

# **Courtship in Winter**

**written by Fay Johnson**

**(work completed 2005)**

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## Chapter 1

### Denby Bookkeeping

With a raised eyebrow and a sigh, Emma looked at the seemingly never ending stacks of bank statements, ledger sheets, and quarterly reports. She shrugged as she studied the clear plastic boxes lining her desk piled with even more work. Bookkeeping had certainly kept her busy and gave her a modest income, but somehow she felt life had passed her by. She had friends, actually business acquaintances, but no one with whom she truly felt a connection; certainly no soul mate like people talked about these days. She decided coffee might be just the ticket to help her get through at least a part of the mound she was working on while she pondered her life. She lived a simple but good life; a widow's life. She had raised her only child to be a successful accountant. He'd built a successful accounting business. Although secretly she wished he was more successful as a husband and father; she was still proud of him. She wondered if she had taught him how to love. She wondered if anyone truly knew how to love. She shuddered and decided she had quite enough contemplating life for one day. She was relieved to see two familiar smiling faces looking through her glass door giving her a welcome distraction from her thoughts.

The doorbell jangled as Janie and Julie entered with a plastic container of receipts for their flower shop, *Hot Biscuits*. They had used Emma's services for several years. With Emma's help their books were always current.

"Thanks for all your hard work Emma; you'll never know how much we appreciate you keeping our books in such good order."

"That's right; we never worry about a thing."

"Oh it's my pleasure, I like to stay busy. May I get you girls some coffee? I was just about to make some fresh. You know you're always more than welcome to help yourselves. I do have some freshly baked banana nut bread; it's scratchy."

"Scratchy?"

"My son, Stephen always called made from scratch, scratchy."

"That sounds great Emma we'll have both."

Emma served the sweet bread while Janie made fresh coffee. She smiled as she watched the young florist fill the coffee maker with the gourmet stuff her daughter-in-law gave her for Christmas. She hoped it was still in date.

"Girls, I've been curious why your flower shop is called *Hot Biscuits*?"

"Oh, that's a great story. Our mother had been trying to raise tropical hibiscus plants out in the front yard when we were little girls. Those plants were new to everyone around here and quite exotic. She wanted to show the off to the neighborhood, you know."

Emma enjoyed the girls' rich southern accents.

"Daddy liked to fix things. He'd been trying to get an old weed eater running for quite some time. After he got it going he weed-eated everything in both the front and back yards. I think he worked on the neighbor's yard too. When Mama came home, he was so proud of himself he kept talking about the yard and how nice it looked, trimmed and all. Mama tried to be kind and appreciative, but then she just couldn't take it any longer and asked him what happened to the hibiscus?"

“Daddy said hot biscuits! I didn’t see any hot biscuits; so hibiscus flowers have been hot biscuits in our family ever since.”

All three ladies joined in the laughter. Emma had been acquainted with Janie and Julie’s parents and could tell they probably had dozens more wonderful stories just like that one.

After finishing their consultation and dessert; the two ladies excused themselves to their next appointment.

“We’ll be back at the end of the week to pick everything up for our appointment with our accountant, Ron Jenkins.”

“Oh don’t worry I’ll have everything ready.”

“Well, Jules did we forget anything?”

“We do need to stop by the store to pick up some things for the Sunday school party.”

Emma laughed as she watched the two sisters walk animatedly down her driveway like carefree butterflies. Janie and Julie’s lively personalities were always a bright spot to Emma’s week. She looked forward to being part of the fun the two young ladies brought with them everywhere they went. It was no wonder their flower shop was successful. They seemed to be social magnets and brought cheer to everyone they met.

Emma went back to the kitchen to prepare her lunch. She was thankful she decided so many years ago to buy a home that could accommodate her small bookkeeping business in the front and provide her a living area in the back. It was also a great perk that she was located on a main street in town for her customer’s easy access. Another day of eating alone; how she wished her son lived closer. It just never seemed like she and Stephen had much to say to one another. They just didn’t seem to have a lot in common, she guessed.

Emma thought about her grandson, Braden. He would be attending the local college in the fall. Perhaps he could be persuaded with an occasional home-cooked meal and visit her. Oh how she would love spending time with him.

She did have her business. Nevertheless, there were still a lot of lonely times; television and crossword puzzles just wasn’t enough to fill her mind or her heart. She thought she would dream about a vacation, maybe a cruise. She shook her head and laughed to herself thinking about the girls’ story, hot biscuits. She knew she wanted an adventure! Maybe some type of Club Med for seniors. Perhaps she would just take on another client or two; she could certainly use the money. For some reason, she just didn’t feel settled. She wanted something more, but she just didn’t know what that something was.



## **Sharons Cross Market**

Janie and Julie each pushed a shopping cart and Joe McDougal pushed a third. He laughed at the two ladies and their three carts. How did they ever seem to eat so much?

“Hey did you remember the dip?”

“Yeah, I think it’s in one of these bags.”

“Would you like for me to help you find it, then you’d know you have everything you need?”

Joe enjoyed being able to help others.

“I don’t think I got the dip mix; in fact I know I didn’t.”

“I’ll go back in the store and get what you need, just wait here.”

“That would be great, Joe.”

Janie gave Joe instructions on what she needed.

Julie looked at Janie with a sly gleam in her eye as they watched Joe go and get the needed ingredient.

“Are you thinkin’ what I’m thinkin’?”

“Maybe, what are you thinkin’?”

“I’m thinkin’ that Joe is such a sweet man.”

“He certainly is. He’s always kind – always thinkin’ of others. He’s quite the prayer warrior too.”

“No not any of that, can’t you see it?”

Janie and Julie as well as all the other customers of the local supermarket enjoyed Joe McDougal’s warm, welcoming attitude. He greeted everyone with a hearty smile, handshake, or bear hug. He always seemed to remember doctor’s appointments and would inquire about the results. He was mindful to ask about the outcome of the latest game the children played. He often would show up at the local ballpark to watch and cheer from the sidelines. Often customers searched for Joe in the store to update him on specific events because they knew he often prayed for their needs. It was well known that he would be in prayer for many who were struggling with illnesses or problems. He worked at the supermarket bagging groceries and taking purchases out to customers’ cars, not because he needed the money; he had a good savings and pension from the phone company, but because he loved people. Oh he had investments too. His son, Ethan, always took care of his financial matters.

He also enjoyed his many friends. It was important to him they share parts of their lives with him. He had had several opportunities to share the Gospel with many of them. He would lift each of the needs up to the Lord in prayer each evening. His little job and his prayer evenings filled his life completely, so he thought.

“See what?”

“It’s obvious, who are the two cutest people we know?” Julie answers Janie who stares blankly back.

“I mean Joe and Emma.”

“Joe and Emma?” Yeah, why haven’t we seen this before, they would make the cutest couple.”

“How do you think we should set this up?”

After a long discussion while delivering their orders, the two sisters decide to host a dinner party and invite both friends to attend and then of course excuse themselves so Emma and Joe can get to know each other better. The plan was simple.



“Hello, Emma? Hi, this is Janie. Julie and I are planning a dinner party and would be honored if you’d come.”

“You would, that would be great, I’ll send you a card in the mail as a reminder for your calendar. We’ll see you soon.”

“I got my end set up, how’d you do?”

“Joe said he doesn’t go out much at night, but he’d look forward to our dinner party.”

“Great then it’s all going to work out beautifully.”

“What shall we make for the main course?”

“I’m not sure, I think we’ll need to make a list and go shop.”

## Chapter 2

### The Meeting

#### Julie’s house

“Janie, what am I forgetting?”

“I can’t really think of anything else except dinner guests, I wonder what the hold up could be.”

The doorbell rang and Julie opened the door to find Joe holding a bouquet of simple garden flowers he had obviously grown in his yard, carefully tied with a simple yellow ribbon. She accepted the flowers as she watched Emma get out of her car and come up to the house.

“Joe McDougal this is Emma Denby.”

“I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“And I’m likewise.”

Emma was surprised to meet a gentleman; she was caught completely off guard. He was just a little taller than her, and was somewhat trim except for a belly that showed he’d struggled with his weight. Emma, however, was petite and thin. Both shared lovely silver hair.

“Dinner will be out on the patio.”

Julie escorted Joe and Emma outside that had been beautifully decorated with tiny white lights which hung from topiary trees, a trellis, and then lined the wooden deck. A single iron table was set with aromatic flowers, delicate china, and sparkling crystal glasses. Joe and Emma thought it strange that only two places were set. Each was led to their seats as Janie and Julie bounced into the house muttering excuses about the food.

“Do you have any idea what’s going on here?”

“I don’t even have a clue.”

Julie and Janie served the main course and then quickly disappeared back into the house without explanation.

“This is like something from an old movie.”

Joe and Emma both sat stunned trying to grasp the intentions of their two special friends.

“Mr. McDougal, I could be wrong, but I believe we have been set up. I apologize; somehow I think this is all my fault. I told the girls a few days ago that I was looking for a new adventure, but this is not exactly what I had in mind.”

“Well, it’s quite alright. I guess since we’re here and those girls have gone to so much trouble we might as well stay and get to know each other, besides dinner is free. So what kind of adventure were you considering?”

“Well I hadn’t really thought about it much. Those cruises on TV always look fun.”

“Like that old TV show?”

Both laugh as the girls continue to serve the various courses.

“They certainly have gone to all lot of trouble. I suppose we shouldn’t disappoint them, perhaps we should get to know each other no one can have too many friends.”

“That’s too true. Well, I guess we can play along, as Julie said, I’m Joe McDougal. My wife, Sarah, had her home-going almost a year ago. I mean she went home to be with the Lord. I have one son, Ethan, who is married and has twin girls, Megan and Maris.”

“How is it that you know our conniving hostesses, Mr. McDougal?”

“I work over at the Sharons Cross Market; I carry out their groceries at least twice a week but sometimes as much as to five times in a week. They can really shop! How is it you are acquainted with those two schemers?”

Julie gave Joe a sharp look with a raised eyebrow as she served a cool cucumber soup.

