would like you to live in it for as long as you like. In fact, as I recall, it should still be well-furnished, so whenever you would like to move in, let me know."

Everyone cheered and Bob hugged Herbie and Arielle, who, quickly recovering from their shock at Bob's generosity, returned the embrace with many words of gratitude.



Herbie and Arielle decided to go ahead and spend their honeymoon in the quaint little house that Bob had given for their use. Mama helped them with every detail of their packing—so much so that they were almost glad to not be living in the same home for fear she might work herself too hard.

It was a pretty home, just like Bob had said it was.—A little three-bedroom, two-story house, delightfully decorated.

“I hope you enjoy yourselves—for years to come!” Bob said with a kind smile before he waved them goodbye. “See you in a week, Arielle! You won’t forget about the old clinic, will you?”

Arielle shook her head reassuringly at him, and then smiled and waved as he took his leave.

“This is so fun, Herbie! It’s almost like one of those real, real good dreams, isn’t it?”

“Only it’s not a dream.”

“I don’t know about that—sure seems awfully dreamy to me.”

“I could pinch you to show you it’s real!” Herbie laughed as he moved closer to Arielle, who instantly jumped up from the couch that she’d been lying on and ran from him.

“I don’t want to wake up, though!” she yelled, laughing and running through the house, peeking in the doors to each room.

Finally Herbie caught up to her. He crept behind her as she looked out a window, putting his arms around her. “Okay, okay. I promise I won’t wake you.”

As they stood looking out the window at the cute pond that sat in the middle of the backyard, they both acknowledged that God had been very good to them.



That night they talked about all the things they wanted to do: have a family, help improve the lives of those folks in the slum, maybe start their own clinic and even donate their services.

“I just thought of something strange, Herbie.”

“What?”

“If there’s ever a war, I’d like to be a doctor there. There you’d really be able to help people. They’d have nothing, and you’d only be there for them—no

distractions or things to make you forget what you were there for.”

“Hmmm,” was all Herbie said. She could tell he didn’t take to the idea.

“You don’t think that’s good?”

“I think your intentions are very good, I’d just be concerned about you. That’s all. Those would be difficult conditions.”

There was a long pause before Arielle finished pondering what Herbie had said.

“You could come too,” she said, wondering if maybe that would make it better.

“If we start a clinic, one of us would have to stay here. Well, I don’t know. If that’s what God tells you to do when there’s a war, then my heart and my prayers will be with you, Elle.”

“We’ll pray that there won’t ever be any wars, but that thought just crossed my mind.”

“You’ve got a beautiful heart and mind, Elle,” Herbie said, kissing her forehead. “Keep it beautiful always—you’re just perfect like this.”

Chapter Seven – The Doctor

“Guess what, Herbie?” Arielle called out at the breakfast table one morning just before they were to leave for work. “I found the perfect job for Phineas!”

Herbie looked up at her, questioningly. “Who?”

“One of the men from the slum, you know, with the large family.”

“Oh, yes!”

“I’ve got to go and help him. Perhaps after work I’ll go over to their street and tell him. He’s got to get this job!”

“I’ll give him some nice clothes. Actually, when are you going to go? I’ll drive you there and pick up some hot dogs on the way for everyone there.”

“Herbie, you are terrific!” she said, getting up from the table and bending over to kiss him. “5:30! Pick me up at 5:30!”

“Okay, I’ll be right outside the clinic then, give or take 5 minutes.”

“Bye!”

“Bye, Arielle!”



Arielle burst into the clinic that morning, though her enthusiasm was dampened a little when she saw the faces of those walking around. People weren’t normally this solemn.

One of the nurses called her aside and said,

“Something’s happened to Bob. He had a heart attack earlier this morning. It wasn’t a massive one, though, and he should be up in a couple of weeks. He’s just got to take it real slow for quite some time.”

Noticing the worried look on Arielle’s face, the nurse put a hand on each of Arielle’s shoulders, looked straight into her eyes and smiled, “He’s going to be okay, Arielle.”

Bob was really much of the life and joy of the little clinic. He was always there each morning, as punctual as he was happy. He loved his work, took pride in it, and was always promoting kindness and gentleness as qualities every person working in such a despairing atmosphere (such as hospitals and clinics often can be) should have. Arielle loved him almost like a second papa, and hearing that he’d had a heart attack hit her quite hard.

Everyone else in the clinic tried to be cheery all day, but it was a difficult day for Arielle. She was more silent than usual, though she tried her best to treat each person that she came in contact with kindly and gently.

When 5:30 came around, she’d quite forgotten about her meeting with Herbie. Finally he went in to look for her.

“Elle, it’s past 5:30. Are we still going?”

“Oh, yes,” she said, still looking down at the charts she was filling out. “I just have to finish up a couple things.”

“Okay,” Herbie answered cheerily. “See you at the car.”

Arielle packed up, locked up her office, and was hoping to find her smile somewhere before the car, but she’d been out of practice all day and couldn’t put it on.

Before starting the car, Herbie asked, “Elle, are you all right?”

“Yep.”

“Well, then, let’s go,” Herbie responded, starting the car. He knew something was wrong, but she had to get it out herself.

Finally, “Bob had a heart attack, Herbie.”

Herbie slowed the car down a bit. “Is he all right?”

“Well, they said it wasn’t a massive heart attack, and now he just needs a little rest.”

“Did you go and see him?”

“No, it was really busy today and he’s at another hospital.”

“Let’s go see him after we see Phineas and the slum people.—You know, we’ve got to find a better name for them than that. We’ve been calling them that for what, three years?”

Arielle smiled. “Okay, let’s go see him after this. I hope they’ll let us.”

“We’ll make them let us.”



They finally arrived at the slum and told Phineas about the job. He was overjoyed, and so was his wife, Josephine.

“You are both wonderful!” Josephine exclaimed. “We’ve been so excited over the last couple years to see people slowly getting jobs and moving out of this wretched corner, out of their one-room homes and shacks into better places. It’s like the world is changing for us! We were just wondering when it would be our turn to start. We’ve been looking and looking for work, but it’s hard to get it when we look the way we do.”

“Thanks for this chance at a new start,” Phineas said, his eyes moist with tears. “We’ll make the most of it.”

“Hopefully we’ll be well along the new path before this next one’s born!” Josephine added excitedly, her hands resting on her stomach.

“Congratulations to both of you! We’re sure you’ll do just great!” Herbie encouraged them. They all

hugged each other, and Arielle and Herbie went on their way.



“We’ve come to see Doctor Curtney,” Arielle said to the lady at the reception desk to the hospital where Bob Curtney had been taken.

“We’re not allowing any visitors except for relatives.”

“We are both doctors and I’m Bob’s junior partner. We’re very close friends of his. Please?”

“I’ll take you to his room, but if he doesn’t want to see you, you’ll have to go.”

“Of course.”

After walking up a few flights of stairs, they arrived in the quiet, softly-lit room where Bob Curtney stayed.

“Two young people are here to see you, a ...”

“Herbie and Arielle,” Arielle whispered to the lady who had only opened the door wide enough to allow herself to pop her head in.

“Let them in,” an even fainter whisper answered.

“All right, you’re in. But not too long. This man needs his rest,” the lady said, as she turned to leave.

“Yes, ma’am,” Arielle and Herbie responded, happy she had relented and given Bob the chance to say yes.

“Bob, how are you?” Arielle wasn’t sure what else to say.

“How do I look?” said Bob in his humorous way.

Arielle laughed, trying to stop a tear from rolling down her cheek. Bob saw it, but pretended not to notice.

“How’s my little apprentice? Happy she doesn’t have someone looking over her shoulder anymore?”

“No. I was worried.”

“Don’t be! Don’t be! I feel I could live a thousand years. I’ll probably only reach about a hundred at the most, though. But as they say, shoot for the

stars and you’ll hit the...”

“Ceiling. Yes, yes,” Herbie and Arielle responded.

“I’ll be back in there tomorrow, Arielle,” Bob said as he watched the alarm in her eyes.

“But you...”

Bob laughed. “Caught you worrying about me for a second, huh? Yes, I’ll be good and rest. God must want me to taste a little of my own medicine for a couple months or so, and I shall do it bravely.

“So, my little girl. Do me a favor and don’t worry. Be cheerful and happy at the clinic. Everyone has to be that way—no reason to be sad about anything. I may get reports!” he added with a twinkle in his eye. There was a slight pause as he looked them both over, then he began again. “How’s the house, my children?”

“Beautiful.”

“You like it, eh?”

“Very much.”

“Well, live in it forever, if you like. I’m only too happy to have someone else live in it and take care of it. It does my heart good to know that two such beautiful souls as yours can now fill that humble house of mine.”

“We’d better let you get some rest. Here are some flowers we got on the way, to brighten your room up,” Herbie interrupted the few moments of silence that had followed Bob’s last sentence.

“It needs that. We’ll have to brighten the clinic up once I’ve up and risen again. You see things very differently when you reverse roles and become a patient for awhile. You’ll both probably experience that eventually. Every doctor should get sick once in awhile. It keeps the compassion young, and reminds them that their profession makes them no exception to the rules God made for us to live by—exercise, proper diet and all that. You two make sure you do that, all right? Don’t become like me. I’ll

have to work on all that once I get home.”

“First start with the rest part, Doctor. You work too hard. Here’s your chance to sleep.”

“All right, all right. You both go along now. My whisper is fading away, and that’s a bad sign—no talking for awhile,” Bob said with a smile. “And give my love to those people who have had to see me every day for many years and are only just now getting a well-deserved break.”

“I will,” Arielle smiled. Bob was so nice and cheerful. He had the sparkle in his eyes even when he’d just had a heart attack. *What courage!* she thought to herself. *I need that kind of courage.*

Chapter Eight - The Test

“Herbie, what are you planning on doing tonight?” Arielle said late one evening, while they were both standing in the kitchen in their bathrobes, she making hot drinks while Herbie read the paper.

“Oh, I don’t know. Got anything in mind?” he said, still looking at the paper.

“Well, sort of,” Arielle answered with a suggestive tone in her voice that Herbie pretended not to notice.

“What was that?” Herbie yawned. “I was going to catch up on some sleep,” he continued, looking up out of the corner of his eye to see her reaction.

She seemed to stir the tea much longer than she usually did before she finally looked over at him, and he broke into a smile.

“You are such a tease!” she raced over to him. “Come here and get what you deserve.”

He ran to the door of their room and stood there, smiling, “Come and get what *you* deserve!”

“Oh no, you can’t just tease and get away with it,” she answered, standing at the end of the short hall that led to their room.

“Oh yes, I can. If you don’t come, then I’ll have to come over there and give you what you deserve!” he said, swinging the end of his bathrobe belt round and round in a playful fashion.

"Okay," she said sheepishly, walking slowly over to the door. "What do I deserve?"

"Something only I can give you at this very moment."

"And what's that?"

"Something that can't be explained verbally."

"Aha," Arielle said, as casually as possible, letting her robe drop to the floor. "Sometimes I wonder if we'll ever grow old in this one area of our lives."

"I sure hope not," Herbie answered, slipping his hands around her bare waist, and initiating the evening with a tender kiss.



The next morning Arielle awoke early to find that Herbie had already gone. He left a note on her bedside table.

Elle, my wonderful Flower girl, I had an early appointment, but I didn't want to wake you. See you tonight! Always, Herbie.

Arielle smiled as she meditated for a moment on the events of the night before. She lay back on the bed to enjoy them for just a second more when her alarm went off.

"Back to work, I guess," she said to herself as she reached over and turned it off.

Work that day was pretty normal, except that Doctor Curtney, who had by this time recovered, and resumed his work at the clinic, had a lunch appointment. This was unusual, since he normally had lunch at the clinic. Bob became concerned when Arielle looked surprised that he was going out. Since the appointment was to be with Herbie, he realized Herbie hadn't told her about this appointment, probably for a reason, so he didn't say anything other than that he would most likely be back in a couple of hours.



"Hello, Herbie! How are you?" Bob greeted Herbie.

"In some ways fine; in some ways not so fine."

"Well now, you don't sound so good. Are you really all right?"

After ordering their lunch quickly, Herbie confided in Bob, "I'm actually not doing so well. I've been in a lot of pain lately, and I'm afraid it might be serious."

Bob's eyes widened.

"I'm not sure though, Bob, but I don't want to frighten Elle. She's much too tender and vulnerable right now, and if there weren't anything wrong, it would be an unnecessary burden for her. If something was wrong, I'd like to pray that she'd be prepared in heart, and then ... I just don't know how I'd tell her."

"God will show you in His loving way, Herbie," Bob answered understandingly.

"Thank you, Bob. I was wondering if you can help me."

"Yes, you mean do the tests?"

"It needs to be very confidential so Elle doesn't find out, and I know you do work occasionally at another hospital for more serious cases. I know you'd keep it under your hat."

"Yes, I will, Herbie, I'd love to help you. My prayers are with you, son."

There wasn't much more that Bob could say. It was one of those moments where the burdens are best borne silently, so the hearts can commune more deeply with one another and with their Savior. Bob knew the feeling all too well, his wife having passed away several years before. It was a tender time, and Bob knew that sometimes too many words, even meant in a comforting way, can add more to the burden than is necessary. Prayer was the best comfort he could give.



The next week went by without too much difficulty for Herbie. The Lord had given him a great measure of grace, and he was able to continue to work and love Arielle the way he always had. It hurt him, though, to think of her finding out one moment before she was ready. He didn't have any proof that something was wrong, but being a doctor, he was pretty certain. He knew Bob was too, and the appointment to undergo the various preliminary tests was to take place that day.

"Herbie, do you want to have lunch today? I'm sure Bob would let me have lunch out of the clinic today, if I asked," Arielle asked as they were getting ready to go to work.

"I'd love to. But could we make it dinner instead? I've got a pretty crammed day ahead of me."

"All right," she answered. *He must be very busy, because he rarely ever skips or even postpones a date, she thought to herself, puzzled. Maybe it's just as well, since there is a lot to do at the clinic today.*

"See you at dinner, Elle! I'll pick you up at your clinic," Herbie called out as he walked out to start the car and be off to his work. Arielle didn't have to walk far to reach her clinic, since it was near to the house which Bob had given them, it having been built right near the clinic for him and his wife near the closing years of her life some years back.

She was all the more puzzled to find that Bob had another lunch appointment and that he wouldn't be returning to the office at all afterwards. Not having any reason to suspect anything, though, Arielle cheerfully went about her work. After all, there was dinner with Herbie to look forward to.



"So, what do the tests look like, Bob?"

"Well, it will take a little while before we know for certain. You know that, Herbie. But please do take care of yourself—you don't look that good, just from

observing you."

"Yes, I guess I did know it would take a little while. It's right what you said about it being good to reverse roles and be the patient. Only ... well, I guess I'm not a very patient patient."

Bob patted Herbie's back. "You're a brave man, Herbie. You have a lot of trust in your eyes. A lot of love too, but a lot of trust for sure."

"I always figure God's in control. Sometimes I question, but then I realize it just won't be possible to know everything right away—all the whys, the reasons."

"If there's anything I can do, Herbie, please let me know. You and Arielle are like children to me, yet friends as well, and I'd like to do all I can."

"Thank you, Bob. I really appreciate it."



"Herbie!" Arielle exclaimed as she pushed the clinic door open to see him standing outside the car, waiting for her.

"Are you all right?" she said, taking a closer look at his face. He looked worn and tired.

"Yes, Elle. I'm fine. Just a little tired. It was a hectic day."

"You sure?"

"Oh yes. I'm in desperate need of recharging, and by that I mean good food, good company, a good evening climaxing in good..." he winked at Arielle.

She leaned against him and stroked the back of his neck.

"Okay, we'd better be off then."

Chapter Nine – Puzzled

“Doctor Curtney there?”

“Yes. Just one moment. I’ll get him on the phone for you.”

“Hello? Doctor Curtney here.”

“Hi, Bob. It’s Herbie.”

“Hi, Herbie! How are you?”

“All right. Tests ready?”

“In fact, they are. Why don’t you come and see me during lunch? I’ll make my way over to the hospital by then.”

“How bad is it, Bob?”

“Not too good, I’m afraid. But I know you already knew that. Let’s talk about it more in an hour or so.”

Bob sighed and folded his hands at his desk. Never before had he seen such a delightful, happy marriage as Herbie and Arielle’s. But then again, he had once been part of a very special union too, and he knew his other half was waiting for him up Yonder.

He looked at the picture of his pretty wife on his desk. “Bettie, it marvels me to see how God’s comfort works so wonderfully when we let it. See you in Heaven, my princess. It looks like you might soon be meeting someone new up There—one of my friends. Give them all the love and comfort they need,

will you? I'll do my best to help their other half. Consider it one of those rare missions that brings us together in spirit."

Bob smiled, even though his eyes momentarily dimmed with tears. He knew Bettie was as alive and happy as ever. She'd heard him, he was sure of that.



"Bob?" Arielle asked, as she saw him rushing off again.

"Oh, dear Arielle! I'll be back in the late afternoon. Thanks for the charts—I went over them this morning. Good work."

She exchanged puzzled looks with the nurse that was standing beside her just inside the glass clinic doors.

"Lots of lunch appointments lately, huh?" the nurse, Megan, said, speaking Arielle's thoughts.

"Yes," Arielle agreed as she watched Bob cross the street, looking surprised that the nurse had noticed her concern.

"He'd just asked me to tell you that he wouldn't be here for lunch, when you seemed to appear out of nowhere. Maybe it startled him. Well, he said you could leave early if you like—it's been a pretty long week. Let me know if you need any help."

"I—I know," Arielle answered, still looking out the window. "I mean, uh, thank you. That's very kind of you."

Megan squeezed Arielle's shoulder gently before walking away, leaving Arielle standing there, wondering exactly why suddenly there were so many lunch and early afternoon appointments elsewhere.

Megan Doyette was a kind and compassionate young nurse. Many said she was among the best there were and that she had a gift. She was extremely gifted in the practical sense and had an outgoing nature, though she didn't strike anyone

as out of the ordinary upon first meeting. She was the kind of person who made you feel as if you could just lean your head on her shoulder and cry, even if you hardly knew her.

"Megan," Arielle called after her. "There's not a lot happening today, so I think I'll go to the park around 5:00 for a little breather. It's not too far away and I'll just be gone an hour or so. I just need a little time."

"I understand," Megan assured her.

Going back to her office, Arielle thought she'd call Herbie and see if he had a little spot free where he could join her. *But then again*, she thought to herself, *maybe I just need to be alone a little. Oh well, I'll see if he's free at least.*

"Hello, is Doctor Carlin there?"

"No. He's been out since just before lunch. I think he'll be back later this afternoon. Can I take a message?"

"Uh, no. It's all right."

Arielle sank into her chair. *That's odd. I wonder where he would have gone? I wonder if it's the same place Bob has been going to all this time? But why wouldn't Herbie tell me if he was doing something together with Bob? Oh well, I'd better stop trying to put all the pieces together as if it were all part of a puzzle, and get back to work before going for that "breather" at the park.*



"Now you know the worst that can happen, and the best. Yet either way..."

"Either way it's only a matter of time, right Bob?"

Bob nodded, his eyes moistening a little. He held back the tears though, for he knew that couldn't help. He knew all too well the feelings Herbie and Arielle would have to go through together, and he was concerned for Arielle.

God, give her the grace, Bob prayed silently. *Her*

reaction to this could determine the happiness of Herbie's last months. You know he deserves the best. Please help her.

After looking out the window for several moments, Herbie asked if Bob wouldn't mind joining him at the park for a little while.

"It'd be nice to take this all in in better surroundings, Bob."

"I agree. Let's take it to the Lord in the midst of His creation rather than in the midst of man's. It can only be easier."



"Okay, Megan. See you tomorrow, or possibly this evening—though I doubt it," Arielle said as she popped her head into the room Megan was working in.

"If I see you here, I'll know that you were struck with an irresistible urge to work overtime and I'll admire you greatly for it."

The two girls laughed.

"All right, see you, Megan."

"Bye, Arielle."

As Arielle stepped out of the clinic, the cool wind caressed her face. "Ah, yes. I definitely needed a breather," she said, as the sight of the park just around the corner confirmed it.

Arielle felt good to be out of the clinic and in the refreshing outdoors. It made her feel even better than she thought it should, and she wondered why. With each step, she began to feel more peaceful and serene. She momentarily forgot about the puzzle she had been trying to put together in her mind just moments earlier about Bob and Herbie.

A little bird suddenly flitted nearby, and landed on her shoulder. Intrigued at the bird's seeming fearlessness, she put her finger up to see if it would trust her further. It hesitated, but then gingerly reached one foot onto her finger, and then the next.

She brought the little bird closer to her chest and cooed softly, "There now. See? You don't have to be afraid. What would anyone do to a precious little birdie like you except take good care of it?"

The bird perked up and looked around, as if it were looking for a place to fly to. Arielle noticed that its leg looked like it had been hurt—perhaps it was healing up now, but it had been broken not too long ago. After a couple attempts at flight, it only made it up in the air a few inches before awkwardly fluttering to the ground. She gently picked it up and perched it back on her finger again. This time, she gave it a little boost by tossing it up higher into the air. It went flying, low, over to a little branch. She would have gone over and taken it off the branch except that just then she noticed two figures walking behind some trees out of the park about 30 or 40 feet away.

"Herbie and Bob?" She strained to see.

Once they'd made it past all the trees, Herbie and Bob shook hands, then hugged. Bob walked off in the direction of the clinic and Herbie to his car.

"Herbie! Herbie! Wait!"

He looked around as if he couldn't believe he was hearing that voice—the familiar voice he loved so much. Finally their eyes met.

"Elle!" He closed the car door and came running in her direction.

She started running, but then she stopped and began walking slowly. She felt a funny wave of worry or excitement—she wasn't sure which. She couldn't understand why she would have such a funny mixture of emotions so suddenly.

"Elle, are you okay? What's wrong?" Now it was Herbie's turn to be concerned about the expression on her face, the way she walked slowly, everything.

"I—I'm fine. Was that Bob you were with?"

Herbie almost cringed but managed to contain himself. "Yes! Oh yes, that was Bob."

Arielle looked at him with a question in her eyes. She knew it was Bob; what she wanted was for Herbie to tell her just what was going on. He was about to, but not the whole thing just yet.

"Arielle, I've got news for you!"

"What is it?" Arielle responded, her eyes again catching a glimpse of Bob as he made his way to the clinic she had just come from.

"Look, you have to pay attention. This is important," Herbie said, shaking her excitedly.

"Okay, you've got me scared. Now, what is it?" Arielle answered calmly, turning her gaze from Bob back to Herbie.

"It's nothing to be scared about. It's exciting!"

Arielle looked at him, as if to say, "Okay, tell me."

"I've found this great deal—a nice bungalow by a beach not too far away from here. I discussed it with Bob and he said you could have five days off so we can go together!"

Herbie looked almost too excited, and it made Arielle wonder. She was usually more much more excitable than he was, she thought. She was still wondering what in the world was happening. Was that all there was to it?

"That's great, Herbie! But ... but you've been so busy. Are you sure your clinic can..."

"Yes. My boss has said it's fine," he reassured her. "Anyway, we do get two vacation weeks aside from the regular holidays, remember? And I checked with Bob, and he was more than happy to give you the time off."

"So ... how's everything going at your job, Herbie?" Arielle asked, surprised that that was all she managed to get out after such exciting news.

"Honey? Are you all right?" Herbie asked, worried, praying and hoping she hadn't found out about his condition yet.

Honey? He's never called me that before. What's

happening? Everything seems so weird right now, such a strange time to take a vacation. I should get straightened out before we go, so it can be a happy one without me worrying the whole time.

"Elle?"

Arielle realized her face was displaying all these questions, so she reached over and kissed him. "I'm sorry. It's just been a very long day; in fact it's been one long week. But this—this is terrific! When do we go?"

"This Saturday."

"That's tomorrow!"

"Is that too soon?"

"Why, no, of course not! Right now wouldn't even be too soon!"

"That's my girl! You had me worried for a second—real worried. You can't do that to your Herbie—he wouldn't be able to take it," he joked.

Chapter Ten - In Sickness and Health

The next morning Arielle slipped out of the house quietly so as not to wake Herbie. She'd been having a very nervous feeling for a few days now, and it just seemed to be getting more intense. She had a few things to finish up at the clinic, so she left a little note letting Herbie know that she'd be back in a couple of hours—that she just had a couple of things she wanted to finish before they began preparing to leave.

Just as she walked past Bob's office to hers she stopped and re-traced her steps. Was that Bob she heard in there? The door was cracked open a tiny bit and she peered in to see Bob sitting at his desk, looking at a picture of his wife. She crept in slowly behind him and laid her hand on his shoulder. He didn't budge. He just reached up and patted her hand gently.

"Bob, are you all right?"

He wiped his eyes with a handkerchief before turning around to see her.

"Yes, I'm fine. And you?"

"I'm worried."

Bob reached over and hugged her, wanting to hide his surprise at her answer. "Whatever about? Aren't you taking a little time off? After that it should be all right."

"I'm worried about Herbie. Is he all right, Bob?"

"Yes, I'm sure Herbie's all right," Bob assured, not wanting to be asked any more specific questions.

"I'm not sure he is, that's the problem. I think he's not well and every morning I wake up with this nervous or worried feeling, like maybe something's happening to him."

"Sweet child. You really love him, don't you?"

All Arielle could get out was a nod before she burst into tears. "Everything's been near perfect for so long, only little tests here and there—life's usual tests, you know. I'm just afraid of losing it all."

Bob stood up and held her. "There, there. Everything you put into God's hands you'll never lose, my child. It's only those things we hold onto that we are in a position to lose."

"Did you ever lose...?" Arielle started to ask, but stopped as her eyes once again fell on the picture of his wife in front of him.

"Are you thinking of Bettie, my wife?"

Arielle nodded.

"I almost did. But I finally put her in God's hands. He's keeping her for me, sweet girl." Now it was Bob's turn to weep. He'd been through this experience several years back, but it was still fresh in his memory.

It was Arielle's inborn instinct to comfort, and her own desire to be comforted that prompted her to fling her arms around the doctor, and hold him. "That's what I'm afraid of. I let go once before, and I'm afraid of having to let go again." The tears were still flowing down Arielle's cheeks.

"God always gives the strength, my sweet Arielle. God always gives the strength," he answered through his own tears.

He held her for a few more moments before she asked what Bob was afraid she would ask, "Bob, you've been seeing Herbie, haven't you? Is something

wrong with him?"

Bob didn't respond. He knew she knew already. The Lord had prepared her heart, just like he had prayed, and he knew that even with the sufficient grace that the Lord gives, these things are never easy.

"Bob, what should I do?" Arielle looked up, hot tears still flowing. "I'm so scared, but I don't know what to do."

"Love him the best you can, all the while putting him into God's hands. That's the best advice I can give. It's not easy, you know I know that. The only way is to let go. You can't fight it—it's God's will."

Arielle nodded and tried to smile. "I won't spoil it for him. He'll want me to be brave."

"He'll love you all the more for it."

"I—I'd better go and finish up some work before going back to the house. He'll be worried if I'm gone for too long," Arielle said as she started to walk towards the door. "Pray for me, will you?"

"Always."



As Arielle walked out of the clinic that morning, she decided to take the park route home. The surroundings of God's beautiful creation might give her more peace, she thought, and it did. Just as she walked by one of the park benches she noticed a bird sitting on it. She'd nearly brushed it as she walked by, and she thought it would fly away, but it barely moved, so she went back to take a closer look.

"Hey, look at you. You're the same pretty little birdie that sat on my shoulder the other day—the same hurt leg, at least. Come onto my finger, I'll take you home till you're better and you can fly away."

It seemed like a sweet sign of God's presence that He'd led her to find that same bird the very next morning after she'd first seen it. Arielle smiled

as she felt His peace filling her soul.

She walked in the door looking very different from the way she had the day before, as if an aura of peace had been put around her. Herbie noticed it.

“Look, Herbie! I found this bird for the second time. Yesterday it flew onto my shoulder, though it seemed to have trouble flying anywhere else. And then today it was just sitting there, so I picked it up.”

“No wonder. Its leg is hurt.”

“I know, and so it can stay here till its leg heals.”

“Where are you going to put it? We don’t have a cage or anything.”

“For now I’ll just put it on the back porch.”

“The porch?”

“C’mon Herbie, we have to improvise. We can put a little box out there for it to rest in, and then as soon as it feels better, it’ll be able to fly away to freedom.”

“Wow, you sure have it all figured out. What’s he going to eat?”

“He? *She* is going to eat some bread soaked in water—for now,” Arielle teased.

“How do you know it’s a ‘she’?” Herbie answered as he went up behind her, put his arms around her and tried to tickle her.

“Herbie, stop!” she laughed. “I’m trying to get this little chirp set up and happy. Go eat your breakfast, Herbie. We have a long day ahead of us,” Arielle joked as she found a little box and lined it with some soft cloths. “There, little birdie. You stay here for as long as you like. You can fly away whenever you’re ready.

“Okay, you’re almost set,” she said as she placed the box in a corner of the porch and set the little bird inside it. “I’ll go and get you a little food. It’s not real birdie food, but it’ll have to do for now.”

She went to the kitchen to get a little bowl and

the necessary ingredients for the bird’s breakfast, when, “Surprise!”

“Herbie, how sweet! You made all this in just a few minutes?” Arielle gave him a sweet smile as she glanced over at the nicely set breakfast table, upon which Herbie had placed hot eggs, toast with jam, fresh-squeezed orange juice, and a simple array of sliced fruits.

“You’ve been playing with that bird for almost half an hour, Elle,” Herbie joked as he reached for her hand and kissed it. “I thought I would surprise you.”

“You sure did. This is—oh, this is just so, so nice. I love you!”

“You too!” Herbie said with a friendly wink. “You’re my girl!”

“I just need to...”

“I’ll get the birdie breakfast, you sit down and enjoy the breakfast I’ve prepared for you.”