“I own *Denby Bookkeeping Service*. I bought that place after my husband died in the war; well World War II that is. It’s quite convenient. I’m able to work out of my home and have for I guess forty-five years, and that’s where I raised my son, Stephen.”

“Is that the little place around the corner from the pizza parlor that sells pizza-by-the-slice near the university?”

“Yes, that’s where I am.”

Julie and Janie continued to come and go from the house to the patio removing dishes and serving the next course all the while careful not to interrupt their guests’ conversation – even ignoring the couple when spoken to, when necessary. The two ladies had really out done themselves with the tasty dinner, they even topped the evening off with a flambé.

Afterwards, Emma and Joe had eaten so much they looked as if they each needed a ride home.

“I really don’t know what to say ladies. The meal was wonderful and so was the company. Can I walk you out to your car, Emma?”

“I believe that would be in keeping with the evening and it would certainly be in order, wouldn’t you think so girls?”

Janie and Julie didn’t speak. They both waived goodnight to their guests. They stood in the doorway watching Emma and Joe as they walked down the romantically lit sidewalk to Emma’s car. Both sisters gloated the rest of the evening over the triumph they felt with their matchmaking.

“I still don’t know why they went to all of this trouble for the likes of us, but it was a very nice evening, and the food was wonderful!”

“I was thinking, they did go to a lot of trouble tonight to introduce the two of us and I certainly enjoyed getting to know you, what would you say about checking out that buy-it-by-the-slice pizza place at lunch tomorrow. I’ve been wondering if it is still as good as it used to be?”

Emma panicked! She had not been asked out by a man in more years that she even cared to count. He was certainly a very nice man, and she had known the two girls for years, they wouldn’t get her into anything that was terrible. What was she thinking at her age being asked out? Hadn’t she been on a date tonight? Emma, for probably the first time in her life, was speechless.

“Now I don’t want to cause...”

She finally managed to nod her head and agreed to meet for lunch. Systematically, by memory, or repetition she started her car’s engine and drove to her safe little home.

Joe was surprised and even shocked by his lunch invitation. His wife had just died; he had never thought about seeing anyone else. Dating at his age, he wondered if people did that. He must be crazy. She was such a nice lady and she seemed so lonely. He always tried to help those in need and she certainly needed a friend. He knew he could be a friend to Emma. What would his beloved Sarah think? What would Ethan think? What ever was he going to do with Janie and Julie? Why would they be so interested in fixing up an old couple like Emma and him? Couple! One date and that makes them a couple? He wondered if dating went the way it used to back in the old days. He didn’t know if he was ready for anything like this. His life was just the way he wanted it. What was he thinking; he was just an old fool. Dating! He worked in order to get away from the house for a little while and see people, his dear friends. When he did get home in the evenings, he enjoyed his Bible study and his prayer time. He was usually exhausted after his time with the Lord so he would usually go to bed early. He would just make it all a matter of prayer and ask the Lord what He thought about it all.



Emma turned on a light in her bedroom still dazed by the events of the evening. What had happened to her? Oh she had dated a few times over the years, but never anyone that could hold a candle to her Hank. At first, after Hank died, she didn’t want Stephen to grow up with a stepfather and all that blended family stuff that was so common these days. Then as the years went by, she got used to things the way things were, comfortable. She had built a good life for herself and Stephen. She was ambitious and she had instilled ambition into Stephen, in fact a little too well. Stephen worked all the time and barely had time for his own family. That’s just how it is these days, everyone is busy. Additionally, Emma thought Joe wouldn’t even remember his invitation the next day, so she thought surely there was nothing really to worry about. With a sigh she resolved she would just go to bed and read a romance novel she had purchased recently. She had been looking forward to reading it since it was on the best seller’s list, and she finally found it in paperback. It took quite a while for her to relax from all the events of the evening. It took even longer for her to stop reading the same page over.

## Chapter 3

### The Lunch Date

Joe was up with the sun as usual. He thought he would have enough time to rake leaves from the yard and pick up trash that always seemed to accumulate from the neighbor's yard or was thrown from cars that passed by. While he worked, he noticed bright little sunbeams shooting off the rake. He smiled as he remembered the twinkling lights around the patio and the sparkling glasses from the night before. He also smiled as he thought of Emma. He was suddenly embarrassed by his thoughts. He remembered he said he would call her about lunch. He probably should not have made that promise. He didn't get her number, so he couldn't call. Wait a minute, he thought, he remembered she owns a business, now what was the name of it? He thought for a few more minutes while he raked, it was a bookkeeping business; surely there would be a listing in the telephone book. He would look it up when he finished his chores. Joe became nervous as he looked around the yard and found nothing left to be done. He needed to get ready for work. He paused by the phone waiting for it to give him courage to make the promised call. Joe hastily fled the room and readied himself for work. He looked at the telephone again, still silent. Joe sighed no help there he thought. He forced himself to sit and rummage through the yellow pages to find listings for bookkeeping businesses, after all a promise is a promise. He remembered it was over by the pizzeria. There it was *Denby Bookkeeping Service*. He stared at the number hoping it would somehow dial itself.



Emma had been busy all morning with one client after another each wanting to mail off reports or pick up payroll. Since she had not slept well the night before, she was exhausted. The added pressure of completing general ledgers and reports for so many clients didn't help. She thought she should probably buy a computer like everyone else, the thought was horrifying. Stephen used a computer in his business. She wouldn't even know how to turn one on. Besides, everyone knows you can't teach old dogs new tricks. She laughed imagining herself learning how to run a computer. She still had Hank's old military issue sidearm; she would probably shoot a computer the first day and put it out of her misery. Emma was startled by the telephone ringing. She began searching, she knew it was somewhere on her desk, she could hear it ringing and hoped whomever was calling would allow it to ring until she found the phone.

"Hello, Denby Bookkeeping."

"Good morning Emma, this is Joe, from last night over at Julie's house."

Joe had not been so nervous in years. Why did he say anything about lunch today? All he had to do was say goodnight and it would have been over.

"Oh yes, I remember, how are you today?"

"Fine, fine. I was calling you for something... oh yes, if I remember correctly last night we talked about checking out that little pizzeria?"

Emma panicked; she had forced herself to forget about the invitation because she didn't think he would call. That's how men are these days, they say they will call and never do; everyone knows that.

"Yes, I think that did come up, but I certainly don't expect you to..."

"Nonsense, I think we can beat the crowd if we get there by 11:30."

"Well, I think I can meet you there by then."

Emma surveyed her office and then the massive piles as she pondered the wisdom of her promise.

"There used to be a little table in the back; it's not too far from the kitchen but across the room from that awful jukebox. I don't know who picks the music for that thing it's loud and everything on it sounds like all the cars that go by. You know worse than a knocking engine. At least that's how it was last time I was there. Anyway, I'll see you there."

Emma sat down as she hung up the telephone in an attempt to recover from the conversation. She looked around her little office. What a mess! She only had an hour to tie up the loose ends so she could quickly begin work again in the afternoon. She began to organize piles of various clients' books, she knew there was probably an easier way but this one had worked for her for such a long time. She laughed as she remembered how her Hank used to tease her, he called her his "professional pilot" — pile-it here, pile-it there. She knew where everything was and almost never had any trouble finding anything. It was a perfect system.

Emma was startled as the clock chimed on the half-hour. Oh my, eleven-thirty so soon. I can't believe it; I'm late to meet Joe. She scurried around to find her purse and keys almost forgot to lock the front door on her way out. The drive over was short, but she knew it would be quicker to drive than to walk. Besides she would be winded when she arrived if she walked; of course a lady never should be winded.



Emma parked her car and walked gingerly into the cramped and crowded little restaurant waiting for her eyes to adjust to the dim lighting. Joe waived from the corner of the room just where he said he would be.

"I'm so sorry you had to wait, I was absorbed in work and lost track of time."

"Oh that's OK; I haven't been here very long."

He chuckled thinking he had actually been there for over a half an hour; he didn't want to be late. He was worried about securing the table he promised Emma. Joe nervously pulled out a chair for her.

Emma looked around the room as she removed her sweater and deposited her purse on a chair close by. She noticed their table was the only one with flowers. She remembered Joe brought flowers last night for Janie and Julie. These too were just simple garden varieties also tied with a yellow ribbon. She smiled thinking about his kind gesture.

"The flowers are lovely."

"Pansies, daffodils, and irises, grow 'em in my yard, they're kinda like weeds."

"I've never had a lot of success in growing plants, but I wish I could."

“They grow like crazy, just throw out some seeds, give ‘em a little water and sunshine, that’s about it.”

You make it sound easy.”

“Oh it is easy.”

The owner anxiously waited for their order. He seemed put-out as he approached the table. He felt he had been losing money since the table had been tied up for so long.

“Yes, I think so, what you would like Emma?”

“Oh, I’ll just have whatever you are having Joe.”

“Well in that case, do you still have that pepperoni and cheese deluxe? We’ll have two with a couple of crèmes sodas.”

Emma and Joe were laughing so hard they hardly noticed the pizza had been brought to their table. Emma felt warm inside as she listened to Joe’s prayer of thanks for their meal. They laughed and talked for the next two hours. Finally, Emma decided if she did not get back to work she would be up half the night trying to get caught up.

“I would like to thank you for such a wonderful lunch.”

“Oh, it was nothing.”

He finally noticed the time and that he was already late for work; something he had never been before.

“I would like to show my appreciation by fixing you dinner one night.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary,”

He certainly did not want to press the issue too much since he did not know what they should do next. This whole dating thing was new to him. There it was again – dating, what possibly could he be thinking. He was simply too old to be dating! Besides they were only getting to know each other as friends.

“Well it wouldn’t be any trouble just meatloaf or something simple.”

Joe didn’t really know how to respond. He was at a loss for words and he really enjoyed her company. Meatloaf was his favorite, especially home made.

“Perhaps you have more important things....” She felt he might need help in finding a way out of an awkward situation.

Joe suddenly realized unless he responded quickly and carefully he might lose a very good friend.

“Actually meatloaf is one of my favorite dishes.”

“Would Thursday evening, around six o’clock be a good time for you?”