“Thank you, Herbie. You know what to get?”

“Yes, bread soaked in water. Whoever taught you that? It’s a little strange to me.”

“My Papa.”

“I guess city boys like me wouldn’t know things like this now, would they?”

“I didn’t either till my Papa ... oh!”

“What?”

“It’s almost Papa’s birthday. I’d better at least call him and Mama or let them know that we’re leaving. We can celebrate when we come back.”

“Good idea!”

Just then they heard a knock.

“I’ll get it, Elle. You just enjoy your breakfast.”

“But you’re in your bathrobe.”

“It’s okay. I’ve never been too modest, though I don’t know who it could be,” he added, pretending to be a little frightened.

Arielle chuckled to herself as he went to the door.

"Papa George, Mama Tamara! It's been a little while. What a surprise!"

"Indeed, indeed," answered Papa in his agreeable voice.

"We made some little treats," said Mama, "the kind you liked when you were younger, Herbie."

"Mama got me into all this cooking," Papa added.

"George, you loved every bit of it!"

"Well, we thought we'd bring them to you. We old people do need some fresh air sometimes."

"Hi there, little Flower. Don't just watch and observe from back there, come and enjoy!" Mama called out. Arielle ran forward and hugged both of them.

"We miss you," Mama said.

"We surely miss you! Now Mama has no one else to take care of but me. I almost feel a little spoiled sometimes."

"It's because I love you, George."

"I know, I know," he reassured her, and patted her shoulder. "Well, we didn't actually think you were going to be here. We thought you'd be going to work today. Don't you usually? We were just going to leave the treats on the back porch for you to find, but then when we got closer, we heard your voices, so we thought to knock."

"We're going away for a week or so," said Herbie.

"We were just talking about calling you when you showed up."

"Isn't it amazing how that works?" Mama answered with a twinkle in her eye.

"Oh well, we'd better be off and let you prepare for your trip. Come see us when you return, okay? We miss you," Papa said.

"Yes, Papa."

Mama squeezed Arielle's hand affectionately. "Such pretty hands you have, my precious Flower. Let me see them." She lifted Arielle's palm up closer

and smoothed it out. "They've always been beautiful hands." Arielle knew Mama was reading her hands, but she didn't say anything.

"Let me see yours, Herbie. Are they the psychic hands or the worker's hands?"

He gingerly gave her his hand.

"Aaah, a little of both. Very strong hands indeed," she said as she smoothed his palm like she had Arielle's. "My prayers are with the both of you," she said with a sweet smile. "Have a special time. God loves you both a lot, you know." Then she added in a whisper to Arielle, "Keep the fire, Flower!"

Arielle and Herbie waved until Mama and Papa were out of sight. They were both wondering if Mama had read anything in Herbie's hand that would have revealed what turn their lives were about to take.

Chapter Eleven – Till Death Do Us Part

“It’s beautiful out here!” Arielle said as she waded through little pools on the beach, picking shells. It had been almost a week since they’d come to the small beach for their vacation. “It was a heavenly idea to come here, Herbie. Don’t you think?”

“Sure was,” Herbie said, admiring the view while lying on the sand. “Wouldn’t be perfect without you here, though.”

“That’s so sweet, Herbie!” she said, coming up out of the water, sitting beside him on the sand and then leaning on his shoulder.

“You’re soaked, Elle!” Herbie said, playfully scooting away.

“I know. It’s fun. It’s like when I was a little kid, playing on the beach. My papa would come and chase me into the water, even if I still had my hat and clothes on. It was so much fun. While I ran I would be splashing water at him ferociously and Mama would just stand on the beach and laugh, until Papa would threaten to throw her in as well.”

“Did he ever really throw her in?”

“Not usually. A couple times.”

“Did you go to the beach often when you were little?”

“No. Just once we stayed for a couple weeks in a little tent on the beach. We had a campfire—we were

camping after all—and Papa would get his guitar and play songs. Mama and I would dance. Mama danced so beautifully! That’s the closest I’ve ever been to being a real Gypsy. I loved every minute of it. You know, I could just close my eyes and imagine lots of other people like us around the fire too. It would have been so much fun to have other little girls...”

“...And boys!”

“Yes, other little girls and boys, other papas and mamas like mine, all living together like one big family.”

“In Heaven, Elle. Heaven will be like that.”

“Yeah? Do you really think so? I’m not sure what it would be like. I have all different sorts of fantasies of what Heaven is like. It’s a little hard for me to imagine it exactly. Maybe I don’t have such a good imagination.”

“I think Heaven is a place where all your dreams will come true for you. All the little things you ever wanted or loved, they’ll be at your fingertips. I think it’ll be a real love-filled place.”

“Do you think about Heaven much, Herbie?”

“Not so much, but...”

“More lately?” Arielle said without looking up.

Herbie held her close. “Our time here’s almost over, isn’t it?”

“Uh-huh. Tomorrow’s the last day, then we go home.”

“Come a little closer, Elle. Lay your head here on my chest. There’s something I need to tell you.”

Elle moved closer, keeping her head down. She was already getting teary-eyed but she didn’t want Herbie to see. Herbie kept his eyes on the horizon, searching for just the right words.

“Aaah,” he sighed, as he lay back on the sand, Arielle’s head on his chest. He knew God had given him the grace for what was coming. He felt it. He

was just worried about Arielle. Telling her was the hardest thing he ever had to do.

“Elle, I’ve been thinking and thinking of the right way to tell you this. I’m just not sure how.”

“Herbie...” Arielle started, and then looked up at him, trying to hold the tears back. “Herbie, I know. I already know.”

Herbie held her tightly. There wasn’t much that could be said. For a long time they just held each other, and prayed for the other.

“It’s a strange thing, Elle, but even though I’m sad, I’m kind of happy.”

Arielle looked at him inquisitively.

“Not happy the way you usually think someone’s happy, but in a different way. I mean, I’ve had a very wonderful life. It hasn’t been without the difficulties that we all have at one point or other, but I’ve been so blessed. I’ve been so blessed to have spent so much of my life with you. I’ve been so blessed to have known your parents. I’ve been so blessed to have been able to make a difference, with you, to those poor people in the little street behind the cemetery. And I’m so blessed to know that I’ll have all eternity with you and everyone I love. You really can’t ask for more than that, can you Elle? I mean, just think, we’re going to be together for eternity!”

“I know. It’s wonderful. It’s just a little difficult to comprehend. At least for me. All I can see is just the next few years, wondering how I’m going to do it all without you.”

“Elle, there’s Someone who has always been with you—even before you ever knew me, even during the time we were apart. He’ll still be there. You know that. You just have to get closer to Him again.”

“I guess I do. Oh, why can’t I just go with you? Then I can be with Him and you. We can all be together!”

“Because it’s not your time. Your time will come. There must just be more for you to do. Your mission must not be over, Elle. Remember, we’re all on missions. You’ve had a wonderful gift of helping people in the most amazing ways and times. There are people who need you—people you don’t even know, but who need you all the same. If you aren’t there for them, it’ll make all the difference in the world; their lives won’t be the same. Elle, remember that little girl you told me about, who almost got run over? You saved her life! That’s the most wonderful thing anyone can do for someone else. It’s so courageous, so brave of you.”

“It’s not like I’m so strong. I don’t even think about it. It just happens.”

“That’s why you can know for sure it’s a gift. It’s not something you turn on and off—but then again maybe you do, in your heart. Remember what I said a long time ago when we were sitting at the fireplace, what you promised to me?”

Arielle burst into tears. “I just don’t know if I can. I just don’t know if I’m strong enough, Herbie.”

“You don’t have to be. Remember Him? Just pray and just love, keep on loving. Make it your promise to me once more, Elle. It’ll mean everything to me to know that you’ll keep your promise. Because then I know you will be happy again. Don’t close up, please, Elle.”

“I promise, Herbie. I promise all of those things.”

“It’s another kind of courage, Elle, to love even when you’re sad or hurt and would rather keep to yourself and not open up to others. I would love you all the more for that—even though sometimes it seems like I love you so much that it wouldn’t be humanly possible to love you more. And I’m gonna be around. I’m really gonna try to be around. I’ll come and whisper in your heart, come and look at your pretty face, maybe even get to kiss your pretty

lips too. You never know what they’ll let you do up There. If it’s my kind of Heaven, that’ll have to be a feature—getting to come down and visit you.”

“And I’ll pray that I can visit you in my dreams. You know, some old Gypsy saints used to take spirit trips in their dreams.”

“That’s my girl.”

“Herbie, do you know how long you have?”

“No, not really. Maybe months. If we pray real hard and God wills it, possibly even a year.”

It was then that Herbie explained the details. He had an advanced case of cancer, which was near impossible to treat. After talking with Bob, he felt that the best thing he could do was to live out what time he had left in the peace and comfort of his own home, with Arielle.

“I have a year to let go,” Arielle whispered, the tears rimming her eyes as she took in all he had explained.

“You have to start letting go now, Elle. Then it’ll get easier when the time comes.”

“It won’t be easy.”

“Of course not. But God will give you the grace, Elle. I just know He will.”

Chapter Twelve – A Vision of Hope

“Bob! Bob!” Arielle called out. “Are you all right?”

Bob had had a serious heart attack this time and fallen off of his chair. Arielle had been in there minutes earlier and had just walked back to ask him something when she saw he’d collapsed. Thanking Providence that it had once again put her in the right place at the right time, she was able to come to his aid immediately. Bob revived, but it was clear that he would no longer be able to perform his regular shifts around the hospital.

Bob retired that month, though he still owned the clinic. He was still in very good spirits and acted as a consultant for Arielle, but other than that, he kept mostly to his home. His active days were over and though he was happy, he missed the action and the staff at his clinic. His only link with them for the most part was through Arielle. She spent a lot of time around him, and he helped encourage her heart with the experiences he had gone through at the time of his wife’s passing.

“She’s very pretty, isn’t she, Arielle?” Bob asked when Arielle picked up one of Bettie’s pictures.

“Yes.”

“I believe she’s even prettier in Heaven. In Heaven we’re all going to be just as we are, I believe—only a better version. Sometimes I find it a privilege to have

someone so close to my heart on the Other Side, almost like my personal, earthly representative. Well, she's no longer 'earthly.' But she used to be, and so she understands us."

"I guess I'll have my representative before too long as well, Bob," Arielle said with a sweet smile. Her eyes moistened a bit as she said it. Bob knew she was trying to be brave, and he was so proud of her. He'd been down that road as well, and he knew it took an awful lot of courage and grace.

"Come here, my sweet girl." Bob said and reached out to hug her. "A hug can mean so much in times like these, can't it?"

Arielle could only nod.

"There, there now. Don't you try to say anything. Our sweet Jesus understands, and I understand. You need anything, you just come and see old Bob. All right?"

"Herbie told me not to let myself get hard and close up."

"No, you can't do that. You have to keep soft, and then these things can only make us sweeter. Stay soft, for him if nothing else, Arielle. That's a good start. Then you can be soft for others too. Will you stay soft, dear?"

"You stayed soft, didn't you? If I stay soft, will I be brave like you?" Arielle sobbed.

"Better, child. You'll be better," Bob comforted her.



Herbie was becoming weaker and needed more rest. He stayed home most of the time, and when Arielle couldn't take care of him because of her work, Mama would come and stay with him. Mama did their home a lot of good during this time. She was a brave woman who had been through many things, whose heart was in Heaven while her feet were on Earth. She seemed almost like a wise old sage who

saw this world as it truly was—just a chapter in all of eternity—though she knew full well the human heart's weakness to see only the temporal.

One day Mama came earlier. Arielle had been on call in the wee hours of the morning and Mama came to see Herbie through the first part of the day till Arielle returned. Once Herbie had woken up, she went to open the curtains.

"Ah, there's a little bird on your porch, Herbie," she called out after opening the curtains to the porch window. "Did you find it somewhere? Or did it just fly here and stay?"

"Elle found it at the park one day," Herbie said as he drank some of the broth Mama had brought him. "She said it flew from a branch she was walking by and rested on her shoulder. Its leg was hurt. She tossed it up into the air and it flew a short distance away. Then the next day when she went to the park it was there again, so she brought it here shortly before our vacation.

"We thought it would have left long ago, but it was still waiting for us when we returned. It must have been doing better, because it had obviously been able to keep itself fed somehow. But for some strange reason it seems to like staying here. We suppose it'll fly away when it feels strong enough. Its had a happy home, perhaps it's a little unwilling to let it go, not sure what it'll find out in the world after being here for so long."

Mama looked at the bird and smiled as Herbie told her the story. "You're just like my daughter, aren't you, fair little birdie?—Unwilling to let go, not sure what you'll find after this one sweet home and if it'll be as nice. God sent you, didn't He?"

The bird just chirped and nervously glanced around, but Mama knew. It was one of those little whispers, God's whispers in the wind.



Arielle was going for a walk in the park that day during her lunch break. It was a quiet day at the clinic and she felt in need of some renewal of spirit before going back home and seeing Herbie. The park had become a favorite place of hers, one that gave her such a feeling of peace and tranquility. Noticing that Arielle looked weak and worn, Megan, the nurse, offered to go to the park with her. At first Arielle hesitated. She wanted to be alone. Megan knew that, but she also knew that sometimes it's good to be with someone else during times like this. There's often more strength in spirit with two people. But Megan left it up to Arielle.

"All right. I could use some company."

"Wonderful. I could use some fresh air as well, after being cooped up in here all morning—and night, too, I took an extra night shift."

"You must be exhausted," Arielle said as they both started walking out of the clinic, towards the park.

"Oh well, I am actually. But it was an interesting night."

"How so?"

"A very old man came in in the late evening. His family lives close by and they were worried that he would slip away in the night, so they brought him until they could take him to another hospital. But he looked so happy and peaceful that it made me curious. So after he got settled in his bed, I went to see if he was all right and if he needed anything.

"He was quite old, but he had the spirit of an angel. I would have thought he was nearly 70 or so by the way he looked, but he told me he was almost 100. I told him that if he lived to be 100 that I would come and celebrate with him. He smiled and told me that he would be celebrating it with his wife. I told him that that was very precious and asked him how old she was. He said she would probably be

about 95, but he's not sure how it works up There.

"It took me a few minutes before it dawned on me that his wife had gone to Heaven. I guess the realization registered on my face and he said, 'It'll be a better celebration up There, you know. It'll be much prettier. I know, my wife told me.' I looked puzzled, but he didn't bother answering the question on my face. He just said, 'It's been a long time since I've seen her, but oh, I hear her all the time. In my heart she whispers to me. Sometimes I like to imagine her hugging me.' He said that anyone could hear if they try. Isn't that amazing, Arielle?"

"That is amazing," she answered with a deep and pensive look on her face. "Do you think it'll be that way with Herbie?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Arielle. I should've been more thoughtful of that."

"No, I'm glad you told me. It's a beautiful story, a hopeful story. I need all the hope I can get. Herbie makes me promise all the time that I'll keep loving and keep my heart open. I guess just the fact that he makes me keep promising is starting to affect me. I think my heart will stay open. I want it to so much. I can tell it means a lot to him to know that I won't stop loving or living after he goes."

"He may go, but he may also still be around to whisper in your heart, like the old man said."

"I don't want to get my hopes up."

"But truly, you can't be so pessimistic. I believe that you could hear him. Think of all the good spirits and angels that have whispered into people's hearts for ages."

"I guess you're right. I should have more faith. It's just difficult to let go and yet still love. I'm sure the Lord will help me."

"Of course He will. He already has. You're a very brave person, Arielle."



Megan and Arielle spent their entire lunch break at the park, and Arielle was looking forward to seeing Herbie that evening. Though he had to stay home, he wasn't bedridden just yet. He just needed to rest a lot more. She thought she would surprise him and Mama by bringing home dinner from his favorite restaurant.

She crept into the house and set the food down on the table. Despite the racket she made here and there, the house seemed to be quite still.

"Mama! Herbie! I'm home!"

There was no answer.

"Mama? Herbie?" She walked over to their bedroom and opened the door gently.

"Surprise!" Mama and Herbie had set up a nice little table in their bedroom, laden with delicious little dishes that Mama had prepared.

"Oh, I guess we were all thinking of the same thing! Here, I brought some of your favorite dishes, Herbie. We can add it to the feast!" she said, putting down the boxes of food and then going over and kissing Mama and Herbie. "You guys are wonderful! I must confess, I was a little worried for a moment though."

"So sorry, Elle. We just wanted you to have a special surprise dinner after a long day of work."

"Surprises are good. I always love surprises—only making them, that is," Mama said, and they all laughed, knowing Mama wasn't entirely enthralled with the idea of being surprised; though she loved to surprise others.

It did Arielle a lot of good to have fun every so often, and Mama and Herbie knew that. She tended to think that she needed to carry all the burdens she could, and not many could persuade her otherwise—except Mama or Papa and Herbie, who knew her better than she knew herself.

Chapter Thirteen – Promise to Love

The months had passed somewhat slowly by. Herbie's prayer was that he could at least see spring, if not summer. He knew by then he wouldn't be able to get around much, but at least he could feel the warm sunlight bathing and caressing him. So far it looked as though his prayers would be answered. He was doing better than either he or Bob thought he would be doing, and it was just about springtime. He rested more and more, though when he was strong enough to get up, you would hardly know he was sick. Arielle often took him in a wheelchair to the park. It was such a pretty little place, an oasis of peace in the midst of the world's confusion.

"Herbie?" Arielle asked him one day, as they sat several feet away from the man-made lake in the middle of the park near their home. "Can you make me one promise?"

"Of course, Elle. If it's within my power, that is."

"When you go, promise to come and whisper in my heart, even in my ear, to let me know that you still love me and you'll be waiting up There in Heaven for me."

"I'll try my very best. You know, I don't know all the rules up There," he said with a smile. "But I promise to try to come and whisper in your ear. You

just have to promise to be listening, and not to close up. You won't hear it if you do, you know."

Arielle smiled. Herbie used every opportunity he could to tell her not to close up like he knew she could so easily do.

"Elle, you know that I'll still love you. I always will love you. It's not just my love that keeps me loving you so much—it's God's love too. That's why it's so much. And if He gave it to me, I think when I go closer to Him, I could get even more of it. And, yes, I'll be waiting for you in Heaven, waiting for you to join me. But still love others, won't you?"

"Yes, Herbie. I promise to love others."

"That's my girl. I'll be happy then. You'll have to keep your promise because I'll be watching you from my big telescope up in the sky!" Herbie said with a little laugh.

"Yes, I'll be good."



That night as Arielle lay next to Herbie, she couldn't sleep. Her mind kept wandering back to all the things people had told her about Heaven, about loved ones There, about letting go, all those things. She especially thought about all that Bob had said, and what Megan had told her about the old man she had talked to. They were all such hopeful things—she knew that Jesus had let her hear all those things because He knew it would give her hope and encourage her heart.

They're like little signs, little signs of love, aren't they? she thought to herself, almost asking Him. She didn't expect an answer, but one came anyway, in the stillness of her heart.

Yes, they're little signs. There are always little signs of love—everywhere—even more than the few you've seen. If you open your heart and your eyes, you'll find them everywhere. Then My love can rush into your heart through those signs and make it all

so much easier. But they're like little whispers. You have to listen with your heart, a Voice seemed to answer. But it wasn't really a voice at all. It was more like a thought that beamed into her heart. She knew it was more than just her own thoughts because it made her feel peaceful, warm and loved. Like there was Someone who knew her, just as well and in fact better than Herbie did—Someone who loved her just as much, if not more, than he did.

She looked over at Herbie, sleeping so peacefully beside her. She had promised him many things—that she would let go, that she would keep loving, that she wouldn't stop living. Though she wanted to do all those things, she didn't feel that she would have the strength. She had mostly promised knowing it would comfort him and make him feel assured. But as time went by, she had started to mean the words she'd said.

But now she knew she had to decide; she had to let go. The Voice, though it said not a word about needing to let go, seemed to put that conviction in her heart, and there in the moonlight she promised Herbie. She snuggled up to him and whispered in his ear:

"My sweet, sweet and wonderful Herbie, I promise to let you go. I promise to continue to love, to keep living, to keep giving. I promise not to shut out the world and not to shut hope and love out once you go. It will be hard, I know," she softly cried, "but I will try my best."

Then she added, "Don't forget to whisper to me after you've gone, Herbie. Please, don't forget."

Herbie rolled over and smiled at her. "I won't forget," he whispered. "Elle, I won't forget. Come closer to me. Let me feel your warm body."

She snuggled closer to him and tenderly kissed his lips. Peace flooded her heart.—She knew that no matter how difficult it was, she was going to be

okay. Herbie was going to be with her in spirit, and so was Someone else.



Early the next morning she awoke to hear Herbie singing softly beside her.

“What are you singing, Herbie?” She asked.

“I’m singing the songs that the angels are singing to me, Elle. They’re singing so beautifully. I can’t sing as well as they can, but they said that in time I’ll be able to. Then I can sing songs to you. You’ll hear them in your heart.”

Arielle sobbed. She knew that Herbie was coming close to passing on. She had let go, and now it was time.

“Don’t cry, my sweet baby. It’s very happy up There. I can’t see anything dark or ugly. Everything is so pretty and happy looking. You know, they said I can come and whisper to you.”

Arielle smiled. She felt happy that he had been able to be so well and strong the last few days. It was better this way.

Herbie kept singing softly for a few more moments. This whole time he had been looking up at the ceiling, and Arielle knew that he saw more than met her eyes. Then he began talking to her, his eyes still turned upward.

“Elle, last night wasn’t the last time I’ll be able to love you. You know I’ll be able to love you many times, all the time if you want, when you go There. Only, I think that won’t be the only thing you’ll be interested in. There’ll be lots of other interesting things, the angels tell me. I get to go and see them all first and prepare a nice place for us. Then when you come, I’ll be able to show you around to all your favorite things. Hold that close to your heart, Elle—the thought of that special day. It is going to be such a special day when you finally get to cross the river to the Other Side. You just have a few more

things to do here, then it’ll be your turn.”

“I’ll have to go soon, Elle. The light’s getting so bright that I’ll have to close my eyes. But I’ll come back and be beside you,” he whispered.

Arielle cried the whole time. But it wasn’t just that she was sad; she was touched by Herbie’s love and Heaven’s love. She looked up at the ceiling where Herbie was looking. She didn’t see anything, but she felt love. It was another sign that Someone loved her, and He wasn’t just up There watching over her. He was right beside her, holding her while Herbie went into the angels’ arms.

“Goodbye, my sweet love. They said it was better I go now. Then I could be well enough to say goodbye and tell you that I love you. I—I’ll always love you, Elle.”

Chapter Fourteen - Going On

The days following Herbie's passing were busy, and Arielle found that she was given sufficient grace. It almost seemed as if an aura of peace had been placed around her, and she felt a supernatural calm. Sometimes she felt as if Herbie was right beside her!

After things had settled, and the days turned into weeks, Arielle had to pray for more strength sometimes so that she could keep her promise. She spent a lot of weekends and spare moments at the park, which she had so grown to love.

"Arielle," a soft voice said one day when she was sitting beside the lake. "I found this. I think Herbie meant to have it sent to you at our clinic some time ago, maybe to surprise you at work or something. But it accidentally went to Herbie's clinic, and it was only just now sent back. I thought you might like to see it."

"Oh, thank you, Megan," Arielle said as she reached out for the rose and an envelope, which, when she had opened it, revealed a lovely bookmark with a pretty picture of a bird on it. It looked like Mama had drawn it for Herbie. Among Mama's many talents and skills, she was also very artistic, though she would never admit it.

"The rose is sort of withered now," Megan said, and they both laughed, "but the bookmark is still

okay. Look, there's a note in the envelope as well. C'mon, read it."

Arielle gently picked up the rose and pretended to smell it, laughing, even though—or perhaps mostly because—tears had started welling up in her eyes.

"It's all right, Arielle," Megan said, rubbing Arielle's shoulder. "It's gonna be all right."

Arielle unfolded the note and began to read:

My sweet Elle,

This morning I awoke to the sound of that little bird you had brought in from the park. It's still here, you know, and seems to enjoy sitting on the railing as the sun comes up. Then I began to think of you and how you came like a little, pretty and gentle bird, to the window of my life. Or perhaps you came and flew onto my shoulder—but whatever it was, you added an extra dimension to my life. Like your little bird here, you've stayed faithfully with me, loving me all the time, in all the ways.

We've gone through lots of things together, and all the time you stayed. You were always there. One day, when you get strong enough to let go, I want you to fly—fly into someone else's heart and home. There are lots of lonely hearts who need your beautiful presence. If you fly into even just one of them, it'll mean the world to me. I'll know that I've given the most precious gift I can ever give—you. I know you'll have to give, and this is how I'm going to give too. And for all our giving we're going to reap one hundred fold in Heaven. I'll be waiting for you there.

*Love always and forever,
Herbie*

"Sorry it got to you a little late, Arielle."

"No, no. This is the perfect time it could have come. Really, Megan, the perfect time."



Arielle continued to have the grace for Herbie's Homegoing even though it was difficult sometimes. But Mama was still concerned. Arielle hadn't tried to reach out yet. Mama knew that the heart can only try to comfort itself for so long, then the healing process must be continued by giving and reaching out to others. It had been well over a year by now.

Whenever Mama would try to encourage her to do something, participate in some new project, or start an after-work program that involved people, Arielle politely declined. After her work she just mostly wanted to be alone. She argued that her work brought her in contact with enough people already. She preferred go to the park or read, but whatever it was, it was usually alone. She wasn't bitter or resentful; she just didn't feel strong enough to give. She was closing up.

The little bird still perched on the porch railing outside her window, as if it had little else to do, and nowhere else to go. Arielle continued to bring the bird bread and water each day, and had even bought some birdseed.

I'm not closing up, she would whisper to the bird. I just don't have the strength yet. One day—one day I'll be strong. I just need a little more time.

Deep down inside she knew that she would never feel she was strong enough.—She had to take the first step, then the strength would come. But still she waited for the strength before she would step out again.

"Why don't I have the courage anymore, or why don't I find myself face to face with circumstances that require me to give in an instant, without thinking, without premeditating?" Arielle asked

Mama one day.

“Perhaps because God knows you have that kind of courage, you’ve passed that stage. Perhaps now He’s trying to teach you another kind of courage,” was Mama’s wise reply.

“But what if I don’t feel strong enough to have that kind of courage?”

“My little Flower, if you felt strong enough then it wouldn’t really be courage, would it? You know, God never takes anything without putting something else in its place—something better. Perhaps He knows that you’ve been able to give, to put your life on the line for someone in need, even someone you hardly know, and that is very admirable. Not many of us get the chance to do that, at least not more than once in our life. With the courage He’s given, you’ve done such things repeatedly. So perhaps He’s teaching you a different kind of giving now, an inner courage—not only to face life with a smile, even when you’d like to cry, but to help *others* face it with a smile too. Do you think so, my Flower?”

Arielle only nodded. In her heart she knew Mama was right, she just didn’t know where to start. Though a full year had already passed, she sometimes still struggled as if it had just happened the day before.

“How can I be brave like you, Mama—like you and Bob, and the old man Megan told me about in the hospital whose wife had died?”

Mama sat down beside her. “My little Flower, you only become brave through suffering, then taking what God sends—be it joy or sorrow—graciously, and thanking Him for it, even if you do not understand His reasons.”

“I know Bob and the old man have lost someone close to them. Have you also, Mama?”

Mama’s eyes took on a faraway look as she slowly nodded her head. “Yes, little Flower. I have also. I

have a couple of rainbows in my life also.” Mama didn’t expound there, but the compassion Arielle felt when she looked into Mama’s eyes told her that she understood all too well. Papa later told her that Mama had had experiences similar to Arielle’s, but that Mama had been brave and had learned to love again. Then she had found Papa. That touched Arielle in a special way. Mama and Papa loved each other deeply, and knowing that Mama had loved and lost before, but had learned to love well once more, gave Arielle hope.

It was all very new to Arielle. She so much wanted to be among those many who had borne their burdens bravely, and had even turned them into blessings, into stepping stones. Yet she knew it wasn’t easy. She was only on the first stone, she told herself, and the stream seemed wide, with many more stones to go. But she knew she would make it. She wasn’t walking alone—there was Someone lifting her over the waters to the next stone.

Chapter Fifteen – A Bridge to Freedom

It was soon after, on a sunny day in July 1942, seven months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and America's entry into WWII, that Arielle remembered what she'd told Herbie about wanting to be a doctor in time of war. Or had she really *remembered*? Perhaps it was really Herbie *reminding* her, placing these thoughts in her heart. Perhaps it was also Herbie who had a part in the planning of the events that were to come.

"Mama, Papa!" she burst into their house early that morning. Both of them were barely up for the day. "I'm going to be a doctor!" "You already are a doctor, Flower! What do you mean? What are you so excited about?" Papa and Mama asked.

"No, for the soldiers. I'm going to be a doctor for the soldiers. I'm going to the war!" Arielle barely got the words out. "This is my chance to start reaching out!"

Mama and Papa smiled.

"Are you going alone?" Mama inquired.

"Megan's coming as a nurse, and there'll be others too."

"We're so happy for you, Flower. Concerned too. Are you sure about this? Will you be okay?"

"Yes, yes. The angels are watching. ... Remember?"

"Of course we remember."

"Do you need any help getting ready?" Mama asked.

"Oh no, I'll be all right, Mama."

"We'll take care of your house, though, Flower. How long will you be gone?"

"Oh, I don't know. Six months to a year for starters, maybe more."

"Don't forget to tell Bob!"

"He knows, Mama. He knows. But I'll be sure to see him before I leave."

"You be sure to write him—and us too. You're one of the only relatives or family he has, Flower. At least close by."



"Bob?" The door to his home was cracked open, so Arielle tip-toed in.

There Bob was, sitting in his rocking chair, looking out the window.

"How are you, Bob?"

"Fine as I can be, Arielle. Come, come."

She walked over and stood beside him.

"Come to say goodbye to old Bob?"

"Yes." Arielle smiled.

"Happy to leave me?"

"No, of course not. Just excited for the change and the opportunity, I guess."

"Your mama and papa already told you, I don't doubt, but do be careful."

"I will."

"And just as soon as you come back, after you see your mama and papa, you come and see Bob too, all right? That is, if I'm still around."

"Of course you'll be around."

"You're right. Shouldn't really be talking about moving on just yet, should I? My spirit feels stronger than it ever did—it's just this old frame it lives in that has me worried sometimes. Well, come here,

girl, give old Bob a departing hug. My, you look pretty and all grown up. Going out there with all that suffering's bound to grow you up some more. If you take it right it'll make you all the more beautiful. God'll see to that. Fighting's a terrible crime in my book, but going to help those men trapped into doing the crimes, well, that earns you a medal. God bless you, Arielle. I'm proud of you!"

Bob held her tight. She buried her face in his chest, not wanting Bob to see her teary eyes. But Bob was happy; he knew she'd stayed soft, and now the rest of her promise just needed to be fulfilled for her sake and Herbie's—she needed to love again. He knew she would in God's good time.



"All right, little birdie. Arielle's going away for awhile. If you want, you can stay here and Mama will come take care of you each day, or you can fly away and find a new home. Your leg should definitely have healed up a long, long time ago. But don't worry, you just stay here till you feel you're ready, and strong enough to fly away, okay, sweet birdie?"

Chapter Sixteen – The Patient

The first few months after Arielle began working as a doctor in the war were busy. Being away from her old home and friends and past was refreshing, the demand was great, and she found herself being strengthened in new ways. With all that was going on around her, she didn't find much time to do anything but reach out and be there for those poor men, and she was. She was good humored, compassionate, and very skilled in her work. The soldiers loved her.

“Megan, you know, I didn't think I'd be happy again after Herbie was gone. I told him that once.”

“But you're happy now?”

“Yes. I'm really happy!”

“You're brave, Arielle. I admire you.”

“I'm not brave, but God gives the grace. He gives it to everyone. I used to just marvel at Bob. I guess he was one of the few I ever knew personally who had lost someone whom he loved so deeply. And he's got so much spirit, you know.”

“Bob's amazing. He's the most cheerful fellow I've seen, and he's been like that ever since I first met him, nearly ten years ago.—Always getting others to be cheery alongside him too.”

“He's helped me a lot.”

“I imagine he has; he has a lot to give—a lot of

comfort, a lot of encouragement, a lot of spirit. Some people just fold up after a loved one goes; but not Bob—he’s just as alive as ever.”

Arielle smiled. “I know!”

Just then they were interrupted by a commotion at the entrance to their makeshift hospital—a large tent. A group of soldiers were carrying in a wounded man on a stretcher. One of the soldiers shouted across to the two women. “There’s someone here and he’s hurt badly! A landmine went off and he wasn’t too far away. He just barely made it this far.”

“Okay, we’re coming right over. Come on, Megan.”

Over at the wounded man’s cot, they started working. “Oh dear, Lord help him to survive,” Arielle said.

“He’s really messed up, Arielle!” Megan noted as she mentally summed up the man’s injuries. He was not a pretty sight. His face seemed to have taken the brunt of the explosion, and was filled with cuts and blood, to the point that his features were almost indiscernible. His clothes were ripped in places from the men on the field having torn off bandages for the other gaping wounds in his arms and legs, and his side seemed to be bleeding quite profusely as well, as there were several patches of dark blood seeping through his uniform.

“Yes, Megan. But if he’s got the will to live, I have faith he’ll make it. We’ll just have to do our part, and fast.”

They both worked through the night to put him back together again. It wasn’t a very pretty job, and even though they’d been there for nearly six months now, and in the profession for years, it was work that would make anyone squeamish.

After all was said and done, Arielle knelt beside him. “You’ve been brave so far, soldier. Don’t give up just yet. This hell will all be over soon, and there’ll be peace. We’ll go back to our loved ones and

families—you will too if you hold on.” She wished she could take him in her arms and embrace him, but she knew that for now words alone would have to do until he was strong enough to feel the soothing and comforting that a human touch can bring.



“How’s that soldier doing, Arielle? I noticed you’ve been tending to him a lot,” Megan asked once while they were working.

“I feel for him. Something draws the compassion out whenever I pass his cot.”

“Well, he has been through a lot, and we’ve seen it.”

“Yeah, but there’s something else. Maybe it’s curiosity to see his face once it’s healed and find out what his name is, if he has a family and all the rest. I guess just to see if he’ll pull through.”

Megan smiled. Arielle was always kind and sympathetic to each man she treated, but not as faithful to visit them in every spare minute she had, as was the case with this badly hurt and unknown soldier, whose identifying name tag had somehow been lost before he reached the hospital. *It’s good to see her reaching out and caring in a special kind of way again*, Megan thought.

Later that evening Megan came to see Arielle sitting beside the man’s bed, reading Scripture to him.

“What are you reading, Arielle?”

“Some of the Psalms. They were Herbie’s favorite when he was ill, I thought maybe they’d be a comfort to him,” Arielle said, her eyes getting misty. Embarrassed, she wiped her eyes. “I—I’m sorry. I haven’t done this for awhile.”

“You still miss him, don’t you?”

“Yes, sometimes. But I think it’s just the pressure out here, all the trauma that surrounds us.”

“Maybe you should have a little break for awhile.”

“No, no. It’s more than a job for me—it’s what keeps me going, Megan.”

“I know,” Megan said as she squeezed Arielle’s shoulder. “Do you need anything?”

“No, I’m all right.”

A little while after Megan left, Arielle dozed off with teary eyes beside the bed of the soldier whose name they didn’t know. She had thought a lot about her parents, her hometown, the clinic, her friends. It hurt to remember that Herbie wasn’t going to be there when she finally got home, but it was a good kind of hurt. She felt that she could sympathize with all those around her who were suffering, and often thought that her burden was easier for her to bear than theirs was for them. Herbie had gone on to his reward because it was his time, she often told herself. She knew he’d gone to a better place and that they’d be reunited once again someday. But she wasn’t sure if all these soldiers knew that. She knew thousands were dying day after day, many of them without hope. She was blessed.

Just as she was dozing off, she heard a little voice. *Elle*, it said softly. She looked up, but she didn’t see anyone so she closed her eyes and went back to sleep.

Elle, came the voice again. She was still asleep. *I’m so proud of you for keeping your promise to me so far. We’ve both been happy for it. Elle, there’s something that you’ve got to do. You’ve got a few more steps to go before the promise has been kept fully.*

“I’ve already kept my promise,” Arielle mumbled in her sleep.

Yes, you’ve done wonderfully, Elle. I’ve been whispering in your heart all along and you’ve been doing the right thing. Now, stay with the soldier beside you.

“I don’t even know his name.”

But you will, Elle. You will. Don’t leave him once he gets better; he’ll still need help, he’ll still need you to care for him. Will you do that for me, Elle?

“Mm-hmm,” Arielle agreed, still half asleep, wondering whether it was a dream or whether she was awake.

Thank you, Elle. I love you.

“I love you, Herbie,” she answered. *Herbie?! She sat upright and looked around. “I must’ve been dreaming,”* she reassured herself and fell back to sleep.



The next morning Arielle felt someone shake her knee. It was Megan.

“Arielle, more wounded from the frontlines. We need you to come! C’mon!”

“More...? What?”

“More soldiers, Arielle. Come, here’s your jacket. We need you in the next tent.”

Arielle jumped up, threw her jacket around her and raced over to the next tent.

“I’m so sorry, Megan. It was such a long night,” Arielle called out as she entered the tent, still putting her jacket on. “Something strange happened to me while I was asleep. ... Well, I don’t know if I was really asleep or not.”

Megan raised her eyebrows.

“No, just a strange dream—well, it wasn’t a dream because I didn’t see anything, I only heard,” Arielle said as they got prepared to tend to the wounded. “It sounded like Herbie. It must have been Herbie, because nobody else ever called me ‘Elle.’”

“What did he say?” Megan asked, as she pulled fresh supplies from a nearby trolley.

“Something about that soldier I was sitting beside, you know, the one I’ve been tending to.”

“The one whose name we don’t know.”

“Yes.”

“Well, what did he tell you?”

“He told me not to leave him once he gets better, that he’ll still need my help.”

Megan looked at Arielle questioningly. “But you know these soldiers only stick around here for a few days, until only their most dire needs are taken care of, and then they are moved elsewhere. What will you do then?”

“I ... I don’t know,” Arielle said. “All I know is that Herbie wanted me to stay with this man. Oh, Megan, surely we can keep him here longer. We can say that he is too weak to be moved or something. If we play our cards right, he won’t have to be transferred at all, at least not for a good while. Please, back me up on this one, will you, Megan?”

“Oh, Arielle, you know I will. Maybe that’s why Herbie brought you here—to help this man.”

“Maybe. But I told him once that if there was ever a war I was going to go to it, and he didn’t really agree.”

“Perhaps he sees things differently now. Perhaps he knows something will come out of this experience.”

Arielle shrugged her shoulders. “Perhaps.”

Chapter Seventeen – Following a Whisper

“Hooray!” shouted Megan, Arielle, and a few nurses and soldiers who were standing by, once the bandages had come off of the yet unknown soldier’s face. He could only smile. Talking, sitting up and moving were other hurdles still to be jumped once he recovered more—but the smile was good enough for these few who had been steadily following his progress, especially Arielle.

“We’ve been waiting for this day a long, long time, soldier,” Megan said, and the others cheered. “We’ll celebrate again once you’ve regained your strength and can tell us about yourself!”

The man smiled again.

“Oh, he’s such a darling patient. So brave and courageous,” another of the nurses said, producing yet another smile from the man. “Well, we’d better leave you to rest now that we’ve caused so much commotion.”

Arielle just stood by, smiling and watching. It was obvious to Megan that something was on her mind; she just wasn’t sure what. Arielle was pondering that night when Herbie had come and talked to her, and she was still mystified by it all.

Whatever would have been so important for him to come and tell me audibly? I thought it was the first

time he'd whispered to me, but he said he had been all along, so I wonder, is this for me? Or is it for the unnamed soldier? Or the both of us? Whatever could it be, and how long am I supposed to stay with him once he's better? I just wish Herbie would come and answer those questions for me.

Just then a little thought popped into her mind: *Your heart will answer those questions for you.* It wasn't an unusual thing for her to get answers to her own questions—it happens to everyone. But this time she wondered if it was Herbie whispering into her thoughts. And before Herbie, who was it that put those answers into my mind? Perhaps it's been the angels and the Lord, and now Herbie too since he's with them.



It wasn't much longer before the soldier had regained some of his strength and could talk. It started out as just a whisper, but that was good enough for Arielle. She had been dying of curiosity as to what his name was, and finally she'd been able to ask him. "Jim," had been his short and hesitant answer, but it was more than sufficient for Arielle.

One evening as she was sitting beside his bed, as she often did, she heard him mumbling. He turned his head slightly, as much as he could, trying to say something—to her, it seemed.

"What is it, Jim?" Arielle said softly.

Then came the words—halting, in a whisper, but sweet. "Are you—are you the one who often sat beside my bed ... like—like you are now?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. It's that same pretty voice."

Arielle smiled, a little embarrassed at his sweetness. "Where did you hear my voice before, Jim?"

"Oh, not before here—at least I don't think so.

But when you were fixing me up, I could see your face—yours and the other woman."

Arielle became puzzled. He couldn't possibly have seen them. He had been unconscious most of the time.

"I know that I couldn't have. I was too badly hurt—but I did. I think God let me see your faces so that I would know that somebody cared. Otherwise I would have rather gone to be with Him. And you were the one—the one that read those verses?"

"The Psalms? Yes."

"You've been an angel. It takes courage to be so kind to someone who is so badly hurt that they might not make it."

"Why is that?"

"Well, when you help someone in need, you start to love them—and then, then if they go..."

"Then you'll know that they had someone who cared right up till the very last moment. Then they go from one caring person, into the angels' arms," Arielle responded.

"I guess you're right. What's your name?"

"Arielle."

"Arielle—that's an angel. That's an angel's name. Are you an angel?"

"No. But right now I'll be your angel," she smiled.

"How did you know I was going to ask—to ask you to be my angel till I get better?"

Arielle smiled. "Jim, why don't you get a little rest. You're starting to look weak again."

"Will you stay?"

"Yes. I'll stay."

Arielle dozed off. A few hours later Megan came by and looked at her.

"You had an angel for a wife, Herbie," she said aloud. "She's doing this for you."

If only Megan could have seen Herbie standing there, in that other dimension, smiling and saying,

"She *thinks* she's doing it for me now—but she's doing it for love. She'll learn that soon. She's being Jesus for this man."



Jim recovered quickly. He still wasn't able to walk, but strength returned to the rest of his body in no time.

Once while Arielle was helping Jim practice walking, along with a nurse, she was called away.

"What is it?" Arielle said as she rushed over to the tent where the mail for the soldiers arrived and was distributed.

"It's a telegram for Jim. We wanted you to give it to him," someone said as they handed it to her.

Arielle quickly took the telegram.

"You may want to read it first, Doctor."

Arielle glanced at the man who handed her the telegram, and then turned her eyes to the telegram. A look of surprise swept over her face. "Why me? Why are you asking me to do this?"

"We try to have these kind of messages delivered by someone who the soldier is close to—if there is someone," was the response.

"I barely know him!"

"That doesn't matter. What matters is, he's close enough to you. He takes kindly to you. You've been there for him before. Why not be there again?"

Those words hit home. All of a sudden, she remembered Herbie's whispers that one night several weeks ago. Maybe this was the time Herbie was talking about.

Arielle walked slowly out of the tent and over to Jim. He looked up, "I'm doing better, aren't I?" He said as he took a few steps with the aid of the nurse that had been walking with him.

Arielle's face looked concerned.

"What is it, Arielle? Do you have to leave here?"

Arielle managed a smile, and, not knowing what

else to do, handed him the telegram.

"For me? W-what is it?" He said as he took it and read it.

"I'm so sorry," Arielle said as she went to him, holding him and stroking his hair as he buried his face in her coat.

"My children! Who are they going to be with now that she's gone?"

"It's all right, Jim," Arielle said softly. "They're going to be with your sister till you return."

"And I wasn't there!" Jim sobbed.

"No one holds it against you, Jim. You were doing your duty. She understands. She's in Heaven now. She's in Heaven with the angels—and with our loved ones," Arielle added, as a tear rolled down her cheek.

The other nurse looked at Arielle. She knew Arielle had been married once before, but Arielle didn't talk much about Herbie with the others. The nurse then walked over to where Jim and Arielle stood, and rubbed Jim's back. "It's going to be okay, Jim," she added.



As soon as he was fully recovered, Jim was to return home, but that wouldn't be for some time. Though he had made remarkable progress, he wasn't yet able to care for himself completely, much less two little ones. Arielle learned that Jim had two young children—a son and a daughter—and that he'd been married only a few years before the war.

Arielle spent as much time as she could with Jim. He felt comforted with her, knowing that she had had a loved one pass on not too long before. Arielle knew it was difficult for Jim. He had loved his wife as deeply as Arielle had loved Herbie. Arielle knew how much it meant to have someone there to give you a hug and remind you that your departed loved one was in good hands—God's hands—and that you'd see them once again.

Jim kept getting stronger and stronger. He could soon walk for short stretches, and he looked almost as whole as any of the rest of them. Arielle prepared her heart that he would soon be well enough to have to leave their medical camp.



Arielle stayed with Jim each evening until he went to sleep, and sometimes even fell asleep there herself. She knew it meant a lot to Jim, and she knew it was good for her as well.

“Those Psalms are very beautiful, Arielle,” Jim said once while she was reading them to him. “I’ll have to keep reading them once I get back.”

“Do that, Jim. They’ll comfort you.”

“Did you read them before, Arielle? I mean, before the war, and all this suffering?”

“Sometimes. I should have read them more often.”

“Arielle?”

“Yes, Jim?”

“I’m going to miss you very much once you go. Your heart is as pretty as your face.—And it’s a very pretty face, you know.”

Arielle smiled and kissed his hand. Then she put her head against his as he sat, propped up on pillows.

“You’re an awfully brave man, Jim. I’ll miss you too.”

“Come and see us once all this is over, will you?”

“Okay.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise.”

“Lay your head on the pillow, Arielle.”

Arielle leaned over from her chair and put her head on the pillow. She’d been thinking a lot, but could only manage to get a few words out.

“You’ve got so many pillows, Jim. Did they let you keep all these, even though you’re better? Or do you still need so many for your back?”

“My back is fine. Everything is fine. I just like the pillows. They make me feel warm and cozy, like I used to feel... Oh well, never mind getting into that now. I’ve got to look ahead.”

Arielle understood. She leaned over to kiss his head, but Jim gently lifted his lips to meet hers.

“I just wanted to thank you for being an angel to me, Arielle, all this time I’ve been so ill. That’s—that’s the best way I knew how to thank you.”

Arielle was surprised, but touched. She wasn’t sure how to respond. She wished she could do more, but thought that she’d done everything she could do. She knew he needed all the love and care he could get—lonely and heartbroken as he was.

She fell asleep that night on her chair with her head beside his. She’d been asleep a few hours when she heard that same, sweet, familiar voice in her heart again. She was never sure if she actually heard it with her ears, or if it was a dream of some sort, or if it was just a little voice in her heart, but she knew without a doubt that it was there and it was speaking to her.

Elle, the voice said softly. Elle, you’ve done wonderfully once again. Thank you for staying with him. He needs you—and believe it or not, you need him. Hasn’t it felt good to reach out, not just reaching out everywhere in little ways, but actually reaching out to grasp ahold of another set of needy hands that are reaching out for yours? Elle, you’ve been thinking that there isn’t much more you can do. But there is.

“What is it?” She mumbled.

Well, I’ll leave that to you to think of. But I’ll give you a clue—there’s a certain kind of freedom in selfless love. The Gypsies had it. It would mean all the world to him. It would be like heavenly elixir for his broken heart.

“I don’t understand.”

Like I said before, Elle, your heart will make it clear. Just don't stop at anything to give. Whenever an opportunity lies before you, take it. Don't pass it up. Keep being there for him, Elle. You need each other.

"I need you, Herbie."

Yes, but in a different way. Not like you need him, and not like he needs you. Be strong, Elle. You've let go, now you can let go totally. It always has to get to that point for everyone—you get the opportunity to totally be free and to let go.

"You're always talking about letting go," Arielle mumbled and smiled, her eyes still closed.

It's an important truth—I want you to do it. You won't be happy unless you do.

"But I am happy."

That's because you've been letting go and loosening your grasp on the past as each step comes along. But when another step comes and you don't take it, that same peace and happiness that you find when you surrender won't be there anymore. Then you'll have to wait for another step to come along, and it could take awhile.

"So what am I supposed to do?"

Just love to your fullest at each opportunity. Don't ever hold back or hang on to me, to what we had. You can look forward to that in Heaven because I'll always love you and I'll always be Here for you. You need to be there for others now. I love you, Elle.

"But wait! Herbie!" The voice was gone and Elle was puzzled. She didn't understand what it meant, but she knew that any time she had heard a whisper in her heart, it had always been right—the Lord's voice in her heart the night before Herbie went into Heaven's arms; Herbie's whisper several weeks ago, telling her to stay with Jim; and others she didn't even remember just yet. She wasn't sure what it was that he had had to come and tell her this time, but she knew that she would know soon.

Chapter Eighteen – A Gift of Love

Within a few weeks they were all meant to move farther away from the frontlines and into a small, empty building that they could use as a hospital. Some of the patients and nurses had moved already, leaving a skeleton crew behind to continue to treat the men still coming in from the frontlines. New teams of medical staff were to come soon to operate the field hospital while everyone else moved back onto safer ground. The tents were quite empty because most of the wounded had now been transported to the new—and better equipped—location.

A little bit of the morning sunlight shone on Jim's face as Arielle came into the tent.

"Am I going yet?"

"No. The last train for the day left this morning. But there'll be others, Jim. Is that okay with you?"

"Yes, of course. Are you leaving yet, Arielle?"

"No. I think they'll be leaving me here till later."

"But I thought a new team of nurses and doctors were coming."

"Well, there aren't enough. I'll be staying on a little longer."

"Sorry about that. Are you sad? Would you rather go?"

"I'm fine about staying here. It's my job."

“Megan’s gone, isn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“You miss her, don’t you?”

“Yes, I miss Megan. We’ve been friends for a long time.”

“I’ll miss you, Arielle.”

“I’ll miss you too, Jim.”

“No, you don’t understand. I’ll really miss you. It’ll be lonely without you. You see, I—I love you, Arielle.”

Arielle walked over to his bed and squeezed his hand. “You’ll be all right, Jim. You’re brave and strong. You’ll make it.”



Arielle felt uneasy. She hadn’t thought about ever loving or being loved by someone else in the same way she and Herbie loved each other. It had never really crossed her mind that letting herself love again would be a part of letting go—a big part. She loved Jim as a friend, and she enjoyed being with him. It meant a lot to her to have someone to laugh and talk with in the midst of such turmoil. But she’d kept him at arm’s length, even though she didn’t mean to.

That night she wanted to go to bed earlier than usual. She said goodnight to Jim and then went to the tent she stayed in. She couldn’t sleep, though. Something deep down in her heart told her that she had an opportunity to loosen her grasp a little more, to let go a little more, and that she needed to take this opportunity. Still she wasn’t sure what it was. Frustrated that she couldn’t sleep, she got up and started working, filling in charts, checking the supplies, writing Mama and Papa. Finally, tired as she was, she rested her head on the table she was writing at, and fell asleep. Her heart was still struggling, though she didn’t know exactly why.

She was just barely asleep when her mind started

whirling, thinking about so many things, wondering if this is what Herbie had wanted her to do—to love again. Or at least to try, to make a start. And how was she supposed to make a start? She was confused and frustrated, wanting so much for him to come and speak to her, to let her hear his voice in her heart again. It took a few moments before she remembered that if she wanted an answer, all she needed to do was ask and the whispers would come to her once more.

“Please, dear Lord, I have so many questions. Please help me know what’s right. Please answer me.” Then she sobbed, “Herbie, please come whisper in my heart again.”

Elle, came the reply a few minutes later. Yes, I want you to love again. It won’t take away from your love for me or my love for you. It’s hard to understand now, but when you get to Heaven you’ll understand. Here, you can love so much and so many. Loving one person doesn’t mean you can’t love another. The more you love, the more you can love. It’s a beautiful thing. And I want to share it with you.

Love is going to soothe any last hurts you might have, hurts that you’re hanging onto. It’ll make you free, Elle. Jim needs you. He’s so lonely. He’s lost a loved one too. There’s so much you can share. Remember how I said that understanding another’s burdens and trials, having had them yourself, just makes you feel a part of them? He feels a part of you, and you could feel a part too, if you’d let go and love again.

“It’s not easy, Herbie.”

No, but great victories, great triumphs, never come easy. The greatest freedom comes with a price, but it’s always worth it. Always.

“I love you, Herbie.”

I love you too, Elle. And I want you to love Jim too. Please? It takes courage to love when one feels like

you do right now, but the rewards of loving freely are wonderful—beyond anything you could ever imagine, Elle!

“I want to, but...”

Then you can. All you have to do is want to, and then God will reach down and take you the rest of the way. He'll come through for you. He's got me in His loving hands, so don't worry. Just let go of me, He'll take care of me. You reach out and love Jim. Be God's hands for Jim, Elle.

Then, just as soon as Herbie had finished speaking, Elle woke up. She knew now what she was meant to do. It wasn't that she didn't love Jim. She did. Over the weeks she'd become very close to him. She just had to totally forget herself and reach out again without holding back.

She got up from the desk and walked over to the tent where Jim slept. As she walked, she looked up at the moon and it seemed to smile at her. The stars looked like they were nodding, encouraging her that Heaven loved her. A shooting star even went by, and she imagined it was Herbie. It didn't even feel difficult anymore, she *wanted* to reach out. She *wanted* to love again.

Finally, she reached Jim's cot. There were two people sleeping soundly on the opposite side of the tent, but Jim looked as though he was still awake. She drew the curtains that hung between the beds, dividing Jim's bed from the next, and sat on the chair beside him.

“Can't sleep, Jim?” she whispered.

“No.”

“I couldn't either. So I decided to come and visit you, to see if you're okay.”

“Yep. I'm fit as a fiddle, almost ready to go home!”

“I'll miss you, Jim. You're a very special person,” she said, shyly reaching her hand out and stroking his cheek.

“So are you, Arielle,” he said before he took her hand and kissed it. “Thank you for caring.”

Arielle paused, unsure of what to say next. Jim was a very special person. Finally a few words tumbled out, “I—I don't know what to say, Jim. That's—that's...”

Jim, understanding what she was really trying to say, put his finger gently over her lips. “Don't say anything. Words don't always suffice, do they?”

She could only nod her head. She wasn't sure what to do next; she felt a little scared, but also very loved. And she wanted to return that love.

“It's a little chilly, Jim. Can ... can I sleep with you?” Arielle said shyly.

“Of course, Arielle,” he said, making room for her. She snuggled beside him and looked up at his sweet face. They both smiled before he stroked her hair and kissed her. Then they melted into each other's arms and embrace. It had been a long, long time, and they had almost forgotten how much comfort a little love and tenderness can bring to one's soul.



The next morning, when Jim woke up, Arielle had already gone. Though love had begun, the war had not ended just yet and there were still many wounded soldiers to care for. He smiled and thanked God for sending such an angel his way, for bringing a little Heaven in the midst of such hell.

Shortly thereafter Jim was transferred to the hospital that all the other soldiers had gone to before him. Arielle stood by the side of the road as Jim left, waving until he was out of sight. She was thankful she had loved—and been loved in return.

Chapter Nineteen – To Let Go

A few months later Arielle received a letter. It was from Jim. Curiously, she opened it, wondering whatever it could be about. “He’s so kind to have thought of writing me!” she said aloud.

Dear Arielle,

Or should I perhaps call you “doctor”—though you were more than just a doctor to me. You were an angel. At least that’s the best word I can come up with to describe all you were for me those many months.

My left leg has finally healed completely (no more nasty limp!), and I’m on my way home. I am somewhat excited, though also apprehensive. I can’t wait to see my two children, though it’s hard to imagine what it’s going to be like without Claire, my wife, there.

I know you understand. I wanted to write you just once before I leave, since I don’t know how I’ll be able to reach you once I’m home—or if I’ll be able to reach you. Being both a mother and a father will definitely be tricky, but I know God will help me.

Do visit us, Arielle, whenever you like for however long you like. I wouldn’t want to impose on your life and plans but knowing

that you don't have much to go back to, and we don't live far from where your home is, if it would cheer your heart to have someone—or rather, some ones—to call your own once again, we would be more than happy to have you. I don't mean to be imposing, as this is simply meant to be an offer—from one friend to another. It's awkward writing this letter, but somehow I felt that I should. Thank you once again, Arielle, for being a friend.

Jim

Arielle was speechless. As imposing as the offer might have seemed to another, Arielle felt deep down in her heart that this was what Herbie wanted her to do. Still, the thought overwhelmed her. She remembered how she'd told Jim she'd always wanted to have a family, and joked that perhaps motherhood had been saved for her first heavenly challenge once she passed through the Pearly Gates.

Even though she felt it would be the right thing to do, to be a lifetime help to Jim, she struggled. She knew that this was probably going to be the final “letting go”—the giving up of any reservations she'd clung to, closing the book on her old life and starting anew, giving up Herbie to Heaven and growing into a mother for two little ones who had lost theirs.

As much as she knew this would mean the beginning of a new life and new challenges, and new happiness, and as much as she loved Jim, the “letting go” part was hard. She felt she had already done all that she could for Jim—more than she thought a non-relative would do. Something in her heart though, told her that it wasn't just for Jim, this was for her too. But she pushed it aside. Suddenly she didn't feel so soft anymore. As much

as she wanted a new life, she still had difficulty letting go of the old. Perhaps she would think about it, she told herself, once the war was over—or at least her involvement with it. She wished she could hear Herbie and the angels' voices again. But at the same time, she felt she knew what they would tell her, and she didn't know if she was strong enough to reconcile with all that Herbie—and the Lord, really—wanted her to do.

Eventually she was on her way back to her home and her job at the clinic, while other young doctors went off to help where she had been for the last two years. Yes, it had been two long years, and Arielle was looking forward to once again joining the staff at her old clinic. For a moment she was happy it was going to be just like the old days, but deep down in her heart, she knew it wouldn't be the same.

As the train made its way to the town she had come to call home, she knew that the old days had passed away to give place to the new, but she was stubbornly hanging onto them. No wonder she felt so empty!—The past had gone, yet she wasn't willing to take hold of the future. Everything had changed for everyone; some moved on with it, and others chose to live in the past.

Mama and Papa noticed a different Arielle when she first stepped off the train and onto the platform. At first they figured it was all the experiences that she must have gone through, and the exhaustion, no doubt. But as the days went by, Mama and Papa knew. They knew the day had come when she needed to reach out, to spread her wings and fly to a new home, and she hadn't been willing to do it just yet. Arielle told them about Jim, about hearing Herbie's voice in her heart, and then they knew for certain.

All the pieces of the puzzle had come together for her wise old Mama and Papa. In time they knew

she would have to reach out and completely let go of Herbie and her old life. They also knew it wasn't easy for Arielle, and that she'd have to decide in her own heart that this was what she was meant to do—not decide that she was going to do it just for the sake of doing it, but decide that this was God's path for her, and then *want* it.



Arielle began visiting the park again. It was a peaceful place for her, and it also reminded her of Herbie's sweet self. Whenever she went there and sat on her favorite bench beside the lake, she would imagine Herbie sitting beside her, holding her hand, or resting his head against hers.