“Sounds great, I’ll be looking forward to it.”

Emma carefully removed the flowers from the table as Joe reached for her sweater and helped her put it on.

Joe walked Emma out to the parking lot and helped her into her car. He waived as he watched her drive back to her little office. He remembered he was supposed to be at work.



Joe couldn’t think what he should do – he should probably call his boss and let her know that he was running a little late.

“May I speak with Marybeth please?”

“Marybeth, this is Joe, just wanted to let you know I am on my way to work and there’s no need for you to be alarmed, and I’m sorry to be late.”

“Joe, we’ve been worried, you’ve never been late before. Some of the customers noticed and have been asking about you...”

“I’m fine, I’ll be right there.”

“OK, I’ll let everyone know.”

As Joe reached to hang up the telephone, he could hear Marybeth give an order to make an announcement. He hated being fussed over. He had been more embarrassed in the past two days than he had been in fifty years.



Emma looked around the room and could not believe she had left her little office in such a clutter. She went into the kitchen to look for a small vase for her flowers. Afterwards, she started to tidy up the office when the bell on the door sounded, she had a customer. It was none other than Janie and Julie, her benevolent hostesses.

“OK Emma, tell us everything.”

“Tell you everything about what?”

“Don’t even try that coy game with us, give up the details.”

Janie plopped down in a chair and propped up her feet on Emma’s desk.

Julie went to the coffeepot. Seeing it was empty, she decided to make a fresh pot.

“Well I did want to send you both a thank you card for a wonderful evening and dinner.”

“So when are you goin’ to see Joe again?”

“Now why do you think we would see each other again?”

“Of course you’d see him again, he’s the sweetest man.”

“If you must know I had lunch with him today and we are having dinner on Thursday night.”

“Ohhh, this is even better than we first thought.”

“Love is in the air...”

Julie sang as she finished putting on the pot coffee.

“Ha ha.”

“The joke may be on you two in the end, what in the world were you two thinking?”

“We were thinkin’ there were two of the most fun people we know that really needed to meet so they could have fun together.”

“You are incorrigible, fun people.”

“So what’s for dinner?”

“Where did you go for lunch?”

“What do you mean?”

“Dinner with Joe,”

“Pizza. I thought I would just make a little meatloaf...”

“No, no, no that’s all wrong.”

“What is wrong with it?”

“I think you should make a gourmet dish with a lemon sauce.”

"I do well to cook meatloaf without burning it. In fact I still burn it about half the time."

"Well if you insist."

Emma gathered the information the ladies needed for their accountant so they could go to their next appointment.

"I guess since we have what we need, we'll be off."

"Yeah, we need to stop by the market and pick up a few things."

"Oh, you wouldn't ...?"

Emma asked with a hint of urgency in her voice surely life would never be the same.

Emma went back to her accounts when the bell jingled again. She did not even turn around but inquired, if there something that she left out?

"No Grandma, nothing left out," said a handsome young man as he quietly shut the door.

"Oh Braden! I'm so glad you stopped by. Your mother told me you were going to go to the university here at Sharon's Cross. I hoped you'd stop by and see me."

"Grandma don't cry, I wanted to make you happy by seeing you."

"You have more than you will ever know, now tell me what your plans are for school."

"I'm here this week for orientation and then I'll move into the dorm next month."

"You can stay here with me if you would like, the price is right — free."

"No Grandma that's not necessary, I have already signed up for a dorm and a roommate."

He was a little saddened; he wanted to live with his grandmother. His father insisted he move into the dorm so he would not be a burden to her. He had always wanted to get to know her better. He often wondered what she was like. He had not been around her very much but the few times he had, he always knew she was his biggest fan and greatest champion. Living close to her was the reason he picked Widmere University. He had several choices of schools, but he wanted to be close to Grandma Emma. His mom loved her too, but his dad seemed too busy working to spend much time with him not to mention Grandma.

"What are you going to study Braden?"

"Dad wants me to major in accounting but I really can't see myself doing that. So, I've decided not to decide for a year. Just take some basic required courses and find out what greater good for humanity may happen through my life."

"I think that's a grand plan. Ok, I think I have done just about all the damage a body can do in one little space, shall we go into the kitchen, you look hungry. Braden, are you staying in the dorm this week?"

"I'm staying in a hotel over on Riverside Drive."

"Nonsense, I'd really like for you to stay with me."

"You know Grandma, I'd like that too."

"How about you checking out of that hotel and bring your things over here and I'll find something to cook for dinner?"

"That sounds great, it won't take me long."

He left out the front door. After closing the blinds and turning over the "open" sign, Emma waltzed into the kitchen, feet barely touching the floor. She looked into the

freezer to see what possibilities might be there when a package of hamburger suddenly brought a frightening memory to her. Joe – meatloaf – Thursday night. Oh no, what was she going to do? How would she ever explain Braden to Joe and worse how would she explain Joe to Braden?

Emma paced as Braden came in and out through the back door unloading his car.

“Everything OK Grandma?”

“Braden, I have a confession to make,”

Braden sat down a suitcase and sat on top of it to be closer to her.

“Braden, I am so ashamed of myself and I don’t know where to begin so I’ll begin at the beginning. Last night I went to a dinner party. Rather, I thought it was a dinner party but two clients decided to surprise me and fix me up with a man! I had dinner with him and then he asked me to lunch today. I just wanted to say thank you for a nice dinner and lunch so I invited him to dinner Thursday night.”

Emma tried to explain as a tear slipped down her face.

“I hope you’re not disappointed in me but we are just friends. Just friends Braden. That’s all!”

“These clients of yours must think you’re very special to go to that much trouble. I think it’s great you have a friend Grandma, can I meet him some time?”

“You think it’s great?”

“Yeah, I can’t wait until Mom hears, she’s a hopeless romantic.”

“Don’t let your father know just yet, he won’t be pleased. Thursday night, Joe is coming for dinner, you can meet him then.”

“Oh no, I am not going to spoil this for you by sticking around. In fact I’m having second thoughts about staying with you now.”

“No I want you to stay with me, besides he will only be here on Thursday night for dinner.”

“Grandma, in less than a week you will have had dinner twice and lunch once with, what’s his name? Sounds serious to me.”

Braden remembered his mother talking about how she wished her mother-in-law would find happiness again and the last thing he wanted to do was prevent it from happening.

“His name is Joe McDougal.”

“What else do I need to know about Mr. McDougal? Maybe I need to have a little talk with him about dating my grandmother...”

“Now that will be enough young man.”



“Paper or plastic?”

Joe asked with a big smile.

“You know we really don’t mind, either is fine.”

“Have you seen Emma lately Joe?”

“As a matter of fact I did see her at lunch, she’s a nice lady. What was it that happened to her husband? Why did she never remarry?”

“He sure has a lot of questions, doesn’t seem like they talked much.”

“Oh we talk plenty about gardening, bookkeeping, and nosey customers.”

“I’m not sure of all the details about Emma’s husband except he died in the war.”

“That would be the big one – World War II. She has a son and has never remarried.”

“I know that already. How come she never remarried?”

“She’s been waiting for Mr. Right, someone like you.”

He could see he was going to get nowhere with these two and he also knew he didn’t want to give them any more to gloat about. He whistled while he wheeled out their bags to their delivery van.

“Joe we have a fresh supply of roses, would you like us to deliver some to Emma tomorrow?”

Joe just laughed as they got into their van and drove away. He wondered what Emma was doing this evening. He thought he might give her a call when he got home. Tomorrow was mid-week service at church; she might like to go too, if she didn’t already go somewhere else. He had not even thought to ask her about her faith. He was careful to ask everyone he met about his or her relationship with the Lord, but it never crossed his mind to ask Emma. He asked the Lord for forgiveness in the oversight and knew he would make it a priority to find out about Emma’s beliefs.



He turned on the water hose to the yard and flower beds as he walked into the dark house groping for a light switch. He went immediately to the telephone to call and invite Emma to church tomorrow night.

“Hello.”

Joe was surprised that a young man answered the phone.

“Oh I’m sorry I must have misdialed.” Joe was disappointed to think he had gotten a wrong number.

“Not if you’re calling Denby Bookkeeping. Do you want to talk to Emma Denby? I’m Braden, her grandson.”

“She told me about you but I didn’t know you were at her house.”

“I’m attending orientation at the university this week. I’m staying with my grandma. If you’ll hold on, I’ll tell her you want to talk to her.”

“No that won’t be necessary; I don’t want to intrude...”

“Hello, this is Emma Denby.”

“Emma, this is Joe McDougal. I don’t want to intrude on your visit with your grandson and since he is there, maybe we should...”

“Braden will be here for a week and then he is going back home until he moves into the dorm next month.”

“Maybe we should postpone Thursday night for some other time.”

“No, Braden already has plans for Thursday night, so dinner is still on if you are interested.”

“Interested? Oh, I never turn down homemade meatloaf but there was also another reason for my call, Emma, tomorrow night is mid-week service at church. Do you go to church anywhere?”

“Well, no I don’t attend church regularly, I know I should...”

“How about I pick you up then? You can bring Braden too. He can meet some of the young people that live here in Sharon’s Cross.”

“Yes, we would love to, but I probably need to drive since Braden will be coming with me.”

Joe gave her directions to the little church and said goodnight. After he hung up the phone he returned to his frozen dinner, Bible study, and prayer time.



“So where are you going Grandma?”

“You mean where are we going? We are going to church.”

“As Joe said it will give you a chance to meet some of the young people that live here.”

“I’ve gone to church a few times, Grandma. But different churches teach completely different things. It would be easier if a church would just teach what the Bible says.”

“Yes, that would simplify things, wouldn’t it?”

## Chapter 4

### The Courtship

Emma didn’t think work could take so long. She was still struggling to get caught up. She actually looked forward to being with Joe and attending and church with him. The thought of having a relationship was difficult for her because she didn’t believe any man could take Hank’s place. She knew he actually wasn’t taking Hank’s place but finding his own place. She had never really enjoyed attending church before, but she would certainly give it another try especially since it meant so much to Joe.

Braden had been busy with freshman orientation all day, which relieved Emma. She loved that he was staying with her but found it difficult to work when he was there because she wanted to entertain him. She knew his mother warned him about just that which was one of the reasons he agreed to live in the dorm in the beginning. Perhaps she could still change the situation.

“Hey Grandma, how did your day go?”

Braden came through her office with a backpack overflowing with pamphlets.

“Oh, I’ve been able to sort things out and try to come up with some ideas how to get caught up.”

“You need to get a computer Grandma, it would help a lot.”

I wouldn’t even know how to turn one on.”

“It wouldn’t take you long to learn all about it and then you would wonder why you didn’t get one sooner.”

“You seem to have a lot of faith in me. Remember church tonight at seven o’clock.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for anything.”



Joe had been looking forward to seeing Emma at church. He watched through the glass doors as Julie and Janie came up the walk. He held the door open for them since they had several large flower arrangements for the church in tow.

“Good evening Joe, seen Emma lately?”

“Actually I was waiting for her; she will be coming to church tonight.”

“That’s great, we’ve invited her several times, but I guess we are not the chosen vessels to get Emma to come to church.”

“Careful, no bitterness.”

Joe laughed then he saw Emma’s car pulling into the parking lot as he excused himself to allow Janie and Julie to bring in the rest of the decorations and proceed with their tasks.

“Hello, you must be Braden?”

Joe immediately saw the family resemblance except Braden was quite tall, but thin like his grandmother. Both had the same blue-green eyes.

“Yes sir.”

“Hey Grandpa.”

“Well if it’s not my peanut-monkey.”

Joe loved to tease his teenage granddaughter who walked over to meet him with a big hug.

“Oh Grandpa you really need to come up a better line than that or you’ll never get a girl.”

“Emma and Braden, I would like to introduce you to my granddaughter Maris.”

Braden could hardly believe his eyes. Maris was a beauty with long blonde hair and big brown eyes. Emma reached to shake Maris’ hand which she promptly complied.

“It is nice to meet you Maris, I am Amelia Denby, but please call me Emma and this is my grandson, Braden Denby. Braden will be attending the university; he is here for orientation. Next month he will be moving into the dorm.”

“That’s great. I’m going to orientation too, what’s your major? I’ll show you where we sit during mid-week service. Afterwards, we have refreshments in the gym; do you think you could stick around?”

Maris led the way for Braden.

“She’ll take good care of him and introduce him around.”

“She is such a pretty girl; does she live here in town?”

“She and her twin sister, Megan, were born and raised here. My son Ethan and his family live over off of Riverside Drive.”

“That’s the ritzy part of town, lake-front property?”

“Yeah, he is an attorney, stays way too busy.”

“I know all about workaholic sons. My son Stephen is an accountant. That’s Braden’s father. He’s too busy for Braden most of the time.”

Joe held the door to the auditorium open for Emma and found a spot in the front. Emma would have preferred to sit in the back but Joe seemed to have his favorite place. The pastor, a pleasant looking man of about thirty-five, came over to greet Emma along with a host of others who looked to be regular members including several

children. Emma was thrilled to see a few familiar faces especially those of Julie and Janie, each hugged Emma and let her know they were absolutely delighted to see her. Emma smiled to herself as she watched people congregate to what looked like assigned seats.

Emma sat intently listening to every word the pastor said about charity. Charity. She hadn't really thought much about it. He said it was all about love, unconditional love. She always assumed charity was leftover items from a yard sale, the things given to charity. He said charity is unmerited, unsolicited, unworthy love. The love Jesus has for us is charity. So Jesus loves each person exactly the same, unconditionally. She thought that she would think on this more later. Joe seemed to enjoy the service too. He seemed focused on every word.

"It was good to have you in our service tonight, Mrs. Denby was it?"

"Please call me Emma, everyone does. And it was a pleasant evening and I will definitely think about your message."

Joe walked Emma out to her car then noticed she was searching the parking lot.

"I'll show you where Braden might be."

They walked over to the gym to see a large group of teens gathered around a table enjoying refreshments and noisily chatting.

"Hi Grandma, Joe; Maris told me she could give me a ride back to your house in a little while."

"Actually I thought I might leave you my keys and I would see if Joe would give me a ride home. I'll see you a little later, but not too late."

Emma handed Braden her car keys and she and Joe walked out in to the warm summer evening laughing as they got into Joe's car and headed across town.

"Well what do you make of that?"

Maris seemed shocked but Braden just smiled.

"Where do you think they're going his house is over by the university in the opposite direction?"

"Absolutely no telling."

"I've never seen Grandpa act like that before. I wonder what Dad will say. I don't think I'll be the one to tell him."

"I've never seen my grandma like this before either and I don't think my dad would be too happy either. He's not usually happy about very much though."



Joe drove around a while and then stopped at the ice cream parlor.

"Did you ever go to that one over on Fourth Street?"

"Oh yes, Hank and I went there when we were courting... Oh, I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize Emma, I know you're a widow. It's OK by me if you want to talk about Hank. He was an important person in your life and that makes him an important person to me. I was married too, and I know what it means to say goodbye to your helpmeet; not too much is harder than that.

Joe and Emma enjoyed a long conversation over a banana split until finally Emma noticed the wall clock, eleven-thirty. She could not believe the time had passed so quickly.

"It's past my bedtime, I hope you will excuse me, I still have information that needs to be gathered for clients."

"No need to explain, I need to be at work early tomorrow morning."



Thursday morning

Emma could hardly believe the week seemed to go by so quickly. She met Joe on Monday night and it was only Thursday. Tonight he was coming to dinner! She was amazed that so much could take place in such a short period of time. The same time last week she was alone and this week; she had two men in her life. She was enjoying having Braden around and was not looking forward to him going back home and then him moving into the dormitory. Somehow she wanted to convince him to live with her. That might not be difficult but it might be tricky to convince Stephen to allow Braden to stay with her. She was getting settled down to work when the bell on the door jingled. Ron Jenkins, the accountant most of her clients used, entered. It had been a while since Emma had spoken to him. She always enjoyed his company.

"Hi, Ron would you like some coffee?"

"Yes, that would be great. Well I don't know how to say this, so I'll get right to the point. I came by to let you know my future plans since it will have an impact on you too."

He accepted the cup of coffee from Emma as she moved some files off a chair so he could sit down. Emma got a fresh cup of coffee for herself too; since she had no idea where she had left the one she started the day with.

"I have decided to retire. My doctor has advised me that my heart simply can't go through another tax season. So on Monday, I will start settling accounts and help clients find another accountant before the end of the year to ease as many of their burdens as possible."

"I really hate to hear about your medical problems but I certainly understand."

"I will be working through the quarterly reports and hopefully have all of my clients taken care of by the end of the year for a smooth transition. I hope to close my office by then."

Emma saw the sadness and defeat in his eyes; she knew he was forced to close a part of his life that he did not wish to close or perhaps he was not ready. She shuddered as she considered her own mortality. She hated mortality moments, which seemed to come more frequently than when she was young.

"Ron I will do everything I can to help you retire smoothly. Have you thought about the possibility of selling your business?"

"Yeah, I've thought about it, but I can't think of anyone that would be interested in buying it. I can't afford to give it away but I would like to be out of the daily workings of it too."

"My son is an accountant, I wonder if he would like to expand his business. His son, my grandson will be attending the university so he might be making more trips to Sharon's Cross. I'll give him a call and inquire."

Emma thought out the possibilities of not only having Braden close by but also Stephen and Debby visiting on occasion. She enjoyed Debby's company very much. Braden is a lot like his mother, fun to be around.

"That would be better for everyone if that could happen."

"I'll let you know what Stephen has to say about the proposition."

Emma watched as Ron left. Ron didn't know whether to be excited about Emma's idea or not since it sounded too good to be true. Selling the business would provide him more money to retire and create more options for him and his wife, Mary. Lately, Mary seemed to look like she had lost all hope with Ron's heart condition and then still having two children at home with college to pay for in a couple of years.



After Ron left, Emma immediately picked up the phone to call her son but got a hesitant receptionist instead.

"Hello, is Stephen busy? My name is Emma Denby. I'm Stephen's mother. Is he there?"

"Hello Stephen? It's so good to hear your voice."

"Hello Mother. I have a meeting in a few minutes."

"Well I wanted to tell you I have enjoyed Braden so much. It has meant a lot to me that he would stay with me this week."

"Braden is staying there with you? He was told not to. I can't believe that he would be so disobedient and rebellious."

"Now wait a minute, I insisted Braden stay with me. Besides he's saving you a little money by not staying in that expensive, cold hotel."

Emma fought back the pain to know Braden was forbidden to stay with her. She was glad the accommodations had turned out the way they had.

"Was there something you called for Mother? I'm really pressed for time."

"Actually there is. You know Ron Jenkins, the accountant I have worked with all these years, keeping books for his clients? Well, the doctor has told him he must retire."

"Mother is there an end to this story? I'm late already for a meeting, my paying clients are waiting."

"I was thinking this might be a good business venture for you. I don't know the particulars about the sale, but I would think that it might be a good investment. Not to mention Braden being at the university, the business would be a very good excuse for you and Debby to see him more often you know you could check on him every now and then."

"That all sounds very nice Mother, it would also keep you in a job wouldn't it? Maybe you should think about following Mr. Jenkins' lead and retire yourself."

"Won't you even look into the possibility of expanding your company over here in Sharon's Cross?"

"OK, if I can get to my meeting, I promise I will check into the possibility of buying out Mr. Jenkins. I'll need the phone number of his attorney to give to Debby so she can do some research on it. By the way, tell Braden to call home tonight."

Emma did not know whether to be excited at the possibility of helping out her life-long friend or be depressed that she angered her son and possibly got Braden into trouble. She took deep breaths until she finally felt composed enough to call Ron and get the information Debby needed. She thought back to the sermon she had heard on charity -- perfect unmerited, unconditional love. She loved Stephen like that, even with his abusive telephone calls. She just wished she could get through to him before it is too late. She knew she had to find Braden and warn him about his father's ill temper. Then the door opened and Braden came through with a smile that could stop the vilest temper.