But each time she visited the park now, she struggled. She knew that she was hanging on to Herbie and trying to re-live the good old times, even though the time had come to move on. She admitted to herself that she was a little afraid that if she let go entirely, Herbie would perhaps not need to be so close to her—that his first mission was to help her open up once more, and then he would go on to do the other things that he was meant to do in Heaven. She felt selfish to want him for herself, but she didn't know if she was ready to give him up. She knew he would still be around, and that this time would only seem like a moment in all eternity before she'd be reunited with him. But still, it wasn't easy.

After work one day Arielle went to sit at her favorite bench by the lake. There was usually no one there, but today a very old lady sat there alone staring in the direction of the lake. She had dark eyes and gray hair pulled behind her head in a bun, a scarf over her head, beads around her neck, and a very dated dress—almost Gypsy-looking—as if she had stepped out of another time.

Arielle sat down on the opposite end of the bench from the old lady, who was either mumbling or softly

singing, Arielle wasn't sure which. Arielle leaned her head back and closed her eyes for a few moments of peace and rest when the lady's voice seemed clearer. She was singing softly:

He's hanging around on Earth still,
Because she hasn't let him go.
There are so many beautiful things in Heaven,
That he has yet to know.
But he's hanging around on Earth still,
Because she hasn't let him go.

Arielle slowly lifted her head up from the back of the bench and looked at the old Gypsy lady in awe. The lady didn't look at her, though. She just kept looking straight ahead and singing.

Arielle sat up and looked toward the lake. Her mind was racing and her heart beat faster as the lady kept singing. Then suddenly, the lady got up. She was of very small stature, and her eyes met Arielle's once she stood.

"She should let him go, shouldn't she?" the old lady said, referring to her song, as she walked by and looked straight into Arielle's eyes, chuckling.

Arielle sat awestruck as the old Gypsy lady passed her and waddled off. She watched the old lady until she was out of sight. It was one of those signs the still small voice had told her of long ago the night before Herbie's passing.



A few evenings later as Arielle read a book by the fireplace, she could tell from frequent glances up at Papa that he was thinking about something.

"What is it Papa?"

"Nothing, my little Flower. Go on and read your book."

"No, Papa, tell me. I need to know what you're thinking," she said as she put the book down.

"It's true. You *need* to know, but I'm afraid you may not *want* to know."

Arielle looked down at the floor. She knew—*or she thought she knew*—something of what Papa was going to say.

"Okay, Papa. I *want* to hear what you have to say."

"You sure, Flower? Papa doesn't want to make you sad—though you already look quite sad."

"I look sad? I'm happy—very happy to be back, to be with you and Mama and..."

"Your face doesn't look sad, my pretty one. It's your heart that looks sad. You're struggling, aren't you?"

Arielle couldn't say anything. She knew he was right.

"Come here, give Papa a hug."

Arielle scooted over to where Papa was sitting.

"Mama and I know you're sad. Mama especially knows what it's like. But your heart can't heal itself anymore. It needs another heart to heal it."

"Maybe once I start working again..."

"You've already started working again, Arielle."

"But I mean, *really* working. I've only been here a few months. It takes a little while to get adjusted and..."

"It's okay, sweet Flower, don't worry about the tears," Papa said gently as he wiped a few tears that had begun to flow onto Arielle's face.

"It would help you so much if you would step out and try again. Love again. I'm sure Herbie wants that, and Mama and I want that too. We loved Herbie very much, like a son, and though it wasn't the same way you loved him, we had to let go too. Everyone has to let go many times in their lives—sometimes in big ways, sometimes in little ways. Sometimes things seem so perfect for a time, but when those perfect times are gone you have to rejoice that God

allowed them, and then make it possible for God to let other blessings fall."

"Thank you, Papa. I'll think about it," Arielle said, resting her head on Papa's knee.

"Pray, child. Don't think too much. Pray. Use your heart. Open it up to Heaven and ask the Lord for an answer. Don't use your mind—use your heart."

That night Arielle prayed and opened her heart up once again. She knew the last several months had been empty.—It was that feeling Herbie had described would come if you're met with an opportunity to give, yet you hold back.

"Have I missed an opportunity?" she prayed. It had been over a year since she had received the letter from Jim. So much might have happened in between, and she wasn't sure if she still had time. She knew now that it was God's path for her. He was crossing her path with that of another needy heart's, so they could join hands and walk it together. She just hoped it wasn't too late.

She remembered the Gypsy lady and the song she was singing. *God must have sent her, or at least let her be there when I was there*, she thought. *Perhaps there is hope. Perhaps He knew that time was running out, so He sent her.*

"Oh, please, let me try. I want to have another chance at this opportunity. It hasn't passed me up yet, has it?"

She didn't hear a whispering voice in her mind or her heart, but she felt a peace. God knew that the surrender was good for her soul, and that was the most important part. He would work out all the rest.

Chapter Twenty - Flying Away

The next day Arielle knew what she was supposed to do. She got up early, before Mama and Papa awoke, and went to her house.

She opened the front door to a beautiful house. Mama and Papa had kept it well. Still, though, it looked like something out of the past, almost as if it was fading before her eyes. She quickly went to her old room and began to pack her belongings.

Before too long she heard footsteps enter the house. She would have gotten up to see who was there, but she was too busy packing. She just wanted to get out of the past as soon as possible.

“Bob!” she said as she saw the familiar hand on her shoulder. “It’s so nice to see you!”

“A miracle I came by this morning,” Bob said as he sat down and took off his hat. “From the looks of it, I mightn’t have seen you again. Where are you going, Arielle?”

“Out of my past and into my future.”

“I understand.”

“Shall I tell you more?” Arielle said with a laugh.

“Specifics are always appreciated by Bob,” he answered with a smile.

As she packed her things, Arielle told him about Herbie’s whispers in her heart, about Jim, about the old Gypsy lady. Bob glowed—but not nearly as

much as Arielle, who was so happy and relieved that she'd finally closed the book of her past for good, and couldn't wait to begin writing in the new one she knew lay before her.

"I have never been so proud of you, child!" Bob said as he stood up and hugged her. "You've gained another kind of courage, haven't you?"

Arielle smiled. "It was Herbie—Herbie and my best Friend up There!" She pointed upwards. "I couldn't have done it without help."

"Here, let me help you take your bags."

"Thank you, Bob."

Just as they took the last steps in that home of her past, Arielle heard a fluttering sound. She ran back to the porch where it was coming from, and saw her little birdie flying away—joining a flock of birds who were flying overhead.

"I'm flying away too!" she whispered softly. "See you in Heaven."

Arielle smiled. She was so happy. She had no idea what joy her final surrender would bring her.



Mama and Papa found Arielle's note on the refrigerator and rejoiced. They knew that their little Flower had come out of a long winter, and she was now blossoming with the other flowers.

Mama smiled and looked upward, "Herbie, you must be happy! You must be so happy!"

Papa hugged and assured her. "He is, Mama! He is!"



As Arielle boarded the bus, she felt total peace. The bus ride reminded her of the time she was reunited with Herbie, and then all the happy memories of her life with Herbie flooded her mind. Only this time she didn't feel sad or lonely. She felt blessed. She knew God's hand had been in her life all the while, and that He would never leave her nor

forsake her.

It wasn't long before she found herself at the door of Jim's home. Thrilled as she was, she was nevertheless a little apprehensive at what awaited her. She knocked softly a couple of times and then paced the little porch just outside the front door.

Finally, the door swung open and there stood Jim, surprised, but happy—with one of his adorable kids in his arms, and the other by his side.

Arielle smiled nervously. "Jim, I'm sorry it took me a little while to answer your letter, but I finally did. Today!"

Jim held her tightly and the two little kids joined in the festive moment. Little as they were, they didn't understand who this beautiful new person was and why she had come to their door. All they knew was that they were with two people who looked happier than anyone they'd seen in a long, long time.

Just before Arielle stepped into her new home, she looked Heavenwards. "Herbie, I finally did it! I finally let go!"



THE WRITER

Chapter One

Once, in the 1950s, there lived a man in a small town called Leesburg, in Ohio. He was a quiet man and lived alone. He was 32. Not too young, but not too old either, he would say to himself. The town held everything that a small town needed: a bakery, a church, a post office, a butcher. It was a small town, full of quiet country folk.

He lived alone on the outskirts of the town. He wrote poems and short stories under a pseudonym for various journals and magazines. He loved to write, but always feared that people would laugh at him or his stories if they knew it was he who had written them—especially the people in the town he lived in; those who thought he was a no-gooder, a strange man. They had small minds and thought that anything that they didn't quite understand must be bad.

The townsfolk saw him as he went down to the post office every Friday with a large package of his latest manuscripts. No one knew what was in the packages. Edward Olmos, for that was his name, would arrive like clockwork every Friday at four in the afternoon and have a package ready to send—sometimes two or three, and not always to the same address. Occasionally he would pick up letters or equally large packages of the manuscripts that had

been rejected by magazine or journal editors who didn't like his work. He always took these packages back with a tinge of sadness, and would resolve to do better the next time—and he usually did.

The only other time Edward was seen at all by the townsfolk was once a week at church. But even there, he remained alone, quiet, slipping in only shortly before the service, and leaving quickly thereafter. Why he seemed to avoid people nobody knew, but besides Mr. Jackson at the post office, and Pastor Raymond at the church, few others had ever seen him up close, much less spoken to him.

Even the town busybodies (and these were not a few) seemed hesitant to venture to his house and make their presence known, being more content to spin their rumors among themselves than to call on him (like they did with most everybody else) to ferret out new material for their idle gossip.

One day Edward was riding his bicycle into town. It was Friday and in the shoulder bag that was slung on his back was one package. This one he carried with great joy, for in his soul he knew that he'd written a truly great piece of literature, and he was certain that it would be accepted and published by the magazine that he was sending it to. So as he rode, he rang his bicycle bell at passersby in merriment, smiled, and even said hello to some of them. This shocked the old-timers walking around, who in living memory had never heard Edward utter a word to anyone.

He rode through the streets, across the train tracks, down an alley, and onto the main street that went through town, chuckling to himself all the way. He loved the outdoors in the springtime (although he couldn't spend too much time outdoors, because of his allergies). He had brownish hair and green eyes. Some would have said he was a good looking man. He wasn't bad looking by any means. He'd

even been noticed by some of the young ladies in the town, although none dared speak to him for fear of what others might say. This small town had a small town's appetite for gossip, and gossip could ruin a young lady. None of them really felt like having to relocate and start a new life elsewhere because of the horrific rumors that could sprout from such gossip.

There was one young woman in particular, Mary Frank, who was 26 years old, and did part-time work at the post office, as Mr. Jackson was getting old and sometimes couldn't keep up. She always saw Edward riding his bike or at the church on Sundays. She was never in the post office when he came on his Friday run, her shift being from Tuesday till Thursday. The rest of the time she did her private studies, and waited patiently for life to come along and beckon her aboard. She was always curious about Edward. On one particular day she had even resolved to try to get his attention as he rode past, so she could introduce herself and speak to him. But that day he had ridden by with such a gloomy look on his face (carrying a rejected manuscript) that she had changed her mind at the last minute. She had slipped around a corner to avoid being seen by him, and hurried away.

On this fine sunny Friday, Edward was speeding along on his bicycle. He had been adding the finishing touches to the manuscript just prior to setting out for the post office, so he was now late and trying to make up for lost time. He always liked to be punctual. As a young man who lived alone, he had grown accustomed to his routines, and if they were broken for some reason, it would leave him gloomy. So while he kept his good humor, he nonetheless hurried to still get to the post office in good time.

As he came closer to the center of town, where

the small town's few shops were, he decided to take a shortcut through the school playground. It would shave a few minutes off the trip. Without another thought he veered through the school gate on the far side of the grounds. School was already out, and the schoolyard was deserted.

Edward rode along a grassy field and came to a cemented area where hopscotch squares were laid out. The school building was tall and broad; not fancy, but respectable. He rode across the front courtyard of the building, heading towards the gate on the opposite side of the grounds, when he noticed someone sitting on the school steps.

It was a set of twenty steps leading up to the main entrance. At the top was a big brick archway. The solitary figure was sitting near the bottom stairs. It was a woman, sitting with her knees drawn up to her chest and her face buried in her long skirt, so he couldn't tell who it was. He barely knew the name of the postmaster who waited on him each week, much less a girl that he thought he remembered seeing before, but wasn't quite sure. She didn't move, and for some reason he stared at her as he rode past, as if his eyes were glued of their own accord to that figure on the steps.

So intent was his gaze that he didn't notice he had veered off course and was heading towards the tree-lined driveway that led up to the school. The tree coming up fast went unnoticed until the second that he ran into it, dead center. His bicycle crashed loudly, throwing him headlong. In spite of the violence of his fall, Edward only suffered a bruise on his shin from a large root growing out of the ground. The crash and his ensuing cry of surprise caused the young woman to look up.

Edward stood up, noticing that she was watching him. He could see the tears on her cheeks that she was now trying to brush away. This embarrassed

him, and he felt like he'd intruded. He didn't know what to do so he just stood there, awkwardly brushing the grass and dirt from his pants, while she looked on. She continued to stare at him, also unsure how to proceed. He held his hat in his hands now, his shoulder bag lying on the ground by his bike.

"Hello," he said tentatively. "I'm sorry, but I seem to have disturbed you."

When she realized that he was all right, a hint of a smile flickered across her face.

"That's all right," she said.

Still unsure as to what he should do, he started to fumble with his hat, staring at it and scrunching and unscrunching it. Finally he blurted, "Do you sit here often?" *Silly question*, he thought as the words left his mouth.

At this Mary Frank (for it was she who was sitting in the schoolyard that sunny Friday afternoon) couldn't help but smile, and tried to suppress a small giggle with her hand.

"No," she replied, "I come here rarely. For some reason I felt that I had to find a quiet place to sit and think, and this was the closest place."

He continued fumbling with his hat. Finally, "I don't suppose you know who I am. I live here in town—well, actually, outside of town."

She smiled faintly again. "Yes, I know who you are. We've never actually met, but I believe your name is Edward—Edward Olmos, is that right?"

This time he nearly smiled. "Why, yes it is. Edward Olmos. And you are...?" He paused.

"Mary Frank. Pleased to meet you." She stood up at this, brushed the dust from her skirt, and extended her hand while coming toward him. He didn't know what to do, not seeming to be able to unloose his hands from his hat, which was still clutched in the vice-like grip of nervous tension.

Finally, he unclenched his right hand, checked it quickly to make sure there was no dirt on it from his fall, and took her outstretched hand. It was firm and smooth.

"I'm very pleased to meet you also," he said. (Again, nearly a smile.)

When she released his hand, she suddenly felt very bold. "Tell me, Mr. Olmos, what is it exactly that you do in this town of ours?"

His hand went back to fiddling with his hat. "Well, I'm actually—well, sort of—a writer."

Her face showed her interest. "Really! What do you write?"

He looked slightly embarrassed. "Well, nothing noteworthy, I'm sorry to say. Just stories, poems, whatever comes to my head I try to put into words and just," he paused, "try to get people to think." *You're babbling*, he warned himself in his head. *Shush up.*

She tried to take all of this in. "Think? About what?"

"About living. About other people. I try to help readers to see beyond themselves and to look at the needs of others, through stories. None of them true, I'm afraid," he added, then coughed nervously.

As Edward grew more and more nervous, Mary grew bolder. Finally she asked, "I think I should like to read one of your stories."

He looked alarmed for moment, "Oh no, I'm afraid not. Um, you see, I only write my stories under, well, you know, other names. I don't really like to let people know that I write actually. You're the first person I've ever told."

By this time Mary had stuck her hands in her skirt pockets, and had turned to stroll away, expecting him to follow. He was still unsure where this was all going, but finally went and got his shoulder bag, slung it over his shoulder, and

wheeled his bicycle after her.

"You've lived here four years now, haven't you?" she asked, as they walked.

"Yes, about that, I should think," he replied.

"I've often see you when you ride through the town," she continued. "And then at church, of course. I hope I don't sound too presumptuous, but we've all sort of wondered what you have been doing here since you first came."

He looked embarrassed again, staring at the ground as they walked. "I'm afraid I'm not the best of neighbors, and that sort of thing. I suppose I just like privacy."

"Oh really, that's all right," she said. "There's nothing wrong with the way you live. It's just a small town, that's all, and they're all sort of small town people. You're a bit of an enigma around here, part of the folklore even, if I may be so bold as to say."

At this, he finally smiled. "Really?" He looked amused.

"Yes, whenever the old timers gossip in the streets or in the local store, eventually your name will pop up in the conversation, talking about 'that Olmos fellow who lives down the way.' All kinds of stories have been hatched about who you are and what you do."

"Oh," he said, trying to sound casual. "Like what?"

She looked thoughtful. "I heard that you used to be a school teacher, and you were fired for being too undisciplined with your pupils. That's one story I heard."

He continued smiling. "How interesting! I always wanted to be a teacher, although to tell you the truth, I don't think I'd even be qualified."

By now he was becoming more comfortable and relaxed, easing the grip on the handlebars of his bicycle. He even briefly looked into her eyes once or twice.

She grew thoughtful again. The silence was just becoming unbearable between them when she said, "I had thought about trying to introduce myself to you earlier this year, right after Thanksgiving, when I saw you riding past on your bicycle. I was going to call out to you, to try and get you to stop. I had no idea whatsoever what I was going to say," she laughed, "but, I was very curious to find out who you were. I'm afraid at the time you looked very sad. I don't think I've seen someone so sad as that. I remember it clearly. Tell me, what was the matter?"

He coughed nervously again. "I'm sorry, I can't say that I remember that particular day. Um ... I'm sure if I remember what it was, I'll tell you." Her boldness was contagious, and he was beginning to grow curious about her. "What were you doing sitting back there anyway? And forgive me for asking, but why were you crying?"

It was her turn to look at the ground. "It was really quite silly of me, I thought I'd grown out of such things. I suppose I was just feeling lonely, with no one to talk too. The weekend is here and all of my friends are out of town, having fun. My mother is going to Cincinnati to visit friends. She invited me along, but really, I didn't want to go." She hesitated, "They're just not very nice friends, if you get my meaning. Not meaning to sound critical," she added quickly. "I just didn't feel in the mood to be around gossipy old ladies talking about nothing, while playing bridge, which must be absolutely the most boring game ever invented." She smiled.

"Yes," he agreed, smiling, too. "I sort of know those feelings, too."

"So, I was sitting there," she continued, "feeling rather sorry for myself and not a little lonely. Rather silly, isn't it?"

"No, no," he said. "No, not at all. I know what loneliness is. Although, to be honest, it's never really

brought me to tears. Other things maybe, but not loneliness."

She looked at him sideways again, then said quietly, "Why do you live alone? Why are you here in Leesburg?"

At this he straightened, suddenly tense again. "I—I'm, terribly sorry," he stuttered, "but I think I'm already late as it is and must be getting off. I don't know if you ... I ..." He searched for words to say, finally he muttered, "Oh, hang it!" He started to talk fast and excitedly, "Look, I don't know, but you were speaking of loneliness, right. Well, I've just finished a new story, possibly one of the best I've ever written. Well," he paused, "none of them are that great but this one, I think, is the best." At this, he pulled the large package out of his bag. "It's sort of a story about loneliness. Forgive me if this sounds presumptuous, but would you read it? Perhaps it might be of some help. Then again," he hesitated, "perhaps not. But, please, I would be honored." And at this, he extended the package to her.

She took it from him. Another moment of awkward silence ensued. "Thank you," she said. "I, well, feel very uncomfortable accepting this. This is one of your stories and you're giving it to me, a perfect stranger!"

"Oh no, no, I'm not *giving* it to you," he corrected her. "I just want you to read it and tell me what you think. Please. And then, if you would be so kind, I would like it back, as this is my only copy. I burned all of my rough drafts, as they were starting to look quite ugly by the time I was finished with them." At this he laughed.

She looked up at him. He had laughed! It was a musical, tinkling sound, and she loved it. She then said: "Thank you, Mr. Olmos. I would be very pleased to read your story."

At this the tension sort of left him, but almost

immediately it came back. "Um, I'm afraid that I really must go. It's been very nice meeting you, Miss Frank."

"Mary," she said, smiling slightly. "Please, call me Mary."

"Well, Mary, It's been very nice talking to you, and I..." He stopped, with a strained look on his face. Wanting to ask to see her again, yet being unsure how to ask, he began fiddling nervously with the tassel hanging from his bicycle handle.

"I should like to meet you again sometime," she said.

At this his face brightened and he looked up. "You would?" He looked relieved.

"Why yes. Forgive me if I sound hasty, but I've wanted so very much to meet you for such a long time, and I think it would be a shame if this were to be the only time that we met. Besides," she added, "I'll have to return your manuscript when I've finished with it."

"Fine," he said, "I, uh, live alone, I don't go out much, so I'm usually at home. Although I suppose that it would be rather inappropriate to visit me at my house, so perhaps we should arrange to meet at a more public place."

She thought about this. "Yes, to go to your house would be horribly terrible in the eyes of some of the people in this town." She pretended to look shocked. She could almost picture the disapproving stares right then, but put them from her mind.

"Quite right," he agreed.

"Perhaps," she continued, "if we met at Charlie's, the town restaurant."

"Charlie's, Charlie's," he repeated, trying to recollect the place she was talking about. "Oh, yes, I've passed it a few times on my bicycle. I even thought to stop in once or twice, but," he hesitated again, "I don't know, I always feel uncomfortable in

public for some reason. I feel so much better when I'm on my own, walking outside the town, through the farmland. Or down by the brook, do you know the brook?"

She was becoming more and more interested in this man who loved to be alone. "Yes," she said, "I know the brook well. I walk by it every now and then, although I don't remember ever seeing you there."

"Oh, well I only go down there in the evenings, after sunset."

"That's why then," she said, "I only go down in the afternoons. Well, I've just realized the time myself, and should be going. My mother will be waiting for me. She's leaving by train this evening."

"Oh yes, of course, I think I've overstayed as well. It's been very nice meeting you, Miss Frank—I mean, Mary. And I look forward to seeing you again."

He was starting to ride away when she called after him, "But wait, when will we meet at the restaurant?"

He screeched to a halt abruptly, nearly falling over the handlebars. She smiled at this.

"Quite right," he called back to her, "I don't suppose Sunday would be alright. How about noon, after the service?" He waited.

"Sunday then," she agreed. "It's been very nice meeting you as well, Mr. Olmos."

"Oh please, call me Edward." Then he hesitated, embarrassed. "Actually, no, perhaps Mr. Olmos will do for now. Goodbye then." He waved, then turned and pedaled away.

Mary watched him as he rode back the way he had come, until he turned a corner and disappeared from view. She pulled out a hanky and wiped her eyes. She didn't want her mother to know that she had been crying, and she had to go and see her off. It was then that she realized that she was still holding the package he had given her. It was a sizeable

manila envelope. Quite a few stamps on it and addressed to New York. She didn't open it. *I'll wait until Mother's gone and I'm alone*, she thought.

She turned and walked home.

Chapter Two

Mary's mother was at home busily packing for her weekend trip. She was fretting and fuming around the house, gathering items to take with her, trying to choose what book she would read on the train, and she hardly noticed when Mary walked in.

"Oh Mary, there you are! Please help me with some of this packing. I've laid out the dresses and things that I'll be taking. Would you mind terribly if I asked you to help me pack them?"

Mary didn't mind. She'd already hidden the package in the broom closet next to the front door. She hurried to her mother's room to help with the packing. Mother didn't seem to notice that she had been crying, for which Mary was thankful.

"Where have you been, anyway?" her mother said, not unkindly, trying to make conversation as she busied herself.

"Oh, I've been walking around taking in the sun. It has been such a beautiful day."

"I suppose so," said her mother. "You know, I really would like it if you would come with me to Cincinnati! Please?" she pleaded.

Mary was nearly alarmed, since she didn't want to miss her Sunday appointment for anything. "No, I really couldn't, Mother. Besides, I've been feeling a little under the weather I think."

"Are you ill?"

"No no, just a little bit of headache or something. The long train ride would probably make it worse, and I do think that I should stay."

"Oh, alright," said her mother glumly. "But you'll have to come with me next time, promise?"

"Perhaps," said Mary.

"Well, if we don't leave now, we won't get to the station on time." With that Mary took her mother's bags to the front door, helped her mother into her big coat, and walked her to the station.

As they were walking to the station, her mother, out of the blue, said, "I heard that you were talking to that Edward Olmos fellow, just a little while ago."

Mary nearly had a stroke. *Goodness*, she thought to herself, *gossip travels even faster than I had thought in this town!* She tried to make her answer sound casual. "Yes, so I was."

Her mother was only mildly perturbed, and more curious than frightened at her daughter's contact with the reclusive stranger. "What is he like?" she asked.

With her manner as casual as possible, Mary replied, "Oh, he's a nice enough fellow, I suppose."

"What does he do?" mother asked.

"Oh, I don't know, mother," she tried to brush it off. "We barely talked for a minute. He was just riding across the yard and he crashed and then stood up, so I said, how are you and he said fine, how are you, I said fine, and that was basically it."

"Oh, all right," said mother, suddenly preoccupied with other thoughts. Mary heaved an inner sigh of relief.

At the train station her mother kissed her goodbye and waved to her from the train as it puffed out of the station.

Mary sighed again. She was happy, and looking forward to her meeting with Edward Olmos the

coming Sunday. She wondered how she would occupy herself until then. She was only slightly alarmed at these feelings she was having, since she'd always liked his look. Suddenly she remembered the manuscript that Edward had left with her. She ran all the way home to it.

She reached the house, recovered the package from the broom closet, and went up to her room. She had an upstairs room overlooking the street, and every afternoon the sun illuminated the room. It was a beautiful room. She sat on her bed, opened the package and pulled out a nearly half inch-thick sheaf of paper. It was arranged in a perfect stack, tied neatly with a string. She untied the string and examined the pages, noticing that they were all clean and white, immaculately typed.

The story was about two university students who were great friends. One was introverted and shy, although extremely intelligent, and one was outgoing and funny, though not quite as sharp intellectually. They were the best of friends though, finding joy in each other's companionship. They were inseparable, and well-known for their friendship. It was a short story, concisely written and crystal clear in its use of language. It culminated in the outgoing friend helping the introverted one to overcome his shyness, resulting in him befriending a beautiful girl, whom he married in the end.

It was a touching story, and when it was over Mary put the last page face down on the others, and hugged her pillow, a small tear in her eye.

What a beautiful story, she thought. She wanted to take the sheaf of papers and walk the four miles to Edward's house to tell him what the story meant to her, this story of a lonely person finding release from his loneliness through his sacrificial friend. The outgoing friend had sacrificed by giving up the girl that he secretly had feelings for, and had devoted

all of his energy to helping her to get close to his lonely friend. Mary was touched inside.

She read it again before going to bed that night, then lay there half the night thinking about it, and the author, Edward Olmos.

Chapter Three

After having turned and ridden away, Edward could hardly contain his excitement at his chance meeting. *Such a pretty girl*, he thought. *It's a wonder I never noticed her before.* He rode swiftly the way he had come, his pack much lighter with the manuscript absent. He felt that he had done the right thing with his manuscript—giving it to her to read instead of posting it. Normally he guarded his unpublished works with fierce secrecy. His only hope now was that his story would help to lift her out of her loneliness. Along with this he also felt a touch of anxiety that she wouldn't like his story, thinking that it was too simple or commonplace. Conflicting emotions followed him all the way to his house.

It was a small, two-story house. There was a sitting room in the front, and a kitchen and dining area behind that. Upstairs were two bedrooms, and a ladder led up to an attic that had one small window that let in the sunlight in a narrow beam. This was where he sat and worked at a small desk that he had built himself after dragging all of the pieces through the narrow square in the ceiling that the ladder extended to.

He loved to sit at his desk around the time the sun began to set, for it was at this time that its light would stream through the window and onto his desk.

The dust danced in the narrow beam of light and he would look up from his typewriter or his notes to watch it every few minutes, and then turn to write some more. Writing was his mission, he liked to think. A way to make the world a better place by sharing stories of hope and love, of friendship and kindness. Stories that also spoke of God, and of His great care for man, and the different ways in which He could lead or change a person's life. Stories that offered encouragement that life did not have to be as hard as it could sometimes seem.

He would stare into the sun's beam, or watch the particles of dust dancing through it, occasionally catching the sun's light with a miniscule flash. He loved this. He thought of these sparkling particles as angels carrying inspiration down from Heaven, through his window, and then shining into his eyes, the windows of his soul, hatching the thoughts in his head that traveled down to his hand and onto the page.

"My personal telegraph line to Heaven," he had said to himself once.

After the sun's rays had faded he would climb down his ladder, take his hat and walking stick, and head out of the house towards the river, which wasn't far. He loved to go there to pray, more like talk, to Jesus, whom he regarded as his closest friend.

But it hadn't always been this way—or this peaceful. He had retreated into his world of solitude earlier in life when his parents had been killed in a train accident. In his despair he had sold everything they had left him, and squandered his money on drinking and partying; first drinking to forget, and then drinking some more. His parents had been dear to him, had brought him up lovingly and with great care, imparting to him a love for and faith in Jesus.

But when they'd died so suddenly and unexpectedly—and in his mind, unfairly—he had turned on these beliefs, and chose to forget about God.

Eventually he was penniless, an alcoholic living on the streets of Cincinnati. He walked about aimlessly, begging for money and then spending it on drink, leaving him in little more than a dazed heap on the street at night. Then he would rise, and do it again. He'd resolved that he didn't want to live, and would not eat—only drink; drink himself into oblivion.

He was on this quest the day before Christmas, 1949, walking haphazardly, haggard and worn, through the streets that were full of snow. He was warmed by the cheap whiskey he'd guzzled earlier, but it didn't warm his heart or his soul. A tear fell and he wiped it away. Bitter against God and man, he put on his tough face again and begged for money outside the department stores. He stopped the people as they came out of the stores for change and then cursed them as they refused, shaking his fist at them and then moving on. Even those who took pity on him and stopped to give him a coin, he would curse at, too, for giving so little.