"Why look so down Grandma? Don't you have a date tonight with Joe?"

"I just got off of the phone with your father. I spilled the beans about you staying here. I'm sorry I didn't mean to get you into trouble, I just didn't think there would be any harm done by you staying here with me."

"Grandma, I stayed here with you because I wanted to. I'm not going to let Dad bully me. I've enjoyed my stay with you more than you'll know. I came by because I wanted to let you know I'll be playing softball on Saturday with Maris' church. They have a co-ed team and we will be playing against another church team. I was wondering if you would like to come and watch."

"Oh, I would love to. I can't wait. I'll be the loudest cheerleader on the sidelines. How fun that sounds!"

"Oh, by the way, your father wants you to call him tonight."

"Don't worry Grandma I won't be intruding on your evening with Joe. I'll call Dad and then I plan to go to a devotional tonight with Maris."

"You've been spending a lot of time with Maris lately."

"Not to worry Grandma, there is nothing there besides a great friendship. Besides, if you and Joe get married, I'll finally have a cousin or two. What do you know about Maris' twin sister?"

"Nothing really; who said anything about getting married? Don't you think that it's a little soon since I haven't even known Joe a week?"

The bell on the door jingled, it was Joe, holding another bouquet of garden flowers tied with another yellow ribbon.

"I hope I'm not too early."

Joe looked around her office it looked like children had been left unattended to play in the middle of it all.

"No not at all. I was just about to tidy up the place. It's been a busy day."

The telephone rang as Braden reached to answer it.

"Hi Mom, I was going to call in a little while. Yeah Grandma and I have been having a great time."

Joe busied himself in the kitchen putting the flowers he brought into a glass jar.

Braden took the cordless phone into his bedroom.

"I had a rather disturbing talk with my son today. You know, Ron Jenkins, the accountant? He is being forced to retire by his doctor, bad heart he says. I thought Stephen might want to expand his firm by adding one here. You know with Braden at the university, it does make at least a little sense."

"Sounds like a great idea if anyone was to ask me."

Emma laughed at the prospect of either of their opinions being taken seriously by Stephen.

Braden returned with a surprised look on his face.

"If you get a chance you can tell your friend Mr. Jenkins retiring isn't so bad, I've done it twice."

"Is everything ok, Braden?"

The young man plopped down into a chair.

"Mom told me about the conversation you had earlier with Dad. She said she wants Dad to look into it seriously. She said Dad doesn't want to but she won't take no for an answer. She said they would come next week and see what happens from there."

"I always did like Debby a lot. I thought right from the start she would be good for your father."

Braden said his good-byes and left for the evening.

Emma decided to just turn out the light in her office. She and Joe put together a wonderful meatloaf along with a couple of vegetables then decided to walk down the street to the ice cream shop. Again, they had another wonderful evening together.



Saturday was a warm and sunny day; perfect for a softball game. Emma and Joe decided to go together and bring water, chips, dip, and other essential items they thought the players might need or enjoy. Emma brought a folding table she used during tax season to serve on. Joe noticed two familiar shapes walking toward him. He suddenly panicked inside as he realized one was Nancy, his daughter-in-law. He simply didn't consider any other family members would attend the game, especially not her. He wished he had not made plans to be with Emma today. Not with Nancy there too. Emma seemed to notice Joe's change and became quickly aware of a problem. She continued to take food out of the grocery bags and put them on the table for the ball players.

"Hello Dad."

"Hello Nancy. I didn't realize you would be coming to the game. Is Ethan coming too?"

"He's at the office, as usual,"

Nancy seemed to know instantly that Emma and Joe were there together.

"I'm Nancy McDougal."

Emma offered her hand as she noticed Nancy's eyes narrowed obviously in an effort to size up Emma, as though she could see right through to her soul.

Emma tried to shake off the feeling that Nancy was doing anything but introducing herself. After all Maris was a delightful girl and this woman had raised her. Still Emma had an unsettling feeling inside that Nancy was more foe than friend.

"Nancy, I would like you to meet my friend, Emma."

Joe introduced Emma as if she was the most incredible person in the world, which to Joe she was quickly becoming so.

"I'm pleased to make your acquaintance Nancy."

"Charmed."

Emma didn't know what to think about Nancy but she feared whatever happened, Nancy was not going to be nice. She looked out on the field at Maris in her modest clothing, and old sneakers wondering how she turned out the way she did. Maris seemed to have inherited a lot of qualities from her father's side of the family.

Joe was suddenly embarrassed by the shame he felt in being with Emma, he also enjoyed being with her. He began to explore his feelings within himself. He knew he was certainly old enough to have a special friend and he was not married any longer but had been widowed for such a short time. Perhaps it was just the way Nancy made him feel. Maybe it was just too soon to be thinking this way. She was always the high and mighty society socialite. He often thought Ethan had married her to help gain him respect in his law practice. His focus was quickly changed as he watched Maris running the bases after hitting a double and stealing third; she was nothing like her mother. She was her father's daughter. Unlike her twin sister, Megan, who seemed to have been given a double dose of Nancy's genes.

"Joe?"

Emma repeated her question and finally got his attention.

"Oh, I'm sorry I think you've caught me daydreaming."

"I forgot to buy ice, I thought I would go to the quick shop and pick up a bag do we need anything else?"

"No need, I can do that. Looks like you have just about gotten everything ready."

Maris ran over to the table Joe and Emma sat up out of breath reaching for a soda.

"Thanks Emma. You and Grandpa have out done yourselves. This is just what I needed."

"Well you're welcome."

"I'm glad my grandfather has you for a friend."

"I'm glad that you think so, we seem to be getting to know each other quite well, and we've become great friends. Although I don't know that everyone else would share your opinion."

"Oh you probably mean my mother."

"Why would you think I meant your mother?"

"My mother can be difficult; you might want to watch out for her."

"Well I don't want to cause any problems."

"Please don't let my mother or any of her tricks stand in the way of your friendship with my grandfather."

Emma watched as Maris ran back to the dugout and the game. She secretly wished no one knew about herself and Joe, it was easier to get to know him without having to worry about who thought their relationship was inappropriate. Perhaps she should end whatever was going on with Joe now so that someone might be kept from being hurt – someone like herself.

The game ended with shouts of victory and moans of defeat. Maris and Braden came over to the table already planning a rematch to save their team's honor. Joe and Emma served the remainder of the snacks to both teams and decided to take a walk along the shore of the tiny lake. They could feed the rest of the uneaten bread to the ducks. Emma thought the timing might be just right to settle things once and for all. Joe finished packing his pickup truck with the ice chest and other accoutrements when

Nancy came over to offer her help. Joe noticed was it typical behavior for Nancy to show up just as the work was completed and offer her services.

"I see you two have things quite under control, Dad would you like for me to follow you home and help you unload those things?"

"No need, I'm not going home Nancy."

Joe took Emma's arm and lead her toward the lake.

"I thought we might provide the ducks with a little snack today."

"There are some things I have wanted to talk to you about."

Emma looked back to see a very disgruntled Nancy. Nancy wondered what her husband would think about all the nonsense his father had been up to. She couldn't imagine what the old man was thinking, dating at his age! She began planning how she would use this bit of information to her advantage.

Emma and Joe walked and tossed bread crumbs to the seemingly starved ducks, which attacked the tasty morsels as if they had not eaten in ages.

"Joe, I don't really know how to say this, but I've been wondering how long we were going to let this go on."

Joe continued tossing bread to the famished ducks.

"What I'm trying to say is that Janie and Julie really didn't think about what they were doing, introducing us like they did. I don't know why they did it, but anyway, maybe we should just stop pretending things are the same for us as for anyone else..."

"I know what you are trying to say Emma. You are trying to let me down easy. I watch television too you know. As for Janie and Julie fixing us up, well I can't help but think you are simply the best thing that has happened to me in a while. I thought I was happy just going to church and work, and working in the yard. But there has been a void in my life since my wife died. I have found you fill that void. We have had a great time getting to know each other, but if you want all this to end just because Nancy might have some nasty scheme up her sleeve, you may not be the person I thought you were. I thought you were someone that would not be run off by the Nancys of the world but would stand up for yourself. I don't want our friendship to end no matter what Nancy, Ethan, or anyone else thinks. You know Braden and Maris don't think our friendship is ridiculous or bad. They seem to be encouraging it."

"You know Joe I feel exactly the same way, but I thought you might want out..."

"Well enough of that, I've got some yard work to do, how about you making some of that fizzy lemonade you do so well while I tend to my chores and do some hobnobbing around the house this evening?"

"I think I can manage that."

## Chapter 5

Emma carried a tray of lemonade and cookies out to the patio. Joe was busy pulling weeds from one of his flower beds. She marveled as she looked out over the expanse of the Joe's yard. It included a vegetable garden, three separate flower beds and a fountain. It was truly a work of art. She sat down on a rickety redwood bench a little fearful that it would not support her weight, although she was a small woman. She thought how perfect an old fashioned porch swing would be. Maybe she would look into the possibility of having one built as a gift for Joe.

“That sure looks good Emma.”

Joe walked over to the patio wiping his brow with his sleeve while tucking his well worn cap under his arm.

“I’ll try and leave you a little taste.”

“Your yard is breathtaking; you’ve really put a lot of work into making it truly wonderful.”

“Oh, I just add a little each year. Come on I’ll show you around. This is my hanging garden. According to the Bible, Old king Nebuchadnezzar had them all over Babylon, all built for his wife, so the Bible scholars say.”

Emma was enthralled by the vines and flowers that spilled over a wall and then also grew up several trellises as well as a tiny gazebo. Several butterflies flittered around the colorful blossoms. She also saw a hummingbird. There was a bench in the center of another flower bed, and beyond it a vegetable garden at the edge of the yard.

“I’m sorry I don’t know the names of flowers like I probably should.”

She was still in awe of the perfection of the small flowers outlining the edges of the garden with the more majestic flowers toward the center. Roses and lilies graced the crowning flora in abundance. The mixture of fragrances seemed to explode in the cool of the evening.