Later that afternoon, he was walking through the park in the city center. The trees appeared lifeless. There were small birds pecking at the snow, looking for seeds beneath it. He cursed the birds. It started to snow lightly, and he cursed the snow. Slightly drunk again, he was moving faster now, trying to get to the other side of the park to seek shelter from the snow under the shop awnings.

It was then that he heard the sound of a Christmas carol being played by a brass band, the notes floating lightly through the air towards him. It wasn't the most pleasant of sounds—the instruments were well-worn, and not very well tuned either, though in his stupor he hardly noticed that

fact. The song was “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing,” and it was the Salvation Army band playing at the far end of the park. He could barely hear them.

But as he listened to the music grow louder, something inside of him changed—the music in his ears started to sound like a choir of angels. He could have sworn that he saw the gloomy sky overhead open and a bright beam of light shine down on his face, if only for a split second.

He started walking quickly towards the brass band, and then broke into a run as he got closer. He stumbled several times in the snow. Finally he reached them and stood motionless, watching them play. They were playing “Joy to the World” now. When he heard the melody and remembered the words “joy to the world,” he felt bitter again.

What joy? he thought. *Joy to what world?* But before these thoughts could take hold, the tears started to fall down his cheeks. He stood behind and to the left of the conductor, who had just noticed the strange figure watching them, huddled in rags and crying. The conductor looked at him, puzzled for a second, searching the ragged man’s face. And then his face lit up with recognition. He stopped conducting the band and walked over to Edward.

“Ed?” he said, squinting at the face in front of him, the tussled, unkempt beard, the cap pulled low so that it was over his eyebrows, and the collar pulled up over his ears. “Ed?” the conductor repeated. “Eddie Olmos, is that you?”

It took a moment for Edward to realize that someone was speaking to him. Finally he turned to the conductor, dazed.

“Yeah,” he said, “I’m Eddie Olmos. Who’re you?”

“Eddie,” the conductor fairly shouted, looking jubilant, “It’s me, Steve! You remember me, don’t you?”

Edward was annoyed for a second, because he

didn’t remember the face.

“Steve!” the conductor repeated. “Steve Simms. Remember me?”

The name Steve Simms echoed a faint memory. *Steve Simms*, he repeated in his mind. *Steve Simms. Steven Simms!* Suddenly it dawned on him. *Steven Simms! Of course, my old friend from school.*

“Steve,” he said aloud, “my God, I can’t believe it’s you! How are you?” He started to wipe the tears, which were freezing into icicles on his face. He was feeling better already.

“I’m doing well,” said Steve. “But to tell you the truth, you don’t look so good. It’s been such a long time since I saw you last. Must’ve been 12 years at least.”

Edward was suddenly embarrassed and coughed nervously. “Yeah, at least. Well, nice seeing you. I guess I’ll be going then.”

“Wait! Where are you going? Maybe I can meet you later.”

Edward was vague. “Well, I live down the road that way.” He motioned with his hand in a vague direction. “I’ll be going now.” He turned to walk away quickly.

Steve watched him go with a knowing look on his face. He understood. “I’ll be seeing you,” he called after him.

“Yeah, maybe,” Ed responded without looking back.

Hours later, Edward was burning for a drink again, but something stopped him from trying to bum the change for one. He wasn’t sure, but after hearing “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing,” and “Joy to the World,” it just didn’t seem right. He remembered Jesus again. Tomorrow was His birthday, and the Name he’d tried to forget for so long came back to him. He remembered his parents again, too—another memory he’d tried to burn out of his brain

through so many drunken nights. All of these things began whirling around in his mind, and he started to cry again. It had now been several hours since he'd seen the Salvation Army band, and he was walking around wondering what to do, with his hands in his pockets, freezing—needing a drink, but not wanting one.

“What should I do?” he thought aloud.

He turned the corner of a tall, very gloomy-looking brick building. It was darker now and snowing heavily. Everyone was indoors celebrating Christmas Eve.—Everyone but him. Around the corner and not far away was a solitary figure, hurrying in his direction. He wore a huge overcoat and hat, boots and scarf, hurrying along to where he could be out of the open air. The street was otherwise deserted. Edward put his head down and pulled his coat collar up as far as it would go, trying to shield his ears and neck from the biting, cold winter air. He was hurrying past the figure coming the other way when it stopped and turned to him suddenly.

“Edward, it's you again.” It was Steve Simms. Miracle of miracles, they'd bumped into each other once again, in this large but now lonely city. The Salvation Army uniform Steve had been wearing earlier was missing, but he still wore the same warm smile.

“Yep, it's me again,” said Edward, feeling awkward. “I'm here just ... yeah, on my way home.”

“That's great!” said Steve. “You mind if I come along?”

Ed felt really awkward now. “No, I've ... you see...” Finally his shoulders sagged and said sadly “I don't have anywhere to live.” This news didn't seem to shock Steve too much.

“Very well then,” said Steve. “Come and celebrate Christmas with us. Come on!”

Chapter Four

Edward remembered all of this as he walked towards the river. He vividly recalled his road to recovery after meeting Steve, and the events that led him here, to Leesburg. After Christmas, Steve had invited him to stay on with the Salvation Army as a volunteer of sorts. Edward had been hesitant at first, not quite having come to grips with his feelings towards God yet. Nevertheless, deep inside he felt compelled to accept the offer, and soon he was helping them with secretarial and clerical work. It was also at this time that he began to rediscover his joy for writing—a gift he had had when he was younger, but had lost somewhere along the way, or perhaps merely forgotten about.

It was nearly six months later that Steve, being called upon to open a new branch in Boston, asked Edward whether he would be interested in coming along. But Edward did not quite feel ready, sensing that such a move would require a greater commitment on his part. In fact, if anything, he felt like leaving the mission house altogether, at least for a time. His heart was not yet right with God, and being among so many individuals who were devoting their lives to the Lord's service out of sincere and genuine love for Him and the cause of the Gospel made him feel quite uncomfortable. Yes, he was slowly beginning to

rediscover his love for Jesus, and the simple trusting faith he had known as a child, but he felt he still had a ways to go before he could devote his life as fully as those around him were, if ever he would.

And so he hesitated, and wondered what to do. There seemed no alternative but to return to the streets, which he was also not eager to do. He debated the options for a number of days, leaning first in one direction, and then in the other, while Steve patiently awaited his decision. It was during one of these mental tugs-of-war that he happened to thumb through the Bible Steve had given him as a present, and his eyes fell on the verse, "I will instruct thee, and teach thee in the way that thou shalt go." He felt reassurance from the promise. Then he came across another: "Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path."

"Oh, God ... Jesus. Please show me what to do," he prayed. "Guide my footsteps now, as Your Word promises You will."

That evening he was reading the newspaper. As he was turning the pages, a small ad caught his eye. It was on a corner of the page, and written in sparse sentences.

"Wanted: tenant to care for a countryside house. No rent. Clean, furnished, no need of repairs." The ad was followed by a telephone number.

Edward felt drawn to this ad. He had a clear impression that this was for him. He didn't know how or why, though logic told him that at least it could provide him a roof over his head. He decided to call the number. It was answered by a friendly voice, a certain Mr. Atcombe. He told him that the offer was still open. The house was in good condition and he desperately needed a caretaker within the week, as he would be moving abroad and didn't want to leave the house unattended. Edward thanked the

man kindly, and said he would call again if he chose to accept the offer.

After telling all of this to Steve—the verses, the impressions, and now the opening for a house in a tiny town called Leesburg—he expected his friend to plead again for him to stay on with the mission and come to Boston, or question whether this move was truly what God wanted him to do.

Instead, Steve was thoughtful for what seemed like a long time. Then he said, "You know, this may sound strange to you, but after praying about your hesitation to join me in Boston last night, I fell asleep, and dreamt that you were living in a small country cottage. I had no idea why you were there, but I could see you standing outside it. I could feel that you were happy there, and that it was where the Lord wanted you to be for some reason. And now you tell me of an offer to watch just such a house. This could very well be what God has in mind for you, Ed. He opens doors for a reason. All we have to do is walk through them."

Edward was glad and relieved that his friend was encouraging him in this same direction. But Steve knew it was for the better, and that it would somehow provide the opportunity Edward needed to grow in his faith. Steve hugged him. "I'm going to miss you," he said, "and you'll be in my prayers. I know that Jesus has something great in store for you."

Edward called Mr. Atcombe back about the house and, after a few more questions, was accepted as caretaker. Edward couldn't believe how simple it was. Within the week he had arrived in Leesburg—now his home for the past four years.



He arrived at the river just as the sun finished setting. The sky was a glorious red and blue. He loved it when the sky was like this. "Thank You,

Jesus, for this sky," he said, "and for the river and everything in nature."

He then moved to specifics. "Thank You Jesus for the friend that I made today." All through his life, he'd found it hard to meet people and make acquaintances. Moving to Leesburg hadn't made it any easier. People here reacted suspiciously to strangers, which made it even easier for him to keep to himself. Sometimes he'd felt a little guilty that he wasn't stepping out and meeting new people, but at the same time he was relieved that he didn't have to put forth the effort.

"Thank You, Jesus," he continued, "for giving me Your inspiration to write the story I finished this week, and for the good ideas You always give me." He continued walking by the river. He did this every night if he had the chance, walking along and communing with his Savior. Usually he would stay out for an hour at the most, but for some reason he stayed out longer this night. Everything around him just seemed more alive than before. He wasn't sure why at first, but as he walked he began to hear the still small voice inside of him, whispering that it was because of the physical manifestation of Jesus' love for him. Edward wasn't sure what this meant at first, but then realized that it probably had something to do with Mary. Meeting Mary Frank was a sign of Jesus' love for him, and Edward's heart was glad. Then he felt a tinge of anxiety when he remembered his meeting with her on Sunday.

What in Heaven's name will I say to her? he thought to himself. *I mean, what if she didn't like the story? What if she doesn't even show up on Sunday?* Already he was beginning to feel sorry that he'd spoken with her. Then he caught himself. "I'm sorry, Jesus. Help me to have more faith in You. You're in control of my life, so help me to trust You." He turned and started for home.



The following morning, Saturday, Mary slept in late. She woke still feeling special inside from the story she'd read the previous evening. She dressed, had breakfast and then cleaned the house, as was her habit on Saturdays. She went out to do the shopping, all the while thinking about the two university friends and their author.

While at the store she chanced on some of her friends, Lucy and Chelsea, standing next to the bread racks gossiping, as they were accustomed to. Mary was reluctant to enter the conversation, but they noticed her on the other side of the store and called to her.

"Oh hello, Mary!" She didn't really have a choice but to join them and be as brief as possible. She liked them well enough, but sometimes grew weary of their idle chatter, and longed to tell them sometimes about the big wide world and all that went on in it, and how the goings on in Leesburg, Ohio, were really quite insignificant in the overall picture. The latest news about the third grade teacher's personal life, or who was walking out on their boyfriend or girlfriend weren't that important. She didn't feel it was her place to tell them this, though she longed to sometimes. Besides, she was just one person, too. Who was she to say anything?

She walked over to them. She'd quite forgotten that her mother had heard about her chance meeting with Mr. Olmos the previous day, so she was totally unaware that they would also be privy to this piece of information—the whole town by now having heard about this momentous event.

They eyed her up and down as she stood in front of them, as though they expected something to be different about her.

"So...?" said Lucy, and waited.

"So...?" said Chelsea.

“So ... what?” said Mary.

“So what was he like?” said Lucy.

“What was who like?” said Mary, feeling confused for a split second.

“You know, the man! What’s his name? Edward Olmos. We heard that you were outside the school talking to him yesterday. What did he say?” They were obviously very intent on finding out what had happened, and Mary was suddenly put on the defensive.

“He was riding through the school grounds,” said Mary. “And he fell off his bicycle right in front of me.”

The girls giggled. “What a fool!” said Chelsea.

“No really, he’s a nice man,” Mary said. “He got up and said hello, so I said hello, and that’s really about all there is to it.”

“But he gave you something,” said Lucy triumphantly.

Mary’s heart sunk. Someone had obviously seen their whole meeting the day before, and now there was no way out of it.

“What did he give you? Come on, tell us!”

Mary had no choice. “He gave me a manuscript that he wrote. He’s a writer. A good writer.”

“A writer? Of what?” asked Chelsea, sounding incredulous.

“Stories. He writes stories and poems for magazines and sends them in. That’s why he comes in every weekend, to post the stories he’s written to different magazines across the country. He was on his way to post a story, but...”

“He gave it to you instead?” asked Chelsea.

“That’s right,” said Mary.

“Why?” they both wondered, mystified. They weren’t going to be easily put off. This simply had to be the juiciest news of their entire lives.

Mary sighed. “It’s a long story.”

“Longer than you’re willing to tell, obviously,” said

Lucy.

“Oh come on, he’s a very nice man. Really! I’m meeting him on Sunday.”

The girls looked horrified at this. “You agreed to meet him? The recluse? Where?”

“It’s okay, we’re only meeting at Charlie’s. He can’t do anything to me, and besides I don’t think he will. He’s not that type of person.”

They looked skeptical. “How do you know? He could be strange in the head or something,” said Lucy.

“Or on the run from the law,” added Chelsea. “Maybe that’s why he’s living here in this small town.” They exchanged conspiratorial looks.

Mary sighed again. “Oh please, I’m sure I’ll be alright. And I still think he’s a nice man.”

They looked at her. “Well, we’ll see.” Presently, they both had to leave.

Mary heaved a sigh of relief. *Thank God that’s over*, she thought to herself.

After buying the necessary household items and returning to the house, she looked around, surveying her handiwork—the clean kitchen and parlor. Everything was in its place and spic and span.

What do I do now? she wondered, and then thought of the brook, and how nice it would be at this time of day. She loved to walk there through the meadow grass, with the beautiful trees swaying. Springtime, the best time to be out and about.

Yes, she said to herself, *I’ll go down to the brook*. She secretly hoped that Edward would be there, but then remembered that he only went after sunset. *I could stay till after sunset*, she thought. Then she shook her head. *No, it would look funny for me to come walking back into town so late*. She dressed in her old tweeds¹ and put on her boots, taking her

¹**tweeds:** clothing made of tweed, a coarse and rugged woolen fabric, chiefly casual in appearance

late father's stout blackwood walking stick from the rack by the door on her way out. She had loved her father dearly and was greatly grieved when he had passed away when she was 16.

At the time of his passing, she had been one of many young girls in the town who were growing up and going to the small high school that serviced Leesburg and the surrounding towns. All of them dreamed of meeting handsome, enterprising young men who would marry them and take them to the big cities. Many of the girls had gone on to do just that, leaving Mary, Chelsea, Lucy and a few others as the only young ladies in town.

Mary had resolved to stay and care for her mother after her father's passing, and the townspeople had approved of this action, leaving Mary with the reputation of being a decent, hardworking, sensible young woman. She was making the best of her life and was generally happy. Still, she cried more often than not at night, out of loneliness.

She left the house and walked briskly towards the brook, waving to people she knew as she went. Most waved back cheerfully, but she noticed several who regarded her with a disapproving look as she passed. She tried to ignore it, thinking there wasn't much she could do anyway, short of making a public announcement at the town meeting to say that no, Edward and I are not engaged, etc., etc. She drew near to the field that the brook ran alongside of.

Chapter Five

Edward had risen with a light heart that same day, and he felt so much happier. He was expectant; everything around him seemed different, and everything in his house seemed brighter and more colorful. At first he didn't understand why he was feeling this way, but then he realized that it must be the feelings of joy, the mild rush that comes from meeting someone new that you feel you have a connection with. He rose and ate his breakfast quickly, still wondering why he was so rushed and hurried. *Must be because I'm trying to hurry up the day and get it over with so that it can be tomorrow.*

He thought about Mary, and what a wonderful person she seemed to him, and he could hardly wait for their meeting the next day.

After finishing breakfast and cleaning up he sat down, and wondered what he would do to pass the time. Then he remembered a story that he had been planning to write. Throughout the previous day he'd been feeling the concept for a new story forming in the back of his mind. He could feel it there, but couldn't quite grasp what it was; he just knew it was there. If he sat at his typewriter it would start to flow. This was the muse¹ that he always talked

¹**muse:** a guiding spirit, or source of inspiration (after the "Muses," characters in Greek mythology who were believed to inspire various forms of art and science)

about—his name for the spirit helper that brought the stories from Heaven. His muse. The divine inspiration. That's what he felt it was.

He finished his breakfast, but instead of going up to his study, he felt like going outside for a walk and some fresh air. This was an unusual impulse since he was usually eager to get to his work, and being a creature of habit, going out in the morning should have made him feel uncomfortable and out of place. But today he felt driven to go outside into the sunshine, to walk across the meadows and by the brook. He put on his coat and walking boots, grabbed his walking stick from the cupboard by the door, and ventured out into the outdoors. It was a beautiful sunny day and he basked in the sunshine, and breathed deeply of the crisp fresh air. *That's nice*, he thought.

He set out down the road that went by the wheat fields of the farmer who was his next door neighbor—though he was hardly a neighbor, since his house was a good two miles down the road. Edward thought he would walk in that direction and see what he could see.

He walked at a brisk pace, twirling his cane and whistling all the way. He felt a little silly, but for a change he didn't mind it. He walked along. The wheat was growing in its full golden color, and the blowing wind rippled across the surface of it, reminding him of rolling waves crashing on the beach. Tumbleweeds blew across his path. What a great day to be out!

After about a mile he came to the next field, intersected by a farm road. Two men were working a large harvester combine. They were working their way down the field towards the road where Edward was walking. When they reached the end of the field, they stopped the engines for a moment of rest, and watched with quiet reserve as Edward observed them.

He waved and called out to them, "Hello there!"

The two men looked at each other for a moment. "Hello and good day to you," one of them called back, waving his hat.

"Hello," called Edward again, feeling foolish. "We've never met, but I believe we're next door neighbors." He paused for a moment, then added, "My name's Edward. Edward Olmos." He was rather shocked at his own boldness, and so were the farmers.

Their looks changed to ones of friendliness, however, and one of them called back, "Hello and good morning to you too. I be Jake Smith, and this be my farmhand Joe, Joe Trollope." Joe waved.

Edward replied, "It looks like harvesting is a fairly easy job with this contraption. Is that true?"

The two farmers snorted, and Jake replied, "Well, it may look easy, but believe me, it's not. Why, by the time the sun is high in the sky we'll be sweating through our clothes. But it's all part of the job."

"Well," Edward replied, "perhaps on a day when you need another hand I could help you." It was a question and an offer.

Jake snorted again, then looked interested. "Well, perhaps one of these days I'll take you up on your offer. Thank you kindly. Now if you'll excuse us, we'll have to be at least up to the halfway mark on this field by midday." He pointed down the field. "So if you don't mind, we'll be getting back to it." With that and a nod from both of them, Joe revved up the engine again, and they continued on down the field with a wave to Edward behind them. Edward smiled and waved back, then set off again down the road.

He was feeling a little overwhelmed by all the human contact he'd had over the last two days. It was almost as much as he'd had in the whole previous four years. He wondered if it was more than

he could take, but he was sure that he could get back into the swing of it and be just like he was before. Hadn't he worked at a mission center? Although he had done mainly clerical work, hadn't he had been helping to care for all sorts of people and tending to their needs? He was just out of practice, that was all.

Another half mile and he would reach Jake Smith's farmhouse, but he was reluctant to walk that much further, so he turned around and headed back. This time he cut across a field to the left of him so he would reach the creek that flowed right past his house. He followed it home.

By the time he reached home it was 10:30, and he felt refreshed and invigorated. He went into the house and straight up to the attic where he worked, not bothering to take off his coat or his walking boots. He felt that leaving them on kept him in the mood of the great outdoors.

He sat at his desk for a few moments, collecting his thoughts, and then he started to type. He began slowly, typing the sentences as they formed in his head. Soon his hands began to fly across the keys as the words came. The words started to come faster, and he typed faster to keep up. Gradually a poem began to take shape. It was about God's wonderful creation, and its glorious Creator. It spoke of the trees and the fields, the birds and the winding roads, the wagons and the sun shining high in the sky. The golden sun, the sky a brilliant blue, the amber grain and the green-blue brook, with pebbles glowing at the bottom like gems. By the time he stopped typing and read back over what he had typed, he found that it wasn't a half-bad poem. After going over it a second time he found that it needed very little reworking, and after a third reading he concluded that it was not bad at all, and was actually rather brilliant. It was written with precise meter,

and there were few typing errors to be found! He could hardly believe it!

"Boy, am I inspired!" he thought out loud, and he laughed. He praised God for His inspiration, before stowing the sheaves of paper in a binder reserved for his completed works. Then he took another sheet of lined paper and this time, he started to write with his pen, such as he did when he felt a lengthier piece of work beginning to come.

Chapter Six

Mary's mother called from Cincinnati to see how she was doing. The phone rang and Mary, who was just returning to the house after her walk in the fields, dashed to pick it up, for a moment thinking that perhaps it was Edward calling. Just before picking it up she stopped and chided herself, "Of course it's not Edward." She picked up the phone expectantly anyway.

"Hello?"

"Mary dear, is that you?" It was Mother. Her heart fell.

"Yes, Mother, how are you?"

"I'm fine, dear. You really should have come with me. All of my friends were so disappointed that you didn't."

"I'm sure they were, Mother," Mary replied, though she doubted it. "Are you having a good time anyway?"

"Oh yes, it's been splendid. Yesterday we played doubles. It's been years since I've played tennis. You really would have enjoyed it."

"I'm sure I would have," said Mary, only half-seriously. "When will you be home?"

"Well, that's actually why I called, as it looks like I'll be staying an extra day. Susan Exbridge's older brother died several days ago, and the funeral will be tomorrow. Susan needs her friends with her at

this time, and I've promised I would go with her. Is that alright, dear?"

Susan Exbridge was one of Mother's friends who had outlived all of her relatives, including her husband. The only one left had been her older and invalid brother who had not been expected to live half as long as he had. The fact that Susan had devoted all of her time to his care had made her very much admired by Mary, though it had been years since she had visited her.

Mary said that it would be quite all right, and asked Mother to pass on her condolences to Susan. After a few more words, she hung up.

She stood there by the phone, contemplating what she should do with the remainder of her time. She remembered Edward's story, which she had now re-read twice and could almost quote her favorite portions of. She wanted some company, and the only one who came to mind that she could talk to was her friend Joanna. She would be home today and would probably appreciate a visit. Joanna was much older than she, and was already married. Her husband was a soldier stationed at an Army base overseas, and Joanna was waiting for the approval to be able to go and join him there on the base.

Mary put on her coat and set out down the road. Joanna lived three blocks north of Mary's house, past the shops and the little playground where children were playing happily. *What a beautiful day*, she thought.

Joanna was cleaning house and was glad to see Mary. Mary pitched in and helped to dust and sweep, then they both sat out on the front porch eating a light lunch that Joanna had prepared, sipping tea and talking about everything and anything.

After the lunch, Joanna turned serious. "I heard yesterday that you spoke with that reclusive fellow, Edward Olmos. Is that true?"

Mary sighed inwardly and thought, *Here we go again*. "Yes, it's true. I met him quite by accident. He was riding on that bicycle that we never seem to see him without, and he fell over. Right in front of where I was sitting."

Joanna laughed.

"He saw me there," Mary continued, "and we started to talk. We talked for some time. Did you know that he's a writer? And quite a good one too!"

"Really," Joanna replied. "A writer of what?"

"Oh, short stories, for magazines mostly. Like *The New Yorker* and such. He's really quite good."

"You already said that," said Joanna, smiling. "Do you think that I've read any of his things?"

"I'm not sure, since he always writes under pen names, and he didn't tell me what any of them were. So I really couldn't tell you. Maybe he'll tell me someday though."

Joanna looked surprised. "He'll tell you someday. What makes you think that?"

Mary replied casually, "Oh, I'm meeting him tomorrow at the restaurant."

"What are you going to do?" asked Joanna.

"Oh, just talk I suppose. He really is an interesting man, once you get past that shy nature of his. After talking to him, we decided to meet again. Simple as that."

Joanna was watching Mary try to be nonchalant about it all, and smiled to herself. "Well, don't forget to give me a full report when it's over."

"Right," said Mary, "though I can't make any promises that it will be worth your while."

Joanna didn't care. "Tell me anyway," she insisted.

Mary smiled. "Oh, all right!"

Mary stayed for awhile longer, talking and having a good time with her friend until it was time to say goodbye. Mary still had to shop for dinner.

“Don’t forget,” called Joanna after her, “I want a full report!” She waved.

Mary laughed and waved back.

She stopped by the post office to say hello to her boss, Mr. Jackson. He was the postmaster and worked there full-time. He was a friendly old man, who hid his true nature under a blustery, stern disposition. Mary had uncovered the façade early on in working with him, and he had a special fondness for her, treating her like a favorite niece. Mary liked him too.

When she came into the post office she found it empty. Behind the counter in the mail sorting room Jackson was sitting with his hands on his knees, breathing rapidly. She looked worried. “Why Mr. Jackson, what’s the matter? Are you all right?”

He tried to wave her away. “It’s nothing, really, just short of breath—that’s all.”

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Mary asked.

He nodded. “Yes, I’ll be fine. Just staying on my feet all day wears me out. I’m not as strong as I used to be.”

“Shall I help for awhile?” Mary asked, worried.

“No, don’t be silly,” and he stood up shakily. “See, I’m fine, good as new.” He swayed, still breathing quickly, and Mary rushed to support him.

“I really think I should stay and give you a hand. There’s that whole pile of new mail, and you’re the only one here to sort it all. I can’t let that happen, not with you looking like this.”

He tried to insist. “No, no! This is one of your days off. I can’t have you doing volunteer work just because I’m a rapidly weakening old codger! Go home, enjoy yourself. Live a little!” He tried to look stern and stand firm, but she could see that his eyes were smiling.

“That settles it then, I’m staying,” said Mary with a smile. “There’s nothing that you can say or do that will stop me. Now why don’t you get started in the back, while I tidy up this front desk a little, and I

shall come join you presently.”

He looked relieved. “Well, all right then, but only because you insist!” Then he smiled and limped into the back room. In a moment she could hear him shuffling letters and packages into the different mail bins, and half humming, half singing to himself.

Mary stood up front, occasionally talking to him about this and that from where she stood. There was one question she was most anxious to ask, though it took her awhile before she had the courage to mention it.

“Tell me, Mr. Jackson. Do you often receive packages for Mr. Olmos?”

The shuffling in the back ceased.

“Mr. Olmos?” he said, sounding surprised. “Hmm, let’s see. Oh, I guess about once every four or five weeks we get a big heavy package for him. But he sends a lot more than he receives, that’s for sure. Why do you ask?”

He obviously hasn’t heard the stories flying around town, Mary thought to herself. “Oh, just a question,” she replied.

“I for one,” went on Mr. Jackson “would like to know what’s in those packages. Sometimes they’re rather heavy. Perhaps he’s a subscriber to some magazine or book club.”

“Oh no,” answered Mary quickly, “they’re stories that he writes and sends...” She caught herself.

“They’re what?” said Mr. Jackson.

“Oh nothing,” replied Mary, “you’re right, perhaps they’re magazines that he subscribes too.”

Mr. Jackson’s curiosity was piqued. “Stories, you say. What do you mean, stories? Stories of what?”

Mary felt she had said enough already, but it was too late. “Well, what happened was, I met him yesterday quite by accident. And in the course of our conversation he mentioned that he was a writer for different magazines. Those big packages that

come back are his manuscripts that are rejected.”

“Is that right?” said Mr. Jackson, sounding pleased. “A story teller, a writer. Quite amazing, if I must say so myself.” Mary could hear the shuffling of the mail resume. She was glad that he wasn’t displeased that she had been talking to the stranger, for he had always been rather protective of her since her father died.

After awhile the silence was broken by Mr. Jackson. “I wanted to be a writer once. In my younger days I dabbled in a little writing, but could never really find anyone to publish me. Even if I had, I probably wouldn’t have let them publish it. Always far too afraid of failure.” There was a silence. She waited for him to go on, but he didn’t. There was just the sound of shuffling.

It wasn’t long before she joined Mr. Jackson in the back room to help him with sorting the mail. By 4:30 most of it was done, and by 5:00 they were ready to close up for the weekend. “Thank you very much for your help today, I’m much obliged. I can arrange for you to be paid for this overtime work.”

She shook her head, “Don’t be silly! I had nothing better to do, really, and I’m glad that I could be a help. Mother’s gone to Cincinnati, you know, and won’t be back till Tuesday. Things are quiet around the house and I needed something to keep me busy. So, thank you!”

“Well, run along then,” he said. “And don’t let me catch you doing anymore work till Monday!” He put on his mock stern look and wagged his finger at her.

She smiled and kissed him on the cheek, and was about to take her leave when in rushed little Zach. He was the 12-year-old son of the general store owner, and he was puffing and panting from running.

“Mary, quick!” he panted between breaths. “Come quickly!”

“Now slow down, son,” said Jackson. “Slow down and tells us what’s the matter.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” said Zach, “but there’s been an accident! My father told me to find Mary quickly.”

Mary looked worried. “What? Who? What’s going on?”

Zach panted, “It’s your mother! There was a telephone call from Cincinnati. She’s been hurt somehow! You need to come quick!”

Mary’s heart froze. “What’s happened?”

“Come quickly!” said Zach. He raced out the door.

Mary ran after him.

“But where are we going?” Mary asked, feeling frantic.

“To my father’s store,” said Zach, still running. “Emergency services called the store ‘cause they didn’t know your phone number.”

She ran with him, heart racing. *Please help her to be all right*, she thought, with tears clouding her eyes.

When they reached the store, Zach’s father, Mr. Taggart, was pacing up and down. He looked relieved to see her.

“Mary, thank God you’re here. I got a phone call about twenty minutes ago from the Cincinnati General Hospital. We’ve been looking for you everywhere!”

“My mother!” said Mary. “What’s happened to her?”

“She collapsed earlier today. The doctors say it was a stroke. You’re to go at once; the doctors want a relative to come. Hurry, we can drive to your house to get some things.” With that he motioned for her to follow him through a back exit door to where his car was parked.

They raced to her house, and he waited outside for her as she grabbed some things and stuffed them into an overnight bag. She rushed around in confusion, and finally had to stop and collect herself and her thoughts before she lost it completely and

broke down. "Jesus, help me!" she prayed.

She ran upstairs to her mother's room and grabbed some of her things, then taking her coat and hat, she rushed back outside to the waiting car.

"Quickly," said Mr. Taggert as she was getting in. "If we hurry we can make the 5:30 train, otherwise there won't be another till 9:30." He floored the accelerator. They could hear the train whistling in the distance. It was taking on passengers now! Mary was frantic inside.

They pulled up to the station, and she ran through the gate. "You go on and find a seat," called Mr. Taggert. "I'll take care of the ticket."

She rushed up to the train platform and was about to board. "Ah, where's your ticket, missy?" called the conductor.

"Oh," she replied, "Mr. Taggert is buying it for me."

"Is he then?" said the conductor with a skeptical look. Just then Taggert came running onto the platform.

"Yes, here!" he called, waving the ticket in the air. He looked every bit as frantic as Mary was feeling.

"On to Cincinnati, are we?" said the conductor, looking at her ticket and not quite grasping the urgency that was displayed on both their faces.

"Yes indeed," they both said, pushing him aside and boarding. Mr. Taggert saw her to her seat and then turned to leave. "Well, I do hope that your mother is all right."

The train whistled, and Taggert rushed to get off before she could reply.

As the train pulled out of the station, the full realization of what was happening sunk into Mary, and she burst into tears.

Chapter Seven

Edward was typing furiously. Now that the basic outline had been drafted onto his handwritten sheets, the story was coming sharp and fast, and was developing into more of a mini novel than a short story.—Longer than a short story; shorter than a novel. He didn't stop to make corrections, didn't even stop to think; it just flowed. He typed, and typed, and typed. He finished the next chapter and kept on typing. Finally, the words stared to slow, then stop.

"The End," he typed. He was done. Just like that. Weeks of work in a single day. Forty-eight pages of clean text. He glanced through it quickly, his heart racing.

"Amazing," he said out loud. Then he threw back his head and laughed. "Thank You!" he exclaimed, looking Heavenward. It was late afternoon and the sun was preparing to show its artwork through the shutters of his attic window. His favorite time of the day. The beam shone on his face, and he closed his eyes and turned his face straight into it, swimming in the warmth. "God, it's good to be alive!"

He made sure all the pages were in order and slid them into a new binder, then typed out a cover letter, to the editor-in-chief of one of the magazines that he regularly contributed to. He then slid all of

it into a big manila envelope and sealed and addressed it. He laid it down on his table and felt the deep satisfaction of accomplishment roll over him. He stood and stretched slowly. Then he remembered that he hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. Suddenly he was starving. He had an urge to go out again as well, but where to? He had no idea.

He made a simple meal, then ate it ravenously, and while eating he remembered that the day was over. Yes! That meant that tomorrow he would see Mary again! He was so excited that he could hardly contain himself. For the first time in a long time he felt totally happy. Anticipation was definitely half the enjoyment!

"Now steady on," he chided himself. "You really should settle down a little bit! Let's not get carried away here!"

He cleaned up and then went out for his habitual evening walk.



It was a three-hour trip to Cincinnati, and by the time the train pulled into the station Mary was almost beside herself with impatience. The train had halted and as she was gathering her bags, something reminded her of Edward, and the meeting that was planned for the following day. She gasped.

Oh no! she thought. *What will he think? If only I had had the time to leave a note with Mr. Taggart for him or something. I couldn't possibly call and ask him to pass on a message to Edward. What would he think? For that matter, what would Edward think?* She kicked herself repeatedly for forgetting. Now her heart was doubly heavy. It was a very distraught, sad girl who disembarked from the train at Cincinnati Central Station that night. She held onto her bags tightly, feeling very lost on the huge station platform.

The platform guard had been notified that Mary was coming, and that she would need to be escorted to a taxi and directed to the hospital immediately. The guard was standing at the bottom of the carriage steps when Mary stepped down. *What a pretty girl. And what a sad face!* "Are you Mary Frank?" he asked.

She looked up. "Yes" she replied feebly.

"Miss Frank, begging your pardon, Ma'am," he tipped his hat, "but I was told to escort you through the station and to get you into a taxi to the hospital right away. Please come this way."

After a long walk through the main terminal they arrived at the taxi stand. He opened the door for her, then spoke to the driver: "Cincinnati General."

The driver nodded and pulled out of the taxi stand.

Downtown Cincinnati was abuzz with activity this Saturday night. They were halted along their route several times because of all of the traffic. They were in the center of town, and all around her Mary could see people walking in groups along the sidewalks, people going into and coming out of nightclubs and restaurants, laughing and smiling, having good times. The city was bright with flashing lights and huge illuminated signs. Cars honked and there was hubbub all around her, while she sat quietly in the back of the cab. She had a feeling of dread at what she was to find at the hospital, and started to cry again. The taxi driver saw her in the rearview mirror, crying softly. "Ma'am, are you all right?"

She didn't answer.

He shrugged, the light turned green, and he kept driving. *A loved one sick, I suppose,* he thought to himself.

The hospital was in the center of town and usually took ten minutes to reach from the station, but with all the traffic it took almost half an hour. By the

time she finally arrived, Mary was calm, and no longer rushed. She was prepared to accept whatever the doctors told her, but she prayed silently for her mother's recovery.

The front lobby was busy with people coming and going. She walked up to the reception desk.

"May I help you, Ma'am?" asked the receptionist.

"Yes," replied Mary, handing her the note.

The receptionist read it quickly. "Oh, yes! Dr. Ogden is expecting you. One moment." She called for an orderly to take Mary to intensive care.

Through the polished halls they went, and Mary squinted under the bright lights. They took the elevator up to the eighth floor and through into the quiet intensive care ward.

Young Dr. Ogden was there reading a chart on a clipboard, and as he looked up to see her approaching, he ticked off something and hung the clipboard back up on the end of the bed. Then he walked up to her.

"Miss Frank, I presume?"

She nodded, a tear rolling down her cheek.

"I'm very sorry, but your mother has suffered a stroke yesterday while at a tennis club. She's in a coma. I'm very sorry."

Mary was crying. "Can I see her? Where is she?"

The doctor led Mary down the hall to small room. A nurse was sitting by the bed, and he nodded to her and she got up and left. He turned to Mary. "You must be very quiet."

"May I stay with her?" asked Mary.

"Yes," the doctor replied. "We are arranging for a cot to be wheeled in, so you can stay here tonight with your mother, if you want. The night duty nurses will be in and out throughout the night, and should you need anything, just ask one of them." He turned to leave, and stopped to look at the clipboard at the end of her bed. With a grim shake of his head, he walked out of the room.

Mary walked over to the bed. Her mother was lying very still, with a tranquil look on her face. Mary was sure she would start crying again, but something about the look on her mother's face stopped her. She stroked her mother's hand, and then pulled a chair up to her bedside and sat there, holding her mother's hand. She closed her eyes and prayed.

Eventually, exhausted by her long journey and all the tension, she fell asleep. An hour later she woke, and there was a nurse at the bedside, checking the equipment. She gave a small smile to Mary and then left without a word.

Mary was getting hungry, but was too anxious to eat, and she didn't want to leave her mother's side. Finally she got up to go to the bathroom. At the entrance to the intensive care ward, the nurse there asked Mary if she needed anything. By that time it was 10:30 and there had not been any change in her mother's condition. Mary resumed her vigil by her bedside and sat there until she dozed off again.

At midnight she was woken by a nurse's hand on her shoulder. "You should lie down, Miss Frank." Mary got up and was led to the small cot by her mother's side, and lay down. Almost at once she fell asleep again.



The next morning she woke early, and couldn't remember getting into the bed that she was lying in. She had wanted to stay up with her mother and she chided herself for falling asleep. The night duty nurses had all signed off, and some new ones were walking the halls, whispering with doctors and seeing to the patients. Doctor Ogden came in presently to check on her mother.

"Miss Frank," he said, "you should know that your mother showed signs of stirring in the night, which is a good sign. Although she's still technically in a coma, usually if there are some signs of activity by

the patient, then chances are good that they will come out of it. Even then, that is only the beginning of the road to recovery, as they still often have to contend with the speech impediments or even partial paralysis brought on by their condition. So I'm not making any promises, and you should not get your hopes up. I'm just telling you the facts. Right now your mother has a 50 percent chance of coming out of the coma, but the other 50 percent says that she'll stay in the coma and her condition will worsen. Last night there was about a ten percent chance that she would recover, so let's cross our fingers on this one. We're doing all we can."

She thanked him, then he left.

Mary walked over and kissed her mother's cheek. She was feeling better, and with new hope in her heart that her mother might recover, she felt happier. She realized that she hadn't eaten anything since lunch the day before, and so she set out to find something to eat.

The nurse directed her to the cafeteria on the ground floor. While she ate her breakfast she recalled the previous day's events, the rushing and worrying. When she was done she hurried back up to her mother, but there was no change in her condition. Stable, that was all they said.

Mary was already losing the hope that she'd had when she'd gone downstairs. She resumed her seat by the bed, and stayed there for the rest of the morning, praying for her mother's well being.

Chapter Eight

Edward awoke that Sunday morning feeling the same excitement and anticipation as he had the morning before. Everything around him was brighter and richer in color. He hummed to himself while shaving, and carefully groomed himself in preparation for church, and his lunch meeting soon afterwards. He was a little anxious and spent more time than usual in picking out what he was going to wear. He didn't want to be showy, but he didn't want to look like his usual plain old self. He studied himself in the mirror—first one side of his face, then the other. He smiled. He frowned. Then he smirked at himself for being so vain. It wasn't long afterwards that he unhooked his bicycle and headed into town.

In his backpack was his new story, in its packaging. He thought he would mail it while in town. It went against his usual routine, he had to admit, but then again, nothing had really been routine the last few days.

He reflected on the *déjà vu* of the situation. Only a few days before he was riding into town feeling excited about the story he carried on his back, although this time was different in that he would stay in town for a lot longer than usual, and also see Mary. Hopefully, he would not fall off his bicycle this time.

As soon as the service had ended, Edward quickly made his way to his bike, and then on to Charlie's. He came to the restaurant with its outside tables on a bricked terrace. There was a trellis on one side with vines intertwined on it, and the other side overlooked the main road that ran through town. It was an ideal spot to have a pleasant midday lunch. Many people came there during the day.

It was 11:30, and not quite lunch time yet, so the place was almost deserted, but it wouldn't be long before it was full with the Sunday crowd. There were six tables inside and about eight outside. On a usual Sunday they were all full. He sat down in one of the corners facing the street. A waiter came running out, but Edward told him he would order later—he was meeting someone—and the waiter ran back inside. He sat there feeling a little awkward in this public place. He scribbled in the notebook he always carried, to relieve the tension.

By 12:00 the first of the lunch crowd began to trickle in. He scanned each face expectantly, but it was never her. By 12:20 the place was reaching capacity, with families, friends and couples, all laughing and talking, enjoying their Sunday afternoon. Edward felt increasingly awkward sitting there alone, and twice a waiter came up to find out if he was being served. He dismissed them each time, telling them he was still waiting for someone.

Where was she? He looked out at the road and watched the few cars going by, and studied everyone walking up and down the street, looking for her, but to no avail. Finally, it was 1:00 and the place was full. A family arrived at the entrance, a man and his wife and two children. There was nowhere to place them. A waiter walked up to Edward and coughed nervously.

"Will you be ordering then, sir?" he asked.

Edward looked up. He was about to order, but was reluctant to in case she did manage to show up. "No, I think I'll keep waiting. Thanks!"

The waiter was new on the job, and he looked extremely agitated. "Do you think perhaps you could make way then?" and he indicated towards the entrance where the family was waiting.

Edward saw them, and sighed disappointedly. "Of course," he said finally, and got up. He took his bag and walked out into the street. His heart felt like lead.

Where could she be? "Oh well, I suppose that's what I get for getting my hopes up," he said aloud. He slung his bag over his shoulder and walked down the street.

His mind was having a tug-of-war. *I knew she wouldn't show up! She was just being polite when she said she wanted to see me again!* The other side of his mind defended her. *No, she's just been delayed somehow! Maybe she just forgot, or had something very important she had to attend to. You should give her the benefit of the doubt!* The negative side slung back. *Forget it! She had no intention of showing up. You've been stood up!* He struggled to put all of it out of his head, but his heart was still heavy.

I've been so silly! he chided himself. *I knew I shouldn't have gotten my hopes up so high, and this is what I get for running off on my emotions.* He wanted to knock his head against the lamp post that he was passing by, but changed his mind when he saw the people walking all around him. He laughed at the thought. He went and unhooked his bicycle and headed for home.

Just on the outskirts of town he remembered the story he was supposed to mail, and turned around and headed back to the post office. As he was drawing near to it, he could see the big red "Closed" sign that hung in the front window. He heart

sank even further. *Why is the post office closed?* he wondered. Then he realized, *Of course. It's Sunday! Goodness, this is really not my day, is it?* he said to himself. He only went to the post office on Fridays anyway, how should he know what their hours were? He went up to the door to check the business hours sign that was hanging there.

Make a note of that, he thought. *The post office is not open on Sundays. Not here, and probably not anywhere else in the world either.* He laughed at his foolishness for forgetting.

Just as he was wheeling around to ride home, he saw Mr. Jackson hurrying down the road towards him. What would he be doing? He came up to the door and fumbled in his pocket for a key and opened it. He looked up at Edward standing there, and then he motioned at the "Closed" sign.

"Oh. Uh, the post office is closed today, Mr. Olmos."

"Uh, yes ... I see that," he said, again feeling somewhat awkward, and blurting out the next thought to come to his mind. "So what brings you here?"

Mr. Jackson smiled sheepishly. "I've misplaced my wallet, and I think I left it here. I hope it is, 'cause if it isn't, I'm sunk! My old age must be catching up with my memory," he chuckled.

Edward nodded, but said nothing.

"Did you have something to send?" asked Jackson.

"Yes, actually," Edward answered. "I had a package that I wanted to send."

Jackson looked a little surprised. "But it's not Friday. You always send your packages on Friday." Then he looked embarrassed at his presumption. Edward smiled.

"Yes, you're right. Funny isn't it, but it looks like a break in the routine."

"Is it another one of your stories?" asked Jackson. He couldn't help himself, he was a very curious man.

"Why yes," said Edward. It was his turn to be surprised. "How did you know they were stories?"

Jackson was about to make up a story about a lucky guess, but then decided not to. "Mary ... I mean, Miss Frank told me," he said.

"Miss Frank," repeated Edward. Then a thought came to him. "You haven't seen Miss Frank today, have you?"

"No, not since yesterday. She left last night for Cincinnati," said Jackson.

"Cincinnati?" Edward repeated with a puzzled expression on his face. "I thought she wasn't going to Cincinnati."

"Oh no, she wasn't," answered Jackson, shaking his head. "She rushed there just last night. I'm afraid her mother took ill. A stroke or something like that, and she went to be with her at the hospital."

Edward expressed his concern, but inside he felt a little better. Perhaps she had intended to meet him after all, but then this had happened.

"Thank you for telling me," he said to Jackson.

Jackson shrugged. "No problem." Then he turned and went into the post office.

Edward was wheeling his bicycle away when a thought occurred to him. He turned and walked back to the post office. He went inside. Mr. Jackson was poking through the drawers and checking the cupboards, looking for his wallet. He looked up as Edward walked in, then resumed his searching.

"Sorry to bother you again, but do you suppose you could tell me where Miss Frank and her mother are staying in Cincinnati? I thought I might send my best wishes for a speedy recovery."

Mr. Jackson ceased his searching and thought for a moment. "She's at the Cincinnati General

Hospital," he said. "Here, I'll find the address." He turned and pulled a Cincinnati phone book down from one of the shelves, scanning the pages while Edward waited. "Here it is, Cincinnati General." He wrote down the address and phone number on a card, then handed it to him.

"She's a wonderful girl," he added, with a twinkle in his eye. Edward nodded, not sure what to say. Jackson resumed his search as if nothing had happened, and Edward left feeling slightly bemused. This Jackson fellow was a good-natured chap!

He rode down to the general store to use the telephone that stood outside it. He thought he would call Mary. Edward stuck his ten cents in the slot and began to dial operator assistance, when the absurdity of the whole situation struck him, and he hung up.

What am I doing? he thought to himself. *I hardly know this girl and yet here I am about to call her up and chat with her. For crying out loud! But ... what am I to do otherwise?* He thought about it for a moment.

He parked his bicycle on the curb, stuck his hands in his pockets, and began to wander aimlessly around the neighborhood. He felt very forlorn, and confused. He missed Mary, and yet he hardly knew her. He thought of her mother, who was now lying in a hospital in God knows what kind of condition, and he longed to reach out and comfort Mary, even make her mother all right again.

The feeling of helplessness was overwhelming. He walked around thinking these thoughts for several hours, looking and feeling very dejected. It caused no small stir amongst the people in the town. What with the stranger walking around looking like a very sad mule and all! And Mary's mother lying in a coma! These events were almost more than this little town could take in one day.

Mr. Jackson stopped to chat with some of the ladies sitting on their porch on his way home. They were playing bridge as was their habit, and he mentioned in the course of their gossip that Mr. Edward Olmos and Miss Mary Frank were now acquaintances, which caused yet another stir. They talked of nothing else after Mr. Jackson left.

In the course of his aimless wanderings, Edward found himself very near to the schoolyard where he had met Mary a few days earlier. He walked across the playground to the stairs leading up to the entrance, where she had been sitting that fine day. He wished that she were sitting there now. He would walk over and sit down beside her on the step and comfort her. He shook his head ruefully, and turned and walked back to his bicycle.

By then night was fast approaching. He peddled quickly so that he could be home as soon as possible. By the time he reached home the sun had almost set and he walked slowly up the little stairs to his loft. He knelt in front of the latticed window, facing the setting sun's rays, closed his eyes and started to pray.

He prayed for Mary's mother, for Mary, and for himself. He found the solace he needed from his prayers. He stayed in that position until the sunlight had completely vanished, and he was shrouded in darkness. Only then did he open his eyes. He felt at peace. He knew in his heart that Mary's mother would be all right, and that Mary would be okay too. His heart was glad.

After dinner he went to his room and lay down on the bed in his clothes. He reflected on his solitary existence, and how it had been rippled by meeting all of these new people in the last few days. After four years of routine, of solitude, he began to feel the desire to reach out to others again with more than just his writings. With these thoughts he fell asleep.



Mary had been at her mother's bedside when she stirred again. The nurse came in and listened to the sound. Mother was mumbling something but didn't open her eyes. The nurse rushed off and then rushed back with a doctor, who pulled out his stethoscope and checked her heartbeat and other vital signs. He shook his head and looked grim, then walked out of the room without a word.



The following day Edward woke feeling very disoriented. He had slept in his clothes and his shoes! He laughed at his silliness and then got off of his bed. He went downstairs and started to make his breakfast. He was still thinking about Mary and her mother. He hoped that they were both all right. He also wondered what he should do. Should he call her? Visit her? He shook his head at the thought. He didn't know her well enough for either.

"Dear Lord, what shall I do? Please show me."

After eating he went to clean himself up. While shaving, an idea struck him. Of course! That's what I can do! He went to his backpack and pulled out the package that he had been unable to mail the day before. He ripped open the envelope and pulled the story out, then stuck it in a new envelope from the cupboard. He looked through his pants pockets to find the slip of paper that had the hospital address on it, then wrote that on the new envelope. At least he could send his new story to her, and perhaps it would cheer her up a little bit. He really couldn't think of anything better he could do under the circumstances, and the story had lifted his spirit. Perhaps it would lift hers too. After all, it was a story about the triumph of the human spirit, pulling through in spite of the odds.

He didn't know how it would reach her specifically. All he had was the hospital address, not a room number. "I'll call the hospital," he thought. "Surely

they'll give out the room number."

He typed a quick note to Mary, put it into the envelope with the story, and raced out to his bicycle.



Jackson got quite a shock when none other than the mysterious Mr. Edward Olmos was the first customer of the day. He rushed in almost immediately after Jackson had opened the place up, and dropped the package on the counter with a loud thwack!

"Morning to you," said Edward with a quick nod. He was breathing hard from having rushed over this early in the morning.

"Morning to you too. How can I help you today? I see you've got another package to send—or is it the same one?"

"The same one, but to a different address," replied Edward. "Actually, there's a slight problem. You see, I'm afraid I don't have the complete address."

"And what address would that be?" Asked Jackson.

"Oh, it's this one," replied Edward, pulling the address out of his pocket and handing it to him. "The one you gave me—for the Cincinnati General Hospital. Only, I guess we don't know the room number, do we?"

Mr. Jackson took the slip and scanned it in disbelief. "You mean for Mrs. Elizabeth Frank?"

"Well," Edward said, "for Miss Mary Frank, actually. And if it could reach her as speedily as possible."

Jackson scratched above his left ear like he always did when he was puzzled about something. He was practically bald on that part of his head. "Well, you could always phone the hospital and get the room number. And as for the package, it could be sent special delivery with this morning's express train. It'll cost you."

"That's really quite all right," replied Edward. "I'll

walk down to the store and use the phone there. Won't be long." He turned to leave.

"Wait just a second," called Jackson. "You can use the phone here. I've got one in the back room."

Edward was starting to like this fellow. "Why, thank you!"

"Not at all," replied Jackson with a little smile. Then he lifted the countertop on the side and allowed Edward through to the back. Edward pulled the slip of paper out of his pocket again and dialed the number.

After what seemed like an eternity of ringing, there was a click. "Cincinnati General Hospital," said the crisp voice on the other end.

Edward was out of practice on the telephone. "Um, yes. This is the hospital, right?"

Fortunately, this particular receptionist was a patient one. "Yes it is. How may I help you, sir?"

"Um. Right. Yes, I'm trying to locate a patient who's staying there. One Miss Mary Frank." He kicked himself, "I mean, Mrs. Elizabeth Frank. I would like to know the number of the room she's staying in."

"One moment please." There was silence.

After what seemed like another eternity, there was another click. "Who is it that is calling please?"

Oh no, thought Edward at the unexpected question. "Um, My name's Edward. Edward Olmos. I'm a friend of Miss Mary Frank—that's Mrs. Elizabeth Frank's daughter. She's staying there I believe, with her mother in hospital. I'm just a friend."

"Very well," replied the voice. "Mrs. Frank is currently in IC, that's intensive care, and the room number is 180D."

He wrote it down. "Thank you very much!"

He rushed back into the front, waving it excitedly. "Got it!"

Jackson was sweeping the floor. He looked pleased.

Edward addressed the package while Mr. Jackson went to use the phone. He called the general store and asked Mr. Taggart if little Zach Taggart could run down and deliver an express package to the mailroom at the train station. Within minutes little Zach was huffing and puffing in the customer area of the post office, while Jackson stuck the necessary stamps on the package. Zach cast a few sideways glances at the stranger while listening to Mr. Jackson's instructions.

Edward was standing to one side looking a little bit impatient. He didn't want the package to miss the morning train. Zach nodded and went racing out again. They both silently watched him through the front window, until he turned a corner and was out of sight.

Finally Jackson said, "That'll get to Cincinnati Central Post Office by about midday. It should leave for the hospital around 3:00, and could be in her hands by about 4:00."

"Thank you," said Edward, as he fumbled in his wallet for the price of the postage. "I sure appreciate your help with all this."

Jackson shook his hand; there was that little twinkle in his eye again. "Anytime, my friend. Anytime."

"Well, goodbye then." Edward turned and walked out the door.

Chapter Nine

There was little change in Mrs. Frank's condition and Mary was starting to lose all hope. She was now praying for a miracle since it seemed that that was what it would take to bring her mother back.

She paced, she prayed, she sighed with boredom. The hours ticked on.

At around 3:30 an orderly came in carrying a package that looked familiar. She handed it to Mary, and then handed her a clipboard and pen. "Miss Mary Frank?" he asked.

She nodded.

"If you could just sign this for the postman downstairs."

"What is this? Who's it from?" she asked.

The orderly shrugged. "No idea. It came special delivery, about ten minutes ago."

Mary took the package curiously. It was fairly weighty. She signed and the orderly left.

Mary turned it over twice, trying to determine what it was and who had sent it. It was from Leesburg, and she vaguely remembered seeing something like it before. She went and sat on the bed, still feeling puzzled. Mother couldn't have sent for anything, especially not a will, she thought. The handwritten address looked familiar too.

Then it dawned on her. "Of course!" she said aloud, and began to tear it open. Then, remembering her mother, she started to open it slower and more quietly. "It must be the story that Edward gave me on Friday, but I wonder who could have mailed it? Didn't I leave it under my pillow?"

She slid the sheaf of paper out of the envelope. It definitely wasn't the same story that she'd read before. It had a different title. A letter fell out too. It read:

Dear Miss Frank,

Good day to you. I was very sorry to hear of your mother's illness. She is in my prayers, as are you and your well-being.

The reason why I'm writing is this: Yesterday I wrote a new story and managed to have it completed by the evening. Can you imagine? I was on my way to post it when I heard of your mother's illness, and wanted to send my regards. Then I thought that this new story might help you pass the time. Forgive me if this appears presumptuous, and if it does, then please accept my apologies. It would please me very much, though, if it did turn out to please you in some way.

Please do not worry about our canceled lunch meeting either. Under the circumstances it is totally understandable. Perhaps some other time?

*Yours truly,
Edward*

She folded the letter with a sigh of relief and then put it into her purse. She then took the manuscript, which looked similar to the first one he had given her, but thicker, and began to read it.

It was in every way as brilliant and heartwarming as the last one. All else was forgotten as she read it, except when she glanced up at her mother every so often. By the time she was finished it was 6:00. She laid it down, and felt a peace within her, a feeling that things would all turn out all right. Something in the words of the story did this to her. She prayed a prayer of thankfulness, then prayed for her mother and then for Edward. A nurse came in to check on her mother, then left.

She sat and took Mother's hand. "Mother," she said, "I don't know if you can hear me. Perhaps you can. But I would like to tell you how very much I love you. I pray that you get better soon." She started to cry again. She picked up the story, then continued. "Mr. Olmos, Edward, the one you were asking me about the other day ... he sent me another story this afternoon. I really didn't tell you much the other day. I did meet him, and talked with him for some time. He's a writer, and that day he gave me one of the stories that he had written. It was very good! Just now, though, he sent me another one that is very nice."

She looked up at her mother for any sign of consciousness; when there was none, she kissed her hand. "Oh Mother, I love you so much. Please stay with me."

She was crying, with her head in her hands. She didn't notice her mother's eyes flicker open for a second and then shut again. Then they opened again and she looked at her daughter, puzzled and a little amused.

"I knew you weren't telling me everything about that Edward fellow," she said, smiling weakly.

Mary looked up, shocked. "Mother!" she fairly shouted, and threw her arms around her mother's neck.

"There, there, be gentle now," said her mother. "You'll crush me." She laughed.

"You're all right mother! I can't believe it!" She started to cry again.

"Oh don't be silly! And stop that crying, of course I'm alright!" answered Mother. She looked very happy.

Mary ran to the door. "Call the doctor," she shouted to the nurse who was sitting by the door. The nurse went rushing down the hall and returned a minute later with Doctor Ogden. He came in looking genuinely shocked. Without a word he walked up to Mother and started to check all her vital signs. He could not believe that she was conscious—much less that she was as healthy and normal as she appeared to be. "How are you feeling?" he finally asked.

"I'm a little bit dizzy, I'm afraid. But other than that I feel fine—and starving!" she laughed.

The doctor, still unconvinced, shone a penlight into her eyes and checked her pulse once more.

"Oh, come now," said Mother. "I told you, I feel quite well. Now run along and get me something to eat."

The doctor was a young fellow, and not used to being ordered around by his patients, but he obeyed her and left, muttering and shaking his head. The nurse helped Mother to sit up in bed and rearranged her pillows and bedcovers, then left as well with a smile.

A few minutes later Doctor Ogden returned with an older doctor. He was a graying older man with a kindly face. Doctor Ogden was explaining her case to him in an urgent whisper, but the older doctor didn't seem to be paying attention to what he was saying. He was instead looking intently at Mother.

When Doctor Ogden saw her sitting up, he was alarmed. "No, no, lay down," he ordered. "You're still

in shock. You had a stroke you know."

The older doctor shook his head at the young doctor's rudeness. He whispered something to the young doctor, who left.

"Please forgive my young associate's rudeness," he said, smiling good-naturedly. "I'm still trying to teach him manners. Tell me, how are you feeling?"

"I remember being on the tennis court at the Ladies Club," said Mother. "We were playing doubles and it was my turn to serve, and that's the last thing I remember. I feel a little hazy still, but I'm sure I'm all right."

The old doctor filled in the details. "You collapsed, actually. A stroke." Mother looked at him wide-eyed. "Actually," he continued, "I just happened to be there when it happened. I was dropping off my sister—she is a member of the club—when I heard the commotion. I summoned an ambulance and had you taken here, where I work. We have the best intensive care facility in the state. You have been out like a light for the last three days, and to be honest, we weren't exactly sure you were going to pull through—our bodies are not quite as young as they used to be, you know." He had a twinkle in his eye. "But I must say, you've certainly surprised us all today with this remarkable recovery."

"You are very kind, Doctor...?"

"Andrews," he said, smiling again. "Doctor Andrews. I would have overseen your case personally, but unfortunately I was scheduled to speak at one of those damn boring doctor's conventions in Chicago. Oh, I'm sorry! Please excuse my language. It was a slip of the tongue."

Both Mary and her mother were instantly charmed by this friendly old doctor. "Not to worry about the language," said Mother. "You're a very kind man, and I believe I owe you a debt of gratitude for your help." She turned to Mary, "What date is it

today?"