“That will give me something to teach you now won’t it? This part of the yard has lilies and roses in dedication to King Solomon and his lady love, the Shulamite. How do you make this lemonade?”

“Oh every since Stephen was little, he liked it best with what he called ‘green soda’. So I still like to make it just the way he liked it.”

Emma had never studied the Bible much but she did know that Song of Solomon was a love story; she desperately tried to hide the blushing heat in her face.

“How about we go back to the house and just sit by the window so we can see what I forgot to do.”

Joe sensed Emma had become uncomfortable.

“There’s a Bible study that meets on Thursdays at noon over at the church; they are a very nice bunch of ladies. Do you think you might be interested in going? I would love to introduce you to an old friend. Her name is Sara Gray. She has been running that Bible study for decades. They call it the Brown Bag Bible Study; since you bring your lunch and study the Bible during the lunch hour. A lot of these ladies work; so this arrangement has worked for them for a long time.”

Emma agreed to go to the Bible study, but she was afraid she would be uncomfortable and feel out of place. Since she didn’t know much about the Bible, she hoped she would be able to familiarize herself with the various books as well as some of the Bible stories so she would not feel too embarrassed by not even knowing where to look when the lesson was announced. Joe sensed her tension, almost reading her mind; he went into his bedroom and brought out a little bookmark with all the books of the Bible listed as well as a few other handy items he felt might help Emma.



Joe saw Emma safely home. She got into her favorite pajamas, dusted off her old Bible, and sorted through all the things Joe had given her. She was determined not

to feel foolish when she went to the Bible study. She knew most women her age, mid seventies, would be well versed in the scriptures. She read the overview of several books, timelines, and some important things the Bible publisher printed at beginning of each book. She felt she was doing very well and was quite proud of herself for the progress she had made. This might not be so bad after all, she thought. Then she realized she might not retain as much of the information as she did when she was younger.

“Grandma?”

Braden was a little afraid as he tried to gently shake her awake.

“Oh Braden, I was just going over some things before Thursday.”

“Are you trying to learn everything about the Bible before your Bible study?”

“Well yes, I don’t want people to think I’m a heathen or something.”

“Grandma I don’t think anyone would think of you as a heathen. I think they would probably want to help you discover the scriptures. I’ve been going to some devotionals with Maris and no one has ever made me feel stupid or anything. Just go and try not to worry about how much you feel you should know. Besides Maris will be there too; she won’t let anyone get away with mistreating you.”

“Oh good, a friendly face; Maris seems like such a nice girl.”

“Now remember we are only friends, Grandma. Maris has been telling me they will be starting a new study, Romans. I’ve always wondered how we Gentiles fit into the ‘bigger picture’.”

He saw a glimmer of confusion on his grandmother’s face so he explained.

“You see, Paul was a preacher to the Gentiles even though he was a Jew. He went on several missionary journeys preaching and teaching salvation through Jesus Christ. He wrote the book of Romans to Christians who lived in Rome. Romans were known to be practical people. So, Romans is a practical book for us today. I didn’t know anything about the Bible, but the youth pastor is a great teacher.”

“Oh my, I don’t think I’ve accomplished anything by cramming tonight.”

“Just let the Holy Spirit work Grandma. You can count on the Lord to help you learn at the pace you need. There is something else I need to tell you Grandma. The other night at the services, I asked Jesus to forgive my sins, be Lord of my life, and to save me eternally. I’m planning to be baptized on Sunday.”

“Oh that’s wonderful Braden, have you told your mom and dad? I’m sure they would like to be there with you. You know I wouldn’t miss that for anything in the world.”

“I think Mom was happy, but I haven’t told Dad yet. I don’t think he will be very impressed. He’ll probably think it has something to do with a girl, but it doesn’t. I accepted Jesus into my heart and life for me.”

Emma wasn’t quite sure what Braden had in mind with his new-found religion but she knew whatever it was she would support the decisions he made. She had never thought much about spiritual matters. She always tried to do the right thing whatever the circumstance; surely that was all that was important. She thought being a good person was all that was necessary, but now she was not so sure. The sermon she heard was giving her a completely different idea. The pastor said that there really is not “good” in any person. Braden said the book of Romans was written for practical thinking people and she had always thought that was a perfect description of herself.

He knew the next day would bring a lot of emotions with his parent's arrival. Braden wondered if his dad would buy that accounting business and how everything would change if he did. Maybe he would not have to move into the dorm and maybe he could live with his grandmother when classes began. He knew his grandmother might marry Joe, they certainly seemed happy together. He really didn't know what the Lord might have in mind for him and his grandmother but he was encouraged, he had never felt more alive than he did since Jesus came into his life. He also had never felt more acceptance and love than he had since coming to Sharon's Cross. He regretted not growing up here close to his grandmother, who loved him unconditionally. He felt mutual love for her.



Emma had not felt so exhausted in a long time. She had been up too late. She had also had more activities than she had had in years. The bell jangled in her office. She guessed she was open for business whether she was ready or not. Stephen and Debby, Braden's parents, entered unenthusiastically.

"Hello Mother. I trust you are well."

"Hi Mom, is Braden still here or has he already taken off for the day. I've been wondering what he has been up to since orientation ended?"

"We were up a little late last night; I think he might be sleeping in this morning."

Braden walked into the room, showered and obviously ready for the day.

"Good morning, did you have a good trip? I thought I might make Grandma Breakfast this morning."

"Braden what is this I hear about you keeping Mother up too late? I thought we had an agreement that you would not bother her. When classes begin you will need to move into the dorm."

"Stephen, I have enjoyed Braden's visit very much and I want him to stay as long as he would like to, he is always welcome in my home!"

"We came here to straighten out a few things. First, Braden you are not to exhaust Mother. Mother, you should not encourage this behavior from him."

"Stephen, how many times and in how many ways do I have to say Braden is not and will never be a burden to me. Besides, I don't have to be in bed early, you know."

Braden went into the kitchen to prepare breakfast; he thought it would be a relief to leave the quarrel in the office. Stephen looked around at the stacks of papers and files that seemed to never end. He tried to focus to keep his blood pressure from elevating. Debby tried to correctly assess the situation without upsetting her husband which was always difficult to accomplish. Emma lifted the blinds and turned the closed sign over to signify her business day had officially begun.

"I have an appointment with Mr. Jenkins and his attorney this morning, I was wondering if he has told you what figure he has in mind for his business?"

"No, Ron hasn't told me anything about the particulars."

"Do you think Ron, Mr. Jenkins is using any computer programs and is technologically current?"

Emma caught Stephen's eyes surveying the heaps of papers and files.

"Are you asking if Ron is as behind the times as I am?"

“I would not have put it that way Mother but since you did, is he?”

Thankfully, the telephone interrupted a seemingly hostile situation. Stephen took the phone call as his cue to leave since he did not like to be late for any appointment. He understood the importance of first impressions. Emma answered and informed Ron Jenkins that her son was there and ready for his appointment. Ron wanted to meet with him at his attorney’s office, Ethan McDougal. Emma nearly choked when she was told where Stephen would be going. She looked for her son but he was already outside and getting into his car. It stood to reason Ethan worked in the largest and oldest law firm in the Sharon’s Cross. He had married well, Nancy Webber, who was the only child of the late Judge Charles Webber, who helped build the firm before taking a position on the bench. After accepting the judgeship, he had to resign but allowed his son-in-law to take over his interest in the firm. Ethan had done a good job in increasing the size and billable hours of *The Lawfirm*.

Emma was both glad and disturbed by Stephen and Debby’s visit. For some reason Debby did not want to accompany her husband to discuss the business transaction which normally she did when he made an acquisition. Instead, she wanted to spend the morning with Emma. She simply told Stephen if a deal was struck, call and she would come and sign whatever papers he needed. Emma and Debby watched Stephen get into his expensive luxury car and drive off. Stephen wore a suit to match his car and was the perfect look of sophistication and wealth. Both women admired the beautiful picture he made although both knew Stephen could be ruthless in business.

“Mom, there were some things I wanted to talk to you about privately.”

“Oh, what would that be Debby, you know you can talk to me any time and about anything you want.”

She always tried hard to keep communication as open as possible with Debby since Stephen didn’t seem to take his mother seriously.

“Actually, I’m concerned about you and Braden. I’ve heard you have a boyfriend. You know you need consider all the consequences such as your taxes and retirement benefits. It may not be in your best interest to marry again. And as for Braden, he has told me some wild story about this church he has gotten involved with...”

“Debby, I appreciate your concern about my financial situation but I have barely met Joe. At this point I don’t have any plans to get married. And as for Braden, he has enjoyed going and being a part of that church and so have I. Maybe while you and Stephen are here you two might go and see for yourself that everything is fine. Braden is planning to be baptized on Sunday so it would be a perfect opportunity to share with him.”

“Baptized! I can’t believe you would allow him to do something like that Mom. I’m very disappointed in you. We trusted you to watch out for Braden, so he wouldn’t do anything stupid. Maybe it’s too much to ask since you are dating again to watch out for your own grandson’s wellbeing.”

“Debby. I was under the impression that you were OK with Braden being baptized. I’m sorry you don’t feel this is a good thing for him. He is very excited about it. I don’t understand how his involvement in church could be harmful to him. As for my relationship with Joe, well that’s my business. I love both of you and I adore Braden. I want him to feel comfortable and free to live here with me as long as he wants, but my

friendship with Joe is just off limits. There is nothing going on that is inappropriate or wrong. We just enjoy each other's company and that is the end of the story Debby."

"You need to think this through Mom; I don't think you are considering what is expected of a wife. What does his family think about all of this?"

"As I have already told you, we are just getting to know each other and we're friends. Other than that I don't think that there needs to be any other explanation or discussion. Remember we are both consenting adults. What does Stephen know of all of this?"

"He doesn't know anything yet, but when he finds out, he will blow a fuse."

"I guess I just don't understand why there's a problem."

"Mom the problem is you are just too old to get married again. What happens if he breaks your heart? We finally have your retirement in place; Stephen has worked so hard to get the business and house out of debt so we don't have to worry about your finances. If you get married, all that will be up in the air not knowing what the other family might do to us in an estate situation."

Emma finally saw to the problem. For the first time in a long time, she remembered her financial situation. She was fine; she lived modestly, but comfortable. She sat down to fully get a handle on the situation. She didn't want to alienate her daughter-in-law.

"Debby, I love you. I love Stephen. I wouldn't do anything to hurt either of you. I don't have much as far as worldly possessions go. I have this business and this house, such as it is. Stephen did not work to pay for it, I did. I put him through college although sometimes I don't know if I did him any favors for doing it. He has become a self-absorbed overachiever. If I decide to get married and believe me there has not been any talk of it at all. I would want you and Stephen to be part of it. But I want you to know that I am going to be just fine, financially, emotionally, and spiritually. And as for any sort of inheritance, there's really no need to be concerned about that either. Whatever I have will be Stephen's.

"Spiritually, not you too; we never should have allowed Braden to come here!"

"I think Braden is very happy about his decision to become a Christian and I hope you can accept his decision and who knows maybe you and Stephen become Christians too."

"Mom, we are Christians." We believe in Jesus. We just don't go for all that church stuff."

"You know I might not be very well versed in the Bible, but I think church is very important to Jesus."

The telephone rang and Emma felt rescued. She may not have given much thought to spiritual matters before but she certainly never thought badly of anyone as zealous as Braden and Maris. They were great kids who really seemed to love the Lord. Emma wished she could fully understand what those kids so freely and fully accepted. Her thoughts were interrupted by the phone ringing again. It was Joe reminding her about the Bible study, Romans. She was looking forward to it. She had been doing a little preliminary studying of her own. She wondered if there was any way to convince Stephen and Debby to lighten up with Braden. She was nervous to tell Stephen about Joe. She decided she would tell him later over dinner.

“Mom, you know I love you very much. I wouldn’t do or say anything to hurt you and I hope you know that, but I just want you to think everything through. Would you mind telling me how you met this man and maybe I can begin to see what you see in him?”

Emma refilled the coffee maker as she recounted how she was set up by the *Hot Biscuits* florists. Debby laughed as she helped with the much needed refreshments. She found the story quite charming and entertaining reassuring her that her mother-in-law had not gone off the deep end.



An equally fashionably dressed Ethan McDougal extended his hand to Stephen Denby. Ethan’s office was plush, old leather, old books, a look of longevity and old money. His office included an enormous mahogany desk, chairs, and bookcase all to match. The walls were painted dark green and trimmed in rich cream. The antiquated pictures were framed in gold-leaf. Large plants gave a final touch of elegance. Stephen was immediately impressed with the dignity of his would be contender.

“Stephen Denby. Have we met before? Where have I heard that name?”

Ron Jenkins sat nervously watching the two power figures assess each other like generals before a battle. The accountant and the attorney each sized up the other, both obviously well educated and successful, both having an air of intense polished professionalism.

“I don’t see any reason not to get right to the point gentlemen.”

Ethan took charge and presented the contract he had prepared for the purchase of *Ron Jenkins Accounting* by Stephen Denby of *Numbers CPA*.

“How do you plan to handle the everyday workings of the company, Stephen? The information is necessary for the corporate documentation, which we can easily prepare I’m sure you understand.”

“I haven’t completely decided as yet. My son is attending the university. He is only a freshman but there is a strong possibility he will study accounting. My mother has a bookkeeping service, so I thought I could utilize her contacts to possibly hire a local CPA. This would give me the opportunity to keep track of the business, my mother, and my son.”

“It sounds like a great plan; let me know if you manage to pull it off.”

All three laughed and joined in the joke.

Stephen looked over the expertly prepared documents and decided that the price and the particulars of the deal were exactly what he had been looking for in an investment. He didn’t even feel he would need to negotiate anything further than what Debby had previously researched. Ron Jenkins had been extremely generous on his asking price. He thought he could make his investment back from the purchase price in just a few years. He was very pleased and decided to go forward with finalizing the transaction.

As Stephen finished signing the documents, a beautiful woman entered the room. The three men stood immediately.

“Ron Jenkins and Stephen Denby, I would like to introduce my wife, Nancy.”

“Stephen Denby, are you related to that Denby woman with the bookkeeping business?”

“Well yes. My mother is Amelia Denby and she owns *Denby Bookkeeping Service*.”

“You know who that is don’t you Dear?”

“No, I don’t believe I’ve met Mrs. Denby or have done business with her, Dear.”

“Oh sure you do. She’s the lady your father has been dating.”

Stephen watched Nancy’s eyes narrowed in a sardonic caricature of what could have been an exquisite woman as he felt the pit of his stomach constrict. Surely, this wasn’t true. No one said anything about his mother seeing anyone. He remembered when he was a child not having a father to teach him how to throw a ball, consequently he didn’t learn until he was too old to really be able to compete. He also remembered his own and his mother’s loneliness especially during holidays. No, this couldn’t be true. He always knew his mother loved him too much to get involved with any man. Yet he looked around the room. The only person that seemed to be enjoying the moment was this horrible woman. Ethan seemed equally sickened by the possibility.

Ethan looked at Nancy as though she had pierced his soul. She knew immediately she had accomplished what she set out to do when she saw his usually welcoming blue eyes become cold gray. She decided she had achieved more than she had planned so she left Ethan to pick up the pieces.

“I’m very sorry for my wife’s behavior.”

Ethan was not sure how to proceed with the conversation after Nancy’s profound revelation. He was not totally certain his father was seeing any one. He had only been informed earlier in the day when Nancy telephoned him of the situation. He really didn’t know what to think since his mother had only just recently passed away.



Stephen felt as though a feather could have knocked him over with the startling news he had heard. He didn’t know whether to be excited about the business transaction he had settled or defeated by the shocking news. Perhaps out of desperation, he decided to give his mother the benefit of the doubt. He could hear laughter as he reached the office door to his mother’s house. He walked inside and found Braden struggling with a young girl over something behind her back.

“Hi Dad, this is Maris.”

Stephen merely shook his head.

“How did everything go?”

Emma wanted the best for her friend Ron so he could retire comfortably. The possibility of Stephen and Debby moving closer to her or at least visiting more often would be an added bonus. Stephen didn’t look like the same person that left earlier in the day. Earlier, he looked like a power executive, but now he looked more like a defeated, hurt child.

“Everything went fine mother. I bought Mr. Jenkins’ business and it went as planned except for one small item. Mr. McDougal’s wife mentioned something about you and Mr. McDougal’s father seeing each other. I hadn’t heard anything like that...”

“Oh, Stephen, I certainly didn’t want you to find out like that but please understand I only recently met Joe McDougal and we have become friends, and nothing more than that.”

“So it’s true. Mother, what you do is your own business!” Braden could tell how embarrassed Maris was that they were discussing her family in her presence, so he motioned for her to exit out the back door before anything further could be said that everyone would regret.

“Mother, I don’t want to discuss this with you at this time. I simply had no idea and was caught completely off guard.”

“Stephen, I know you’re shocked, hurt, and angry, but we need to discuss this and we are going to.”

“Ok, fine I’ll humor you.”

“It has been a long time since your father passed away. I didn’t think I would ever get over his death, and I haven’t. I only recently met Mr. McDougal and we have become friends. We have had a few meals together and attended church, and that is all there is to the situation. I am truly sorry I didn’t tell you about him myself. I planned to tell you over dinner tonight. I am very angry about the way you found out. Especially since there have not been very many men in my life, actually outside of you and Braden, there have not been any men in my life. Joe and I are friends. ”

“Mother, I’m sorry you’ve been so lonely, perhaps that will change in the future.”

“I would like that more than anything. You and your family mean more to me than anything in the world.”

“I don’t mean to interrupt, but is there anything I need to do in regards to the expansion of *Numbers*?”

“Actually it has all been taken care of there are a few items which will be delivered later. Mr. McDougal is very thorough. We can take possession of Mr. Jenkins’ accounts immediately.”

Debby looked as though something else was weighing heavy on her mind. Emma immediately remembered she was not enthusiastic about Braden’s involvement with the local church.

“Stephen there is one other issue that has come up. Braden has been attending church here in town, you know with that nice, young girl, Maris. Well he has accepted Christ as his Savior and would like to be baptized on Sunday.”

“Oh really, well it’s probably better for him to be going to church than what so many other young people do these days.”

“So you are happy about this situation, Stephen?”

“I think this is a decision Braden must make; besides going to church will probably do all of us some good.”

“I’m thrilled to hear you say that. I was hoping you two would be there to give Braden moral support.”

“I do have one question Mom, when are we going to meet this new friend of yours?”

“Well, how does tomorrow at church sound?”

Debby looked shocked as Stephen seemed to accept the choice their only child had made as well as his mother involvement. She thought he was probably overwhelmed with everything that had taken place, and just didn’t know how to respond.

“Mom, there is something that I would really like for you to do for me.”

“Oh, you name it, anything at all.”

“I have a gift for you, I would like for you to accept it and utilize its fullest potential.”

“You have a gift for me? Of course I would accept it.”

She watched Stephen immediately leave the house and quickly return with a large box. She only received gifts from Stephen at Christmas and her birthday in years past, as well as flowers on Mother’s Day. She assumed Debby had always taken care to provide those gifts.

“It is a computer, if we are going to be working together, you will need to learn how to use one.”

“Oh my! I really don’t know about this at all.”

“You’ll get used to it quickly. Besides, it seems evident that Braden will be around quite often to help you. It has all the latest software that is used in the accounting world today as well as a large hard drive.”

He had always prided himself on his computer knowledge.

“Well if you think I won’t break it, I guess I can give it a try.”

After setting everything up, Stephen proceeded to show her how to boot up her new computer and how to access the various programs. Emma listened very carefully, and took some sketchy notes she didn’t think she or anyone else could decipher without some sort of Rosetta stone.