"It's Monday, the 27th."

Mother looked shocked. "What about the funeral?"

"I suppose you missed it," said Mary.

"Oh dear. I so wanted to be there to console Susan. She's all alone now, you know."

"She phoned here yesterday," said Mary. "She wanted to know if you were getting better. She loves you very much, Mother, and expressed how sad the world would be if she were to lose two loved ones in the same week."

"Such a dear friend," said Mother sadly. Then after a pause, added, "Now, where's that food I asked for?"

Doctor Andrews chuckled. "It should be here any moment now, though I'm afraid it won't be the most palatable of meals. You should eat only soups and other easy-to-digest foods for a few more days. Take it slow. Now, I'm afraid I have some other things to attend to, though I promise I shall see you again soon." With another warm smile he was gone.

Mother watched him walk out of the room and then sighed. "Such a handsome man! Why, he's almost as handsome as your father was."

Mary pretended to be shocked. "Now you behave yourself with these doctors, you hear, Mother? I don't want you messing about with any of them—at least not while you're a patient." She smiled, then hugged her mother. "Oh Mother, I'm so glad you're all right. I love you so much and was so worried." She sat down and held her mother's hand.

They sat in silence for a few moments, then Mother said, "Now, tell me more about this Edward fellow. Then once you've spilled every little detail, I want you to read me the story he wrote."

Mary blushed. "Okay," she said, then told the whole story from the beginning.

Chapter Ten

After she went through the whole story of meeting Edward, and praising him for his genius as a writer, his thoughtfulness and kindness and all of the rest, Mother made Mary read the story that he had sent her.

Just as she was finishing the first chapter a nurse arrived with food on a tray, and they took a short break. The nurse wanted to spoon-feed Mother the soup, but Mother would have nothing of the sort, and shooed her away. "I'm a grown woman, I assure you," said Mother with a smile. "Thank you!"

The nurse left.

"Now," said Mother to Mary. "Go on, this is getting interesting."

She ate as Mary continued the story, occasionally interjecting a comment or a chuckle at something funny. By the time it was over Mother was quite impressed. "What a fine story," she remarked. "I'm sure I've read a similarly written story in *The Bostonian* some months back. It was by this fellow named Terence Smithson though."

Mary looked at her quizzically. "Perhaps that's one of his pen names. He told me he writes under several. He's a rather shy man."

"Yes well, modesty is a virtue," said Mother with an approving nod. "Now dear, I'm feeling a little

tired now, so I'm going to lie down again. You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not, Mother, you should rest. And Dr. Andrews will be pleased to know that you're getting your rest too."

"Hmm," said Mother, as she lay down again. "Yes. Dr. Andrews." Then she was asleep.

Mary called for a nurse to take the tray away, then she turned and looked at her mother. She was already sleeping peacefully, and for a moment Mary was afraid that she wouldn't wake up again but would fall back into a coma. Just as this thought entered her mind her mother turned and looked at her. "Mary," she said. "I want you to know that I do love you so." Then she fell back asleep. Mary knew that she was going to be all right.

Mary dimmed the lights, then tiptoed out of the room. Out in the hall she began to feel elated, knowing that her mother was going get well. She wanted to rush down the halls yelling it to everyone who was nearby, she was so happy. She restrained herself for several reasons—the foremost being that it was already much later into the evening than she had originally thought, and most people were asleep. So she went for a walk in the hospital grounds. It was a small park with trees and flowerbeds. A small bridge crossed a landscaped brook, which bubbled down to a pond where ducks floated in the fast-darkening dusk. She sat on one of the park benches and thanked God for His goodness in all things.



Edward had finished his dinner and was now in his living room reading his Bible. He had felt quite agitated all day, not knowing how Mary and her mother were faring, and twice had resolved to ride into to town to ask for news. He decided against it.

After reading for some time he put his Bible back

on the shelf and was just about to go upstairs for the night when he heard a knock on his door. He was alarmed. In all his years of staying at this house he had not had a single visitor, invited or otherwise, much less at this hour of the night. He went to his front door and looked through the peephole. He was shocked to see a very nervous-looking Mr. Jackson standing in the doorway. He opened the door quickly. "Mr. Jackson! How are you, sir?"

Mr. Jackson was fumbling with his hat nervously. "So sorry to disturb you at this hour."

"Not at all, won't you come in?"

"No, thank you. Don't want to impose. I just thought you would like to know the news. Miss Frank called sometime ago to assure us all that her mother is in recovery. She came out of the coma and is doing quite well."

"Why, that's splendid news!" said Edward excitedly. "I'm so glad to hear it."

"Yes, I thought you would like to know," said Jackson, "which is why I came to tell you."

"You're very kind. I appreciate it very much."

Jackson turned to leave. "Please," said Edward, "won't you come in for a moment, for some tea or something?"

"No, really I'm quite all right, and should be getting home before it gets too late. Goodnight." He turned and was walking down to his little motorcycle, when he stopped and turned around again. "Oh, you know, Mary asked about you too."

Edward's grip tightened on the door. "Is that right?" he said. "What did she say?" He tried to hide the excitement in his voice, but Jackson didn't seem to notice anyway.

"I ... I don't quite remember, to be honest. Oh, no, wait, it was something about being sorry that she couldn't make it to the restaurant, I think. I'm

not sure what exactly she meant by that, but I suppose you do." Edward gave a slight smile and a nod. "Well, goodbye then!" With that, Jackson strode down the path and jumped on his scooter.

"Thank you for coming out here to tell me!" shouted Edward, waving.

"Not at all!" shouted Jackson in reply. "Be seeing you then." With his scooter goggles and helmet on he looked like a fighter pilot. He revved the motor, and with a wave, pulled onto the road and whizzed off into the night.

Edward felt light. Mary had asked about him! He decided that the day had now been long enough, and that he would retire.



The following day brought yet another unexpected surprise for Edward. A telegram had arrived for him. Edward never received telegrams, but this morning he did. It was a short message, reading:

*To Eddie Olmos, Leesburg
Am back in town stop Phone 107-6452
Steven Simms, Cincinnati stop*

He immediately made his way to town, and the telephone at the general store.

"Yes, I'd like to place a call," he told the operator, "to Steven Simms, Cincinnati, at the number 107-6452."

"One moment please," said the operator. There were a few moments of silence, followed by a click, and then a loud voice.

"Edward! Edward, is that you?"

"Steve, old buddy," said Edward, smiling. "Yes, it's me!"

"Edward, it's been so long, how are you old boy? I take it you received my telegram."

"Yes, I did," Edward answered. "So, what brings

you to Cincinnati?"

"Well, it's a long story, but I'm back at the mission here, at least for the winter season. Oh, Eddie, it's good to hear your voice again! I'll have to come see you again. Are you still at that same house?"

"Well, yes, I am," said Edward. "But why don't I just come into town instead. It's been years since I've been there anyway. What do you think?"

"That's splendid! I have so many things to tell you about. So much has happened these past years, you just wouldn't believe it."

"Good," said Edward. "Can't wait to hear about it. Look, I'm only a few hours away by train. I'll grab a few things and catch the next one. I'll be there by lunch. We can eat at the old haunt."

"Can't wait," said Steve. "It's great to hear you!"

"You too. I'll see you at lunch then! Bye!"

"Bye!" He hung up.

Edward was excited. He was dying to see his old friend. There was much to be said, about his life, and his personal voyage of rediscovering his faith, which had steadily grown during these past years. But there was another thought in his heart as well. Perhaps he could pay a visit to Mary in the hospital, to bring her some flowers or something. At least he had a valid reason to be in Cincinnati now. He rushed home to pack.

After throwing some things in an overnight bag he headed into town again. He didn't have much time before the morning train came through, and he definitely didn't want to miss it. He rode by the post office and saw old Mr. Jackson inside. He thought he would stop and say a quick hello so he halted, parked his bicycle, and went inside. His shoulder bag was slung over his shoulder.

"Going somewhere?" asked Jackson.

"Yes, actually. To the city. I have a friend there who's just returned from Boston and I'm paying him

a visit.”

“Why that’s quite the coincidence!” said Jackson. “This morning’s post brought a letter stamped ‘URGENT’ for Mary’s mother. I was just about to make arrangements to have it sent via courier to her, but I don’t suppose you would be able to drop it off for me, if it’s not out of your way?” He gave a small enigmatic smile.

Edward looked confused for a moment. It was as if Jackson was reading his very thoughts. “Well, I suppose I could drop in at the hospital, and perhaps bring Mrs. Frank and Mary some flowers or something.” He tried to sound casual, but it didn’t fool Jackson.

“Well, that would be very convenient for me,” said Jackson. “Could I possibly impose upon you to deliver this for me?”

Edward smiled inside at his good fortune. Here he had a legitimate reason for paying the Franks a visit at the hospital. He took the letter. “Yes, indeed. I would be very happy to be of assistance. You were so kind to come out last night and give me the news of Mrs. Frank’s recovery. I should be very happy to do this for you.”

“Splendid then,” said Jackson. “Please give my regards to Mary and her mother. We are very happy that Elizabeth’s doing better. Tell her that on behalf of all of us here in town.”

“Certainly,” said Edward. “Well, I must dash or I’ll miss my train. Good day to you.”

“Yes, yes. Hurry on then,” said Jackson, and turned back to his work.

Edward parked his bicycle in the overnight storage room at the station, and then bought his ticket. Soon the train was chugging towards his old hometown again. He had spent most of his life in Cincinnati, and still missed it sometimes. He missed his friends there even more, and though most of

them had scattered hither and thither, he would always remember them in the city. Now he was going to his old home, his old friends, with the added bonus of being able to visit Mary. He was a very happy man.

He opened the window in the compartment he was in, and waved at people as they passed by. What a beautiful day to be alive. The wind was fresh and invigorating, and the sun was shining down on him. He sat back in his chair again.



He met Steve at Mario’s, the old Italian restaurant where they used to go after a long day of work at the mission. It was an old-style bar and bistro¹ type place, and although they didn’t drink, there was good food to be had for reasonable prices. Old Mario, the owner, had been a friend of theirs for a long time now, and he welcomed them both with loud acclamations in Italian and a bear hug for each, before rushing off again to get their lunch. It was a busy day at Mario’s.

They hugged warmly, then sat and munched on breadsticks while catching up on all the old times, the old friends, and the new times and the new friends. Edward talked of his personal experiences, as well as some of his successes as a writer, the quiet town and now all of the new acquaintances there. He left out the part about how special he thought Mary was. Steve laughed at the story of how Edward was suddenly thrust back into the flow of life again only days ago, after four years of total solitude. Then he slapped him on the shoulder across the table.

“You’re a good man, Ed. So glad to hear that you’re back in the saddle again. Good news indeed!”

At that moment, Mario came over with their lunch on a tray. Spaghetti and salad, northern Italian

¹**bistro**: a small and generally informal restaurant, bar or tavern

cuisine, heavy and rich, the kind they both loved. He laid it out for them. "For you today," he said, smiling and slapping them on the back, "it's on the house! I am so happy to see you both again after all these years, eh? You be sure and come to visit old Mario again soon, eh?" With that he rushed off again to attend to the other diners before they could even reply.

They were still getting their wind back from the friendly slap he'd given them both. They chuckled.

After eating for a few minutes, Steve continued. "Were you surprised to hear that I was back here at the mission?"

"I was, actually," replied Edward.

"Well, it's really only a part-time assignment for me. The work in Africa has been expanding in tremendous degrees, and I've signed on as a volunteer to head there. There will be a trip after the winter, and I was asked to help out here until then."

Edward smiled at the melting pot of expressions in Steve's sentences as he went on to tell story after story about the work in Africa, and all the adventures he would be set to face. Yes, it was clear that Steve hadn't changed a bit, he thought.

"We sure could use your help again, you know," Steve finished. It was a question.

"Hmm, sounds interesting," said Edward between munches. Then after a pause, "You don't want an answer right away, do you?"

"Oh no," replied Steve. "Pray about it. I'm sure the Lord can guide your steps as surely as they once led you to Leesburg."

"Yes, you're right. I'll certainly pray about it and consider your offer."

"Good," said Steve. "Well, I must be getting on, then. A few more newcomers are arriving here shortly by train, and I am to be the welcoming party. Care

to join me?"

"I would love to, but I'm afraid I have another errand to attend to, so I'll have to pass this time. But I would like to catch up with you again, and all of the others that I know who're still around when I can. I think I'll be here for the night, so maybe tomorrow I'll drop by and see you?"

"Good," replied Steve. "You should see the old building—it's being renovated now. We're adding a soup kitchen, as well as setting up additional rooms to get people off the streets at night—not to mention redecorating the meeting halls and classrooms. Oops, which reminds me, I also have to go and arrange a shipment of paper to the printers. Someone's donating a ton of paper so we can print new leaflets for handing out. Goodness, there's so much to do! Gotta run, old buddy."

With another bear hug he was gone. Edward waved after him, then walked to the kitchen area of the restaurant. He wanted to thank Mario for his kindness. The kitchen door was closed, but he could hear the sound of cooking and the clanking of pots and pans. There was clearly a lot of activity going on. He knocked loudly, then the door was flung open by Mario, who was wiping his hands on his apron. His face broke into a smile.

"Eddie, my man! How was the cooking, eh?"

"Excellent as always, Mario. I just wanted to say goodbye and thank you for your kindness today."

Mario dismissed the thanks with a gesture, as if sweeping it out of the way. "Don't mention it, my friend. You have given me more than I can repay, so I'm happy to do this thing for you!"

"Well, thank you again," said Edward. He shook his hand and left.

Steve and Edward had made friends with Mario after his wife died years before. They had been there to comfort him, and also give him the Comforter of

all comforters, Jesus. Mario had not been a very good Catholic, and didn't have a very clear understanding of the sacrifice that Jesus had made for all, so learning this truth had comforted him more than anything, and he had been their close friend since then.

After leaving Mario's, Edward walked in the direction of the hospital. As he walked along, a flood of memories came back to him from talking to Steve. Hearing the to-do list that Steve had mentioned sounded just like old times again—meeting new people, organizing literature distribution, finding people who could help them with donations for their missions, or goods for their thrift stores—so many exciting things to do. He felt a tugging at his heart, a call to the fray. He felt that the time he had spent on his own had been a good time, a time of rest and getting closer to Jesus, but he had the distinct impression that that time would soon be over. That time had been like a pit stop along the track of life, and now it was time to re-enter the race.

Well, he thought, no time right now to make snap decisions. I need to take this slow and make sure it's what I really should do. I feel that it's the right thing to do, but that's not enough. He prayed, *Jesus, please help me to take the direction that You have for me to take.*

His thoughts turned to Mary, and he began to have second thoughts about his plan to visit her and her mother out of the blue. He had a letter to deliver though, and that was a good excuse. He looked forward to seeing Mary again, but he was also feeling quite shy and prayed that he would not mess up his words or stutter and stammer when trying to talk to her.

He walked into the lobby clutching the urgent letter for Mrs. Frank. It was a busy place, with people coming and going, the occasional wheelchair with

an out-patient being wheeled into an elevator, or a patient on crutches heading towards the hospital park with a visiting friend. Orderlies and nurses rushed about. There was a small cafeteria, and near it was a florist's. He stopped for a moment and bought a bouquet of purple and pink carnations, then he proceeded to the front desk.

The receptionist took no notice of him for several minutes as she talked into a telephone. Finally she was finished and came up to the front desk.

"So sorry to keep you waiting," she said with a smile. "How may I help you?"

"Uh, yes, I'm here to see someone, a Miss Frank."

"Just a moment," she said and went to check her roster. "Yes, we have a Mrs. Frank here in intensive care, and a Miss Frank accompanying her. Any particular one you'd like to visit?"

"Both, actually," said Edward.

"And are you a relative of any kind?" asked the receptionist.

"No, just a friend."

"Well, I'm sorry, but only relatives can visit Intensive Care patients."

"Oh dear! Well, you see I have this urgent letter for Mrs. Frank, and I was going..."

"Well, if she's in IC," interrupted the receptionist, "she probably isn't in any condition to read anything, urgent or otherwise." She was being polite but firm. "I'm very sorry, but we have rules." While she was speaking a young doctor came and leaned against the counter next to Edward. "You here to see Mrs. Frank?" he asked.

"Yes," Edward said hopefully.

"And what's your relation to the patient?" he asked. It seemed to be a standard question around here.

"I'm just a friend, and I do have a rather urgent

letter for Mrs. Frank." He held up the envelope with the big red URGENT stamp on it. It seemed to work. The doctor turned to the receptionist.

"I've been up there on duty. She's just been moved out of IC. Seems like she's making some sort of amazing recovery. It just happened last night." Then he turned to Edward again. "You can see her. But visiting hours aren't for another 45 minutes, I'm afraid." He looked at his watch.

"That's fine with me, I can wait," said Edward, feeling overjoyed.

"But you have this urgent letter for her?" the doctor went on.

"Yes, it's this urgent letter that came for her this morning, and since I was coming here I was asked to bring it with me," explained Edward. "The Franks are friends of mine."

"Very well, then," said the doctor. "Follow me. I'm on my way there anyway." He turned and strode down a hallway to the elevator. "She's been moved to the 14th floor. It's a recovery ward where we continue to keep patients under observation for a few more days to make sure that the recovery isn't short-lived." Edward just nodded. He was feeling very nervous again.

They emerged from the elevator and the doctor pointed down the hall. "She's staying in room 42b," he said, then he turned and strode down the hall in the opposite direction.

"Thank you!" called Edward after him. He then turned and walked slowly towards 42b. It was near the end of the long hallway which had rooms on either side. Some of the doors were open and he could see patients sitting, reading, or just staring out the window. It was a quiet place and very clean.

Finally he came to 42b. He felt so nervous that he just stood there thinking how foolish it was for him to be doing this. He clutched the flowers and

the letter close. *Goodness*, he thought, *what will I say?* He was just about to knock when the door opened a little and a nurse slipped out. Edward's fist was raised to knock on the door and the nurse looked at him with a puzzled look.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"Yes, the doctor said that I might find Mrs. Frank here."

"Visiting hours don't start for at least another half hour, sir. I'm sorry," the nurse replied.

Edward brandished the letter with the bright red URGENT stamp on it. "The doctor said that I could pay a quick visit and deliver this letter."

"Just let me check and make sure it's all right then," said the nurse and slipped back into the room. Now he was feeling very nervous. A moment later the nurse stepped out again, only this time she was followed by Mary.

"It's all right, Jean," Mary said to the nurse, smiling. The nurse walked away. Mary turned to Edward.

"Goodness gracious, what are you doing here?" She looked surprised and pleased.

"Sorry about the surprise," said Edward. "It's really nice to see you." He was playing nervously with the ribbon that tied the flowers together. Mary looked at the flowers and then at him. "Are those for my mother?"

"Yes." He handed them to her. "I hope she likes them, and I'm very glad that she's doing better."

"That's very kind, Mr. Olmos. I mean, Edward."

Edward wanted to keep talking. "I waited for you the other day. I was rather afraid that you had changed your mind and didn't want to see me." He looked down.

She laid her hand on his. "I'm sorry."

"No, it's all right, I assure you," Edward said. "I didn't mean for you to feel bad. I mean, your mother

was ill," he awkwardly motioned towards the door. "Though I am relieved that she's doing better."

Suddenly Edward remembered the letter. "Oh, before I forget. This letter came for your mother, and Mr. Jackson asked if I might deliver it since I would be in town. I was here visiting a friend who'll soon be on his way to Africa," he explained.

She took it and looked at the address. "Thank you. Won't you come in and say hello to Mother."

Edward drew back. "What? Here, in the hospital? You want me to meet her under these circumstances?"

"Of course," said Mary. "She would be rather peeved, I should think, if she found out you were right here and didn't come in to say hello. I read her the story you sent and she loved it! Really loved it!"

"She did?" Edward replied, amazed.

"Really, you must stop being such a tense person," Mary berated him, though with a smile. "Come on, relax. I know you'll be fine. My mother is really a docile person, and I swear she doesn't bite." She took him by the hand, and he allowed himself to be pulled into the room, reluctantly.

Mother was sitting up in bed and reading. She peered over the rims of her reading glasses, which were perched near the end of her nose. She looked mildly surprised. She waited for Mary to speak.

"Mother," said Mary, "this is Edward Olmos."

Mother smiled at him. "How very nice of you to drop in."

"He brought you these flowers too, Mother," and she handed them to her.

"They're beautiful," said Mother. "Mary, you must find me a vase or something to keep these in." While Mary went to ask the nurses for a vase, Mrs. Frank continued, "It's so kind of you, Mr. Olmos, to visit me and bring flowers. To what do I owe the honor?"

"I was in town," said Edward nervously, "visiting

some friends, and Mr. Jackson found out I was going and asked me to deliver an urgent letter to you."

"Here it is," said Mary, returning with a vase.

Mother read the address. "Goodness, this is urgent. You are very kind to go out of your way to deliver this," she said to Edward. Just then, Mary returned with a vase. "Mary dear, why don't you go out for a walk with Edward or something. I must read this letter. Run along now."

"Yes, Mother. Come Edward, let's find something to do."

As they were about to leave, Mother said again how kind Edward was to drop in with flowers, and she apologized of her inability to host her guest properly. Edward bid her farewell and left with Mary.

They walked down the hall together. Mary looked at him. "Did you really mean it about visiting friends here, or did you just come to visit Mother and me?"

"Yes, I did meet a friend, for lunch. He's with a Salvation Army Mission, and soon he'll be leaving for Africa. He's staying here in Cincinnati for the winter, though. He's a very good friend of mine."

"Missionaries? To Africa? How perfectly exciting!" exclaimed Mary. She thought of exotic port cities teeming with ebony natives, wild animals and savannas stretching as far as the eye could see. "Must be splendid!"

"He told me so many interesting stories about tribesman, and how the Gospel is being spread there, as well as how they are teaching the natives to read and write. It's all quite exciting."

They continued walking down the hospital halls chatting happily, like old friends. When they arrived back at Mother's room half-an-hour had gone by. "I just need to check on my mother. Won't be a minute," said Mary. She opened the door.

Edward could see into the room, where he saw

Mary's mother reading the letter again. She seemed to be quite excited about something.

"Mary," she said, "I have the most wonderful news!" Then Mary closed the door and that was all Edward heard. He could hear excited talking going on, but couldn't make out what they were saying. He did catch the last part, when Mother said, "Now go on, go and keep Edward company. He's such a nice man!"

Edward was sure that his ears were playing tricks on him. He stood back from the door so it would not look like he'd been eavesdropping. Mary emerged looking very excited as well.

"You'll never believe it!" said Mary, and threw her arms around Edward's neck. He was stunned. Then she remembered herself and quickly let go and took a step back. A flash of red swept across her face.

"Oh, sorry, Edward." Then she laughed. "Mother's just received a letter from our attorney. He used to manage Father's interests before he passed away. Father invested in war bonds during the war and they're unexpectedly starting to pay off. It's quite unexpected, but it means that these investments can provide Mother with a regular source of income!"

"That is wonderful," said Edward.

"Yes, it is," agreed Mary. "We were coming to the end of our savings, and it looked like we would both have to get full-time jobs to support us, since Mother isn't eligible for a pension. Now our financial worries are over!"

Edward was happy to see her so excited. "Come along," said Mary. "Let's get out of here before I start screaming with joy and wake up all the patients." When they were in the park, Mary said, "Tell me some more about your friend's mission work."

"Well," said Edward, "believe it or not, I helped in this same mission for a while myself, though I didn't exactly sign on with them officially. Then, when

Steve was called to move to another mission in Boston, being an officer and all, well ... I just wasn't ready to follow him that far, I guess. So that's when I moved to Leesburg instead." He went on recounting some of the things that he and Steve had spoken of that morning, and spoke further of the missions the Salvation Army had opened in various territories around the world. He talked all the way until suppertime, and she listened attentively. It had always been her dream to visit such far-off places.

Edward went back inside to wish Mary's mother goodbye, and while he was there a doctor came to inform Mary that her mother was well enough to go home, and that it would be arranged for a nurse to make regular visits to their house to ensure that she was fully recovered. They could leave the next morning if they wished.

This was good news to Mother, who was anxious to be on her feet again, and had even gotten out of bed a few times when there were no nurses around. By the time Edward left, everyone was in good spirits, and he was glad.

Edward checked into a hotel, then he called Steve again to arrange another get-together. He wanted to go home the following day too, but he wanted to see Steve again before leaving.

"Have you given any more thought to my proposal?" asked Steve.

"Um, no. Actually so much has happened the last few hours that I'd completely forgot. But I'm sure..."

"Please do consider it," interrupted Steve. "I really do have the feeling that it would only be good for you, but that's just me. I could be wrong, you know. Really consider and pray about it. Then let me know."

Edward smiled to himself at his friend's determination. He had to admit that Steve had a very good offer though. "Yes, I will pray about it and

let you know. Goodbye then!" He hung up.

By midnight, Edward was still awake in his hotel bed. He had been tossing and turning but could not sleep. Finally he switched on the bed lamp and pulled out his Bible. He read some Psalms, then he climbed out of bed and knelt down beside it and prayed.

"Dear Jesus, a new path has opened that I could take. You once directed me to Leesburg, so I went. Now there is a new direction that I could take to serve You in a more active way. I'm not sure that I'm ready, but if this is what You would have me do, than I stand ready to follow Your command. King David said, 'Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path,' so please show me in Your Word which path You want me to take this time."

After praying this prayer, he started to read from his Bible again. After finishing another Psalm, he thought of another favorite of his, and began to flip to it. While turning one of the pages, his eyes fell on these words: The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, and he delighteth in His way.

Edward felt that that was a good start. It reminded him of another verse: Delight thyself in the Lord, and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart. Commit thy way unto the Lord, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass.

These verses were an encouragement to him, and he felt the burden in his heart growing—the burden to be out among the sheep, introducing them to the Good Shepherd and leading them to salvation. He felt that that was the answer he needed.

"Thank You Lord, for Your answers. I shall do what I can to preach the Gospel, and I pray for Your help in fulfilling this, Your will. Help me to follow it to the best of my ability."

With peace in his heart, he climbed back into his bed, and was soon asleep.

Chapter Eleven

He awoke the next morning with excitement and purpose. He couldn't wait to find out what the future held for him. Where would his path take him, he wondered, as he packed his things and set out to see Steve. He could hardly wait to give him the good news. He would have to go home and pack up, set things in order, but that could be taken care of in a day. He had no real ties to the town of Leesburg. And then he would return and join the mission—officially, this time. There would obviously be much to do with finishing the redecorating of the old building before winter began in earnest, and then, if God so willed, on to new challenges and ventures that would take him further than he had ever dared to go before—to Africa with Steve, to preach a Gospel he had slowly come to love once again.

Then he remembered Mary. In his excitement, he had all but forgotten about her and the feelings that he had begun to develop for her. If he left, he might never see her again. Either way, he was turning his back on Leesburg forever, and didn't see himself going out there to visit, since he was giving up the house. He didn't know her well enough to expect anything of her. What was he to do?

Perhaps I should stay there for awhile longer, he thought. I'm just getting to know the people there,

like Mary, and Mrs. Frank, Mr. Jackson and Farmer Smith. They're all good people. Perhaps I should stay and become more a part of the community for awhile before leaving for good.

These and other thoughts began to crowd into his head. They clouded his vision, and the Words of the night before were forgotten in the barrage of emotion that began to plague him. By the time he went down to the little hotel's lobby to check out, he was completely lost. His heart was torn in two. He knew in his heart what he should do, but it seemed like such bad timing. If only he had met Mary a year earlier. Perhaps he would have been able to take her with him when he finally took off for distant fields again. His heart was turned in her direction, and he tried to argue himself out of it. As he walked down the street, his mind continued its tug of war.

They're only feelings! he thought to himself. *She might not even feel the same way about me as I do about her. Besides, this is all so premature. I just met her last week and I'm already making plans for our future.* He felt that he had never met anyone quite like her before though, and he didn't feel like he was ready to just give it up so quickly now.

Then the other side kicked in. *Do you want to throw away God's will for your life, for something that might not be His will? The Bible says to delight thyself in the Lord, and He shall give thee the desires of thy heart!*

Edward prayed aloud, "Jesus, now I don't know what to do. Please show me clearly, and then give me the strength to do Your will." He kept walking, but nothing came to him. He hailed a cab and gave the driver directions to the mission. He wanted to talk to Steve. He had always been an encouragement and strength when trying to find the Lord's will.

The night before he had been so certain of what

he would tell Steve. He had been so determined to hand over his life to active service again. Now the way was dark.

He arrived at the mission, and he paid the driver. Past the double doors was a huge dining hall, which led up to a cafeteria-style serving area. There were tables and chairs stacked in two of the corners, and it was clear that the redecoration of the place was far from complete. Steve was at a far corner with several others carrying boxes into a pantry room. They were laughing and talking happily. Edward walked towards them, and called Steve's name.

"Edward," said Steve, "you made it! Come on over here and say hi to the others."

Edward tried to hide his glum feelings as he walked across the hall.

"Edward, meet the fellows," said Steve, pointing at the others. There were four of them, and they all looked like they were in their twenties. Edward thought he recognized one of them from before but wasn't sure.

There were handshakes and "How are you's" all round. Edward shook their hands warmly. Then they resumed their work while Steve walked with Edward.

"How are you, Ed? I'm glad that you made it here. So, what do you think of these changes? Aren't they grand?" Steve was in a joyous mood, but could tell that there was something on Edward's mind. "Come on, my friend, what's the matter? You're looking sad."

"Steve," said Edward, "I don't know what to do. I'm in trouble."

"Why, what did you do?"

"It's nothing I did. But I do need someone to talk to. Can you spare a minute?"

"Sure can," said Steve. "Let's go on over here and have it out." They walked over to the other corner of the dining hall, pulled out some folding chairs and

sat down.

“So what’s the matter, old boy?”

“Well, you see,” said Edward, “I had decided that I should join up with the mission again. I feel ready to sign on, and go wherever the road takes us.”

“Well, that’s great!” said Steve enthusiastically, slapping Edward on the knee. Then he saw that Edward’s face was glummer than before, and suddenly was serious again. “No, I can see that it’s not great. Tell me what’s wrong, Ed.”

With that Edward launched into the whole story: meeting Mary the days before after years of solitude, the special feelings that he had for her already and even the feelings for him that he was sure she had, his other new friends in the town. And now just giving it all up so suddenly just seemed like a waste. The timing was terrible, and while he didn’t want to fail the Lord by not doing His will right away, it was still hard to give up these feelings that he had, and he wasn’t sure that he had the strength or the will to do it. On and on the words tumbled out. Edward wasn’t even sure if he was making sense to Steve.

Steve listened patiently. Finally Edward stopped talking abruptly, and turned and stared out a nearby window. After a few moments, and without turning to look at Steve he asked him quietly, “Do I sound like a totally confused, double-minded sinner, or what? What should I do?”

Steve thought for a moment, then spoke. “I’m afraid,” he said then paused, “I don’t think I can tell you what to do.”

Edward looked at him.

Steve continued. “This is your decision, and you have to make it. I can’t choose the path that you should take, you know. I know that the Lord loves you very much, and has a plan for you, whether it be with us, or back at Leesburg. Either way, I know that the Lord will always love you, and so will I, no

matter what you choose. Perhaps this is just a test, to see if you will do God’s best for you no matter what. Everyone has choices in this life. But I’ve already said enough. What you should do is go home, and pray desperately—again. Carefully choose the path that you feel is right for you, and I know that the Lord will tell you exactly what’s on His mind if you’ll diligently seek His face, like the Bible says. Now go.” With that they stood, and hugged.

“Call me,” said Steve. “You have the number still, right? Of course you do. Oh, which reminds me. I don’t have your number. What is it?”

“Ah,” said Edward, smiling, “I’m afraid that telephones are one of the modern conveniences that I’ve had to forego since moving to the countryside. The general store has a phone, but I’m afraid I’ve rarely used it, so couldn’t tell you what the number would be. Sorry!”

“Don’t worry,” said Steve. “I’ve got your address anyway. Stay in touch.”

With a wave to the guys carrying boxes, Edward stepped out into the open again, and hailed a cab. “Central Station,” he told the driver, who pulled out into the traffic.

Chapter Twelve

Mary and Mother were packing their things, preparing to go home. A sleeper berth had been reserved on the afternoon train back to Leesburg. Mother remarked about the excellent treatment this hospital provided.

“Of course,” remarked Mary. “Only the very best for the very best mother in the world. Besides, I think that Dr. Andrews fellow has taken a liking to you!”

Mother smiled. In a few moments an orderly arrived with a wheelchair to take Mother down to the lobby. Mother was still quite weak, and Mary helped her into the chair. Another orderly arrived to take their bags downstairs.

“This is almost like being at a hotel,” remarked Mother as they were in the elevator. An ambulance was waiting to transport them to the train station. Soon the train was chugging across the countryside towards home.

Mother looked at Mary, who was staring out the window at the passing houses and farmland. Then she spoke, “You know, with this money that we have now, I think I’ll be all right. You could get away from home, travel a bit. See the world. Everyone has to find out what they want to do with their lives, and I think now is a good time for you.”

"Oh, Mother," said Mary, reaching across and patting her mother on the knee. "You know that someone needs to stay with you, and especially now. And I'm content where I am with you. You mustn't talk that way."

"You're such a wonderful girl, Mary. I'm truly blessed by God to have a daughter like you." Mary smiled at this. Mother continued, "It burdens me, though, that you haven't had a chance to spread your wings and fly, see the world and find your calling in life. When this money came through, right away I knew what I wanted to do. I really do think it's time for you to have the change that you need."

Mary looked at her. "But Mother, what about you? Who will take care of you?"

Mother raised her hand to silence her. "That's taken care of." Then Mother explained the things she and Susan had spoken of before the stroke. They had been friends for years, and now that Susan's brother had passed away, Susan had expressed her desire to get away from Cincinnati for good, Mother had offered Susan to come and live with her. They had decided that they could live together and take care of each other. They also both agreed that it would give Mary the opportunity to have a change as well. She was in her twenties and had hardly been out of town, and never out of the state, for goodness' sake, and this would be a wonderful adventure for her.

"You don't mind that I made all of these arrangements without you knowing, do you?" asked Mother, worried.

"No Mother, that's wonderful!" Mary could hardly believe her ears.

"Even if you don't want to leave home and see the world, that's fine with me too." Mary laid her hand on her mother's. A tear rolled down mother's cheek. "I want so much for you to be happy."

"You're so good to me," said Mary. "I'm the one who has been blessed to have such a wonderful mother as you." Mary started to cry too.

"Every day that has gone by," Mary's mother continued, "I've thanked God for the happy life I've led, meeting your father and then having you. Watching you grow to become a beautiful young woman has been such a joy to me. God has been so good to me in so many ways."

Mary moved to the other seat and sat by her mother, and they hugged tightly for awhile. Then Mary kissed her, and she moved back to her side of the carriage and looked out the window.

Her heart was leaping. To be able to launch out and see all of the places that she had only dreamed about! Then she looked at her mother, who had dozed off in her seat, and her heart was tinged with sadness at the thought of leaving her, and all of her old friends in Leesburg. Her thoughts turned back to new horizons again, the new roads to take and the challenges and surprises. She thought of exotic lands again—Africa, Asia, and Europe. Then she remembered the stories that Edward had been telling her about Africa.

When they pulled into Leesburg and disembarked, they found Mr. Jackson waiting with a car. He doffed his hat, then took Mother's hand. "Mrs. Frank, it's so good to see you better."

Mother smiled. "That's very kind. And also very kind of you to come and get us. But what's this? I didn't know you had a car! Whatever happened to your little scooter?"

"Oh, this is Farmer Smith's new car. I just borrowed it so you wouldn't have to walk home. Here, let me take your bags." Thus saying, Mr. Jackson took them and stowed them in the trunk. Putting on his cap, he came around and opened the door for them, then drove out onto the street.

On the short way home, Mr. Jackson asked about the urgent letter that he had sent with Mr. Olmos.

"I received it safely, thank you," replied mother. "And where is Mr. Olmos, anyway?"

"I saw him earlier this afternoon when he arrived home from the city. He went straight home, as I understand it."

Mary thought of Edward, and thought about going over to his house right away to pay a visit. But then thought it would be best to stay and make sure that Mother was settled in at home first. Perhaps tomorrow she would go and visit him. She was sure that mother wouldn't mind.

That night she reread both of the stories that he had sent to her. She was still amazed at his talent. He really was good. She fell asleep thinking about all of the places she wanted to travel to, all of the things she would do, and the people she would meet.

Chapter Thirteen

She awoke late the next morning to the sound of the rain against her window. *Oh no*, was her first thought. *No chance of visiting Edward in this weather*. She arose and dressed, then went to check on her mother. She was sleeping peacefully, so Mary went downstairs to prepare breakfast, and by the time she brought it up to Mother's room, she was awake and sitting up in bed.

"Morning, Mother! I brought you eggs and toast, and some coffee. Careful now, it's very hot."

"Thank you, dear! That food at the hospital was totally insubstantial. I've wanted a hot breakfast and some good coffee!" she laughed. Mary laid the tray on her mother's lap, then sat next to her as she ate.

"So," said Mother, after a few minutes of silent eating, "what are you going to do today?"

Mary said she wasn't sure. "I had hoped to go down and see Edward, but I guess I won't be able to with this rain."

"Pity about the rain. I should like to pay him a visit myself sometime, and thank him for those flowers. Such a nice young man, and so polite too," remarked Mother.

"Yes," agreed Mary, distracted. Mother studied Mary's face intently, but Mary didn't notice. Mother had sensed some sort of chemistry between the two

of them, and didn't half disapprove of it herself. She was an excellent judge of character and felt that Edward was a first-rate fellow. She was sure she wouldn't be disappointed in the least if something more were to become of his sudden friendship with Mary.

Suddenly Mary sat up. "Goodness me, it's Thursday! I have work this afternoon. Will you be alright alone, Mother?"

"Of course, dear. If I need anything, I'll just give you a call."

"I'll be late if I don't leave now. Goodbye, Mother!" She kissed her mother on the forehead then ran to get changed for work.



"I'm so sorry I'm late!" she said to Mr. Jackson. "I totally forgot what day it was."

"Don't worry," said Jackson smiling. "Why, with all the excitement you've had the past few days, I hadn't expected you to come in today anyway. Very kind of you to come though, as it's unusually busy today."

With that Mary went to work. She busied herself with stamp inventories and seeing to customers, then she sorted mail in the back. The day passed quickly. It was just getting to closing time, and Mary's feet were hurting. They hadn't had a customer for almost half-an-hour, and Jackson was considering closing up for the day. The rain was coming down fast now, and he didn't think that anyone else would venture out in this weather to send mail.

"Well," he said, peering out the window, "I don't suppose we'll be getting any more people in today. What do you think, should we close up early?" Mary agreed and started to put things away. She was in the back closing things up back there when Jackson heard footsteps running outside. He looked up to see who it was that was out and about Thursday in

this weather, when in rushed a very drenched Edward.

He was soaked to the skin and breathing heavily. His hair hung in long wet strands, and water was dripping onto to his face. The drops looked like tears, falling down his cheeks. A little puddle was forming on the wooden floor where he was standing.

"Edward!" said Jackson. "Goodness me, you are a sight to see!"

Edward looked down at his soaked clothes as if noticing them for the first time, then he looked up at Jackson with an embarrassed face. "Oh dear! I'm sorry about the water on the floor. I was just in a dreadful hurry. I don't suppose I could send a telegram?—Or am I too late?"

"Well, actually you're just in time. Show me what you want to send, and don't mind the floor. We can mop it up later." Jackson put on his reading glasses and read the message over. "Going on another trip, are we?" he said, after he'd read it.

"Yes," said Edward, "and it would be really good if this could go tonight if at all possible."

Just then Mary came through to see what all the commotion was, and got a shock when she saw Edward standing at the counter looking like he had just dragged himself out of a river.

Edward was shocked too, as he hadn't realized that she would be here. For a moment he was at a loss for words.

"Edward, you really are a sight to behold!" said Mary, laughing.

"That's what I was just saying," said Jackson. "Isn't he a sight?"

Edward was doubly embarrassed now. "Hello, Mary. Just urgently needed to send something, so rushed out on my bicycle without my raincoat. Definitely not recommended," he smiled.

"Well, you're just in time," went on Mary. "We

were just thinking of closing.”

“Yes,” Jackson said to Mary. “But I’ll send his telegram, nonetheless.”

“A telegram?” said Mary. She was concerned. “Is something the matter?”

“Oh no, just something urgent to my friend, Steve. The one I was telling you about yesterday.”

“Oh yes, Steve!” said Mary. Then after a moment. “Are you sure there’s nothing the matter? You look very concerned about something.”

Jackson interrupted. “Shall I send this then?”

“Yes please,” said Edward. Jackson turned and walked into the back to send the message. What the telegram said, in short abrupt sentences, was that Edward had made his decision to sign on with the Salvation Army, and if it were possible, even to go with Steve to Africa. He knew in his heart that this was the right thing to do. He had rushed into town to have it sent before he began to have second thoughts about the matter. He hadn’t counted on Mary being at the post office, and it must have been showing on his face.

While Jackson was sending the message, they stood out in the front room awkwardly. Edward didn’t know what to say. Should he tell her the truth? Would it scare her away? All these thoughts raced through his head in seconds. Finally he broke the silence. He had nothing to lose anyway.

He dried off his hands the best he could on his pants, though he didn’t succeed, then he reached across the counter and took her hand.

“Mary,” he said. “You have been very kind to me in these few days that I have known you.” He faltered for a moment, then pressed on. “But it seems that it’s already time to say goodbye.” He felt her hand grip his slightly.

“You’re leaving, then?” she said.

“Yes. You see, with all this talk of missions and

pioneering new territories, I have been inspired to devote my life to God’s service. At least, I’ve been offered to help them in Cincinnati for the winter, with the homeless and the poor and all, so I have accepted. But that’s not all. You see, I don’t know that I’ll be returning to Leesburg. I might even go on to Africa, with Steve.”

He let all of this sink in, then continued. “You see, before coming to live here in Leesburg, I was somewhat involved with the mission in Cincinnati. Then when Steve was going to move to Boston, I didn’t feel ready to follow him, as I told you. You see, my heart was just not quite right with God yet. So I came to Leesburg, where during the past years, the Lord and I had a chance to get a few things sorted out between us, if you know what I mean. And now it seems like God is calling me on to a more active service with the mission.” He looked at her intently. “And I feel that now I am ready, and that it’s time for me to go.”

He just stood there for a few minutes, holding her hand. She said nothing. Finally he went on, quietly. “At first I was inclined to stay here. I’ve just met you, and I wanted to stay here and get to know you a little better. But I must follow where God leads, and do His work. Before I got involved with the mission, I was a terrible person—a bum and an alcoholic. Then Jesus saved me, and He has been making me into a new man ever since—a man you have just begun to know. But now I have promised that I will follow Him wherever He leads, and that seems to be away from Leesburg, I’m afraid. But I must do what He wants me to do.”

Mary held his hand, but looked out the window at the rain. A tear rolled down her cheek, and she brushed it away. Finally she looked at him. “That’s all right, Edward.” She was trying to hold a steady voice. “It was very nice meeting you. But you’re right.

You must do what your heart tells you to do, so if that's what it is telling you," she paused, "then that is what you must do."

She looked out the window again for a moment, then continued. "I'm still very glad that I met you. You are really a kind, gentle man, and I had hoped to get to know you better as well." She stopped again. This was getting very painful for both of them. "When do you leave?" she whispered.

"Tomorrow," he said quietly.

"Tomorrow," she echoed in surprise. Then, "Well, I guess this is goodbye." She came around from behind the counter and took his hand and shook it. "It's been very nice knowing you." Her voice faltered. "I only wish that I had gotten to know you sooner." He didn't know what to say, so he just looked at the floor. She came close to him and raised his head with her hands and looked into his eyes. Then she gently kissed him on the lips. Without another word she went and took her coat of the rack and rushed out into the rain.

He stood alone in the little post office, staring out the window into the rain.

A few minutes later Jackson returned. "That was a tough one," he said.

At first Edward thought he was referring to the conversation he had just had with Mary, and didn't know what to say. Then he realized that Jackson was talking about the telegram. It had been difficult to send.

"It's been sent," said Jackson again. "But where's Mary? Has she gone home already?"

"Yes," said Edward.

"I expect she'll get dreadfully soaked in this rain," went on Jackson, not noticing Edward's melancholy face.

"Yes," replied Edward forlornly. "I expect she will. Well, thank you very much for sending my telegram.

And how much do I owe you?"

"That'll be \$1.58."

Edward paid him, then bid his farewell. He walked out into the rain.

He looked down the street. She was out of sight now. He stood there for another minute, then got on his bicycle, and pedaled slowly the other way.

Chapter Fourteen

By the end of the month, Edward was so busy he hardly had time to think. There was so much to be done at the mission, and winter was almost upon them. There seemed to be too much to do in too little time. But Edward loved the rush of activity and the work. This was his life's calling and he met the challenges with enthusiasm.

Only at night when he lay down, in that interval just before sleep came, would he think of Leesburg and what he had left behind there. He had to struggle each night to put it out of his mind and would quote Psalms to himself and pray, claiming God's promises that he was where he needed to be. Steve had understood that the first few weeks would be hard for Edward. He had offered to pray for Mary and Edward's other Leesburg friends for him, so he would not have to think about them, but could be sure they were getting the prayer that they needed. Edward still thought about Mary anyway.

Almost without warning the winter arrived in full force, and Edward was soon busy day and night at the mission. There was no end of people in need, coming in for a hot meal and a place for the night. During the day, Edward would drive the proudly emblazoned Salvation Army truck, taking it around to pick up shipments of old clothes, or bread, fruits

and vegetables, driving the former to the nearest Salvation Army thrift store, and the latter to the mission, to be turned into the sustenance that the poor so desperately needed.

They would also hold Bible lessons for all those that stayed in the evenings, and Edward would help to teach these lessons. This was where Edward felt happiest, leading the poor and the destitute to the Savior, filling their hearts with gladness.

It was with much excitement that, one day mid-winter, they heard news of the trip to Africa, and that the departure date had now been set. Several others from the mission would be going as well, and there was great excitement in the air. Even Edward shared in the excitement, as he had now been accepted to join this expedition as well. There was such joy that night, as they all made final plans, talked, and laughed together.

That night in his room, Edward couldn't sleep. The excitement was too much for him and his mind was awl with activity. He also felt a little sorrow. He sat at the little desk that was in the room that he shared with two others, pulled some paper out of the drawer and started to write a long letter to Mary. In it he expressed how much he would like to see her and others in Leesburg—Mr. Jackson and her mother in particular. He wrote about the mission, and what they were accomplishing there, with an average of 500 people being fed physically and spiritually each day, and at least a hundred homeless staying each night.

Then he wrote about the upcoming trip to Africa, and of his decision to join it. He expressed his excitement at the prospects. Finally, at the end of his six-page letter, he wrote again about what could have been between them, and how sad he was that their acquaintance had ended as quickly as it had. He felt like he was pouring his heart onto the paper.

When the letter was signed, he put it in an envelope and sealed and addressed it, and left it on the table. He slept fitfully.

He arose a little late, and so had to rush to get to work on time. The letter was all but forgotten. Later while driving a truck to a shipping dock to pick up some crates of provisions, he remembered the letter, and decided that he would not send it. He felt it was unfair to tell Mary all of the things he was going through and possibly make her feel badly.

After returning home late that afternoon he went up to his room, but the letter was not where he had left it! He looked under the table, under the bed, by the chair. Where could it be? *Well*, he thought, *at least it's not going anywhere. Perhaps I'll find it when we pack up this place. Then I can get rid of it.* He went back to work.

At dinner that night he was sitting next to one of his roommates, Matthew. "Oh," said Matthew, "before I forget. I meant to tell you earlier, but this morning I was going into town to deliver some mail, and I saw your letter on the desk, sealed and addressed, so I sent it for you. That's all right, isn't it?"

Edward froze for a second. "Yes, that's fine. Thank you for doing it." He smiled, but inside he was mortified. He continued eating in silence.

After dinner he went to help with dishes, then went up to his room.

That night again he couldn't sleep, so he went out into one of the empty meeting halls. He paced up and down the room, and was reminded of the day, months before, when he had walked up and down the hospital halls with Mary, talking happily. *That was foolish of me to put my feelings on paper like that*, he thought. He wondered what Mary would think, if anything. He hadn't planned to send it, but now that it was sent, he was sort of glad that she would know how he felt.

He went about his duties over the next few days. He still loved his work, and within the week, he had almost forgotten the letter, except whenever the incoming mail was passed out. Then he always hoped that she would reply. After the second week of no reply, he decided that, yes, it had been a mistake to write like that, and she was probably not going to write back. He shrugged it off, but sorrowfully, and went back to work.

Steve had been noticing Edward's distracted state, and finally asked him what it was about. Edward shared all of it with him, and asked Steve to pray for him. Then he went to give a Bible lesson to a group of young orphan boys who had come to the mission. Pouring out to them helped greatly to lift his spirit, as they were all very receptive boys, eager to hear the Bible stories that Edward read to them. When they were done, Edward prayed with all of them to receive Jesus, and when they left, Edward was in a very good mood. He prayed that night for the Lord's strength to put the past behind him, so that His service for the Lord would be unhindered.

He still prayed for Mary and other friends in Leesburg, but was now certain that he would never see them again.



The winter eventually ended, and the upcoming voyage to Africa became the prime focus of all in the mission. Many of the poor that stayed at the mission had shanties or small houses that were uninhabitable in the winter, and now they were returning to them as the weather warmed up. The work at the mission would continue, but not in the same capacity as during the winter.

Finally, during the second week of spring, Steve and several others received a notice from their divisional headquarters detailing the arrangements for their departure to Africa. Everyone helped in

whatever way they could with excitement and anticipation as they collected, gathered and boxed goods and equipment that Steve and his team would take with them. Headquarters had chartered a small ship to bring the missionaries and whatever goods they could gather across the ocean. There they would meet up with other representatives who would help them in establishing their base on this new territory.

Those who were going packed their belongings. Others, downsizing the mission's operation at the same time, dismantled what seemed like hundreds of beds, cleaned and polished floors, and spruced the place up from the wear and tear it had suffered during the busy winter months. Still others were busily packing the goods and crates that would be shipped along with their missionary team to the "utmost parts of the Earth."

In the evenings, those who were leaving wrote letters of farewell to friends and relatives, and some even made visits to their parents to bid their farewells. Edward didn't really have any friends to say farewell to except the few in Leesburg, and he didn't want to pay them a visit for fear of running into Mary. He was quite certain that she was upset at him for the letter that he had written, and didn't feel he could face her again. He did write a short note to Mr. Jackson, telling him how he was doing, and where he was going. He briefly asked at the end of the note to give his regards to Mrs. Frank and Mary.

Finally, those who were to leave said goodbye to the old mission center, and boarded the train for New York. The ship was waiting for them there, and lots of the crates and boxes of equipment had already been sent on ahead. They would arrive in New York and stay in one of the mission's homes there for the few remaining days before their departure. Edward began to put all other things behind him. He was

catching the enthusiasm that the others had, and was impatient to be off on their new mission.



In New York, there were now only two days to go until departure, and the house was abuzz with activity. There was much to be done, and new people to meet, as several members and officers from other cities were joining this expedition as well. Edward was helping to pack and inventory some huge wooden crates of supplies that would be driven down to the docks the next day. He was holding some boards steady while someone else nailed them into the side of the crate, when Matthew, who was also coming along, came in and stood by, watching.

"I've got a letter for you," he said after a minute. "It's from some place called Leesburg."

Edward lost his grip on the board and it slid down and banged him on the toe.

"Someone special?" asked Matthew, grinning.

Edward was at a loss for words. He silently took the letter and walked to one of the empty rooms. He switched on the light and opened the letter. His heart fell. It wasn't from Mary, but from her mother. He almost dreaded reading it for fear of what it might say. Finally he opened it and began to read.

Dear Edward,

I cannot tell you how pleased I am to hear of your upcoming venture to Africa. You have my best wishes for success. It gladdens my heart to hear of people like yourself who take up their cross to follow the Savior as you are.

Please know that I and my friend Susan, who is now staying with me, shall keep you in our daily prayers. Please also accept the enclosed donation to help you in your venture.

I would also like to write on behalf of my daughter, Mary. Some months ago she went

out, not knowing whither she went (to quote the Scriptures), to seek adventure and to find her calling in life. She went with my blessing.

I am very sorry to write that she has since taken a turn for the worse, and is now in a very sad state. As I understand it, she moved to California and fell in with the wrong crowd—show business people who taught her their worldly ways. After several months she wrote to me, and her letter was so sad. By then she had already tried so many different pleasures, and yet she was finding that they did not satisfy her. I would ask that you please pray for her when you have the time.

It had been my hope that she would follow in a path such as yours, to find the excitement and adventures she wanted in serving God, in other countries or here. It seems to me that that is the most meaningful way to live your life, giving it to God by serving others.

I forwarded your letter to Mary those many months ago, and in a letter I received from her she mentioned receiving it. She did wish you all the best. If you do find the time, and if you could write to her some encouraging words, I'm sure she could greatly use them.

In all honesty I had hoped that you two would become better acquainted when you were staying in Leesburg, for I see that you are a very fine young man, serious and dedicated. If feelings had developed between you I would have been overjoyed. Forgive me for speaking plainly in this matter. Please do not take offence in my presumptuous tone. It is every mother's prayer that her children will be happy, and so it is mine for Mary.

I say again that you will be in my prayers, and your companions at the mission.

*Yours truly,
Elizabeth Frank*

Edward re-read the letter, and was touched by her kindness, though saddened by the news about Mary. There was a 50-dollar bill inside the envelope, and Edward marveled at God's supply. Funds were never abundant, and this donation would definitely be most graciously received.

Then his thoughts turned to Mary again. His heart was heavy. He turned off the light in the large room, and the moonlight shone through the windows onto the floor. It had been five months, he thought, since he had seen her. He put the letter in his pocket and went to find Steve.

Chapter Fifteen

Finally, the big day was upon them. With joyous hearts the whole team climbed into the taxis that would take them down to the docks. Steve was concerned about something. "There's one more box of medical supplies that still hasn't arrived yet, though the letter from the pharmaceutical company said it would be here this morning," he said. "Someone should wait for it. I guess I will."

He turned to Edward. "You go on ahead with the others. As soon as it arrives I'll grab the nearest taxi and speed on down, and if it's not here by 11:00 then we'll just have to leave it behind."

Edward nodded and got into the last taxi, where some of the others were already waiting.

"Hold off the ship until I get there," Steve joked as he waved his hat. They waved from the taxis as they pulled out of the driveway.

"Hurry up, then," shouted Edward out the window, and waved.

"Isn't this exciting?" asked one of the girls.

Edward smiled. "Yes. More than words can say!" he replied.

They arrived at the docks, where dock workers were bustling around. The workers made eyes at the ladies of the group, while cranes lowered crates of goods into the ship's hold. The whole team stood

on the dock, admiring the vessel.

"Isn't she a beauty?" asked the captain, who had walked out to greet his passengers.

"She certainly is," agreed Edward. "And this ship is chartered to take just us?"

"It certainly is," replied the captain. "This ship here will hold fifty passengers, twelve crew and enough luggage to stock a department store." He then motioned toward the stairway that led up the side of the ship and laughed. "Well, I guess it'll be all aboard then. That way when Mr. Simms arrives we can push off with the tide." He looked at his pocket watch. "I hope he gets here soon though. If we miss this tide, we'll have to catch the next one, which is tomorrow! All aboard then!" he shouted.

Everyone started making their way aboard along the narrow staircase that led onto the deck.

Edward stood on the deck admiring the sky. The morning was clear and beautiful. After awhile the captain walked by again, looking concerned. "Any word from Mr. Simms then?"

"Not a sign," replied Edward. "But I'm sure he'll be here any minute."

The captain growled and walked off muttering. Fifteen minutes later the captain returned. "If he's not here within the next ten minutes, our departure is off until six tomorrow morning."

Just as Matthew was trying to assure the captain that Steve would arrive they heard a cab drive up to the docks and honk its horn. They all rushed to that side of the deck and looked down. Steve jumped out of the cab and waved. "Sorry I'm late, folks. I got the trunk." Everyone cheered.

"Yes, I got the trunk. And another passenger!" Everyone looked at each other, puzzled. Matthew called down, "Who is it?"

Steve shouted back. "Edward, there's someone here who's simply dying to see you!" Edward was on

the other side of the deck, looking out at the ocean when he heard Steve shout that, and he walked over to the other side. "Who is it?" he shouted down.

With a flourish, Steve opened the taxi door again, took the lady's hand and helped her out of the taxi. She was wearing a wide hat, so they couldn't see who it was, but Edward knew. His heart skipped a beat.

"Mary?" he shouted. He was speechless.

"Edward!" she waved. She was looking very happy. Edward rushed down the stairs to her, and held out his hand to shake. Instead she threw her arms around his neck and held him tightly.

"Oh, Edward!" she said. "I know what I want to do now. I want to go to Africa, with you." Edward let go of her and looked into her eyes. He was shocked. There were tears in her eyes, but she was smiling. Edward looked at Steve who was standing nearby. He was smiling too. "Steve said it would be all right," she said.

"What? You want to just drop everything and, just like that, come with us to Africa?" he said.

She nodded. "I've been on my own for months now. I've tried so many different things, and none of them made me happy. I didn't like living just for myself, and then I received your letter, the one you sent those months ago when you expressed so beautifully how meaningful it is for you to live for others. And I decided that that is what I wanted to do too." She paused and looked at the ground, then went on quietly. "I don't know if there is or can be anything between us, but I do know that I want to do something more useful with my life. So I wrote to Steve here without you knowing and asked if I might join you all."

Edward looked at Steve, confused. Steve smiled and slapped him on the back. "Sorry, old boy, about the secrecy. I do believe however that I deserve a

medal for how well I held out. Why I nearly broke down and told you everything that night when you told me how you were feeling about her.”

Mary looked at Edward again. “I don’t know whether you still want to be with me after all I’ve done. But I do know that I want to serve God and give my life to serve others. And all the better if it can be with you.”

Edward was still in a daze. “I can hardly believe this. I have missed you so, Mary.” He glanced up at the deck of the ship, where several others were still watching eagerly. He felt very self-conscious.

“Right now, it hardly matters to me what may come or may not come of this. I only know that to serve God with you,” he paused, “is almost too good to be true.”

At this she threw her arms around him again, and they kissed. At this the fellows up on the deck started cheering. Edward looked up at them and smiled. “Knock it off,” he smiled.

Some of the sailors took her things to haul them aboard the ship. The captain came out onto the bridge and bellowed, “We have to leave NOW! ALL ABOARD!”

“Come on then,” said Edward and motioned towards the stairway. She took his hand and they made their way up the steps together, with Steve coming up behind them with her suitcase. The moment Steve stepped onto the deck the stairway was pulled up, and the ship let out a huge honk. “Let’s go aft!” yelled the captain, and everyone cheered as the ship started to pull out of the dock. Soon they were on the open sea.

Edward and Mary were standing near the front of the ship looking out at the horizon as they held each other. The city was rapidly fading behind them. They were going east. Mary held onto Edward tightly and he could hardly believe that it was happening.

He thanked God in his heart.

He turned around and waved back at the fast-fading coastline, and shouted, “Goodbye, Old World!” Then he turned and faced the horizon in front of them and shouted, “Hello, New World.” Everyone cheered. Steve walked up and stood next them. “Welcome,” he said, “both of you, to the first day of your new life.”