## Chapter 6

Emma was excited about the turn of events. Stephen seemed to accept the idea of Braden’s baptism as well as her involvement with Joe. There it was again, involvement, with a man! She would never have considered it could happen to her. She felt she had to make the compromise with the computer. How was she ever going to figure out how to use it? Braden and Maris seemed very excited. They both eagerly turned it on and played several games. Both told her they were jealous as neither had such a powerful machine. Yet, she was not sure of this new contraption at all.

Debby offered to help input data in the computer all the while showing Emma how to operate the various programs. Efficiency was the goal but it seemed nearly impossible, yet for Stephen she would give it her best effort.

“Mom, I think I can help by first getting these stacks of files in alphabetical order. We’ll only worry about entries for this year forward.”

“Well if you think that’s what will work out best that will be just fine.”

Emma answered weakly as she answered the ringing telephone.

“Hello, Joe. “I think I can slip away for a few minutes.”

Emma thought it would be good to visit with Joe in light of the day’s events. “I can be at the pizza place in ten minutes.”



Emma walked into the little restaurant and immediately spotted Joe at their table in spite of the dim lighting. What did the kids call it – ambiance?

“Can I have the waiter bring you anything?”

Emma shook her head, so Joe waved to the young man to bring a soda for Emma. Emma looked at Joe, who looked deeply troubled.

“Emma, I got a call from my son, Ethan. He explained what happened at his meeting with your son today. I cannot apologize enough for what happened, I never meant for anyone to be hurt. That Nancy is always looking for trouble. I know one of these days the Lord will repay her unkindness. I have prayed when it happens, she will change and God will receive glory through it.”

“Why don’t you tell me what he had to say, Joe?”

“He said Nancy interrupted the meeting with an announcement about our friendship. I can’t apologize enough. She can be mean and down right nasty. I’d understand if you simply didn’t even want to have anything to do with me ever again.”

Emma panicked! She had not thought the events might cause him to want to end their relationship. Joe seemed to read her mind, he was afraid that she would want to call things off, and he had to know that everything was still alright between them.

“Now, I don’t want to end our friendship over the mess Nancy caused, I just want you to know how sorry I am with her behavior. I was afraid that you...”

“For a moment I was afraid that you were going to, I guess break up with me.”

“Not on your life, we’ve had such a good time together; I wouldn’t want to see it come to an end. I was curious, well; Ethan didn’t tell me how the meeting went with Stephen. Did they work out the details for the sale successfully?”

“Well he bought Ron’s accounting business, so I guess I will be working with my son. I’m so looking forward to it. I should have more opportunities to see him. He did do something shocking. He gave me a computer! And he expects me to use it.”

Joe chuckled as he thought of Emma’s office; he quickly understood the trial she had before her. She had been working in her own space on her own terms for decades. Though it was a workable and comfortable environment for her, others would certainly struggle with it. She had spent years cultivating what worked best for her, organized chaos.

“Debby, Stephen’s wife, is organizing as we speak. I don’t know quite what to think about it really, I’ll just have to see how it goes. I might not ever find anything again. She put up a pair of scissors a few years ago, which have never surfaced.”

“It will be a brave new world indeed.”

## Chapter 7

Emma’s time with Joe was always well spent. In just a few minutes, he could turn her day around. She thought about Joe as she drove home. He was a better subject to think on instead of the so called organizing that Debby was doing, which caused her to shudder. She wondered if she could ever understand his affection for spiritual matters. She had gone to church plenty of times, but her experiences with church always seemed to result with folks not living up to what was preached in the sermon. Yet, Joe was so sincere about his religion. The whole idea was actually quite new to her. She watched Joe at church. The look on his face was undeniably peaceful and completely at rest. It seemed his very soul was moved by the music and the sermon. She would definitely have to think more about his church. As she parked her

car, she noticed how full the trash cans were, as well as the bags of trash piled nearby. Panic suddenly filled Emma as she approached the front door, remembering the work going on inside.

Emma walked into her office and found boxes of files neatly lining one wall. She glanced at each one, which had been labeled with the clients' names. Debby sat crossed-legged on the floor as she continued going through the stacks. She looked up as she heard the door bell's jingle, to find Emma already inspecting her work.

"You've been incredibly busy."

Emma remarked as she continued to inspect the situation. She knew she was so close to everything she had always wanted, Stephen and his family to be part of her life, so she knew how she handled the situation would be very important to establishing even more closeness.

"I never thought about doing it this way, but you know it might be easier to find what I need later."

"Do you think so, Mom? I was so worried you would be upset when you saw the changes, but Stephen thought it would be necessary since he and I will be working so closely with you."

Emma looked around her office, it was certainly different. Braden had also been put to work throwing away magazines, and other things her children thought were unimportant or useless. She stepped back and noticed how tidy it all was already beginning to look.

"You know I think I like it."

"You do?"

Emma wanted to cry to see the look of relief on Debby's face.

Braden had been deeply concerned that his parents were going too far. He felt she should be allowed to work however she wanted. Her system obviously worked for her.

"You know, living through the Great Depression taught me to be both a miser and a packrat. I'm not so old I can't change my mind. Long time ago, no one ever threw anything out because it might be needed and there was no money to buy it again. I've honestly not seen this office for what it truly is, actually quite nice. Debby, thank you for all your hard work. I'll try to keep it as nice and neat as you have it now."

"I thought after the files are organized, then the data can be entered into the computer. Stephen ordered new filing cabinets as well as a new desk."

"Oh my, is all that necessary?"

"Yes, Mother it is. I want you to have the best working environment possible."

He too was working; he had changed into jeans and a t-shirt and was busy helping Braden clear out much of what Emma had saved through the years. As soon as the filing cabinets arrive the new files will go them, and it will look even better.

Emma noticed a change in Stephen; she wondered what happened to bring it about.

"You know you keep books for a lot of the small business tax returns Ron Jenkins prepares, so this office will be vital to my work here in Sharon's Cross."

"Really, I didn't know that."

The bell jingled again as delivery men entered with the filing cabinets. Emma was shocked to see the cherry wood finished lateral cabinets. Stephen had been

extravagant in buying her new office equipment. She had never seen such beautiful things.

“Stephen, this is all too much, I cannot afford filing cabinets like these.”

“Mother, please let me do this. I grew up in this house; I grew up in this office, and there have never been any filing cabinets. You’ve always gotten by with a box or just piled things wherever. We will be working together; I want you to be able to work in the best environment possible. I think you’ll be amazed with the difference it all will make. I watched you just get by for all those years, I would like to see what you can do with the best tools.”

Emma wiped a tear from her eye as she thought of Stephen as a child in this very office. He would play hide-and-seek and at times bounce a ball against the wall. She certainly couldn’t deny him anything including spoiling her.

With the new cabinets in place, Debby showed Braden what she wanted done with each of the boxes, which were soon emptied, broken down, and taken outside to the overflowing trash cans.

“I was hoping we would have time to begin training on the new computer system. I think you’ll like it, eventually.”

Emma decided to go in the kitchen and make coffee and cut some sweet bread she had made the previous day. She was still trying to get used to the changes in her life. She was overwhelmed!



“Mother, I would like to teach you how to turn on your new PC.”

“It has the latest Windows operating system.”

Emma set the tray down she piled with plates of dessert and coffee. Debby promptly accepted the snack as did Braden. You also have a new desk chair, come try it out.”

“Oh my, it is nice; I’ve never had anything so nice.”

She was still fighting her feelings.

“Ok, here is a pen and pad for taking notes. First, just push the button to turn it on. I’ve added icons, little pictures to click on so you can get into the programs you will be working with.”

Stephen tried to explain slowly and patiently which Emma appreciated.

“Stephen, I’ve always heard it’s easier for people to get used to the computer by playing the card games that come with it.”

“You know you’re right Debby. I think we can probably leave it with you and if you have any questions about it, you have Braden to ask.

Braden promised to help Emma get used to the various inner workings of her computer. He was relieved that at least for now his parents were not demanding he move into the dorm. He was hoping he could continue to live with his grandmother. With his grandma’s new relationship with Joe, he liked the idea of having Maris for a cousin and a good friend.

After Emma had gotten the idea of how to move the cards and change the look of the deck, she decided she would take a walk. Surely, she could find some familiar surroundings that didn’t beep at her.

## Chapter 8

Joe was startled by pounding on his front door; he hurried from the backyard to find Maris crying.

“Maris, come in, what’s wrong?”

Maris held out her hands to show him a tiny puppy.

“What is that, a rat?”

“That’s not funny Grandpa, this little puppy was abandoned! I tried to take it home, but my mother won’t let me keep him. She even called the pound and asked if someone could come and pick him up. She didn’t want him to be around her precious spoiled brat-dog, Piper.”

“Your Mom did pay a lot of money for that dog. Not to mention all the grooming, the dog shows. I don’t know how the little pup puts up with it all. Considering everything, Piper has been a good pet, and a better sport.”

“I know, but Grandpa could you take the puppy in?”

“Oh, Maris honey, I’ve not had a dog since your dad was a little boy. I don’t know about that at all. He’ll be a lot of work. Feeding, walking, and oh mercy, house breaking.”

“Oh please, Grandpa. Look how cute he is. All he has ever known in his life is rejection!”

“Ok, Ok, you drive a hard bargain; I’ll keep the little scamp.”

“Thank you so much, you have no idea how much this means to me. I’ll be able to come over and help you with him.”

Maris wiped the tears from her cheeks as she handed the little puppy to her grandfather.

“You bet you’ll come over and help me with... well you think he needs a name? What do you suggest? What do you think about Killer, or maybe General?”

“He reminds me of the little stuffed bears in the mall, all scruffy. Those names are fine, but if grows into his name, might be a little painful. He does look like those bears.”

“He’s ornery! Look at that, he’s knocked over the trash. He’s a little scamp!”

“That’s cute and I think it fits too.”

“Scamp? Scamp it will be!”

“Would you like a sandwich or something?”

“Actually, Grandpa there is a group from my Sunday school class getting together to go and pass out tracts.”

“Well I guess I’ll have a one and maybe Scamp will join me.”



“Scamp, how about we take our first walk, and then when we get back home we’ll have some dinner.”

Joe stopped by the grocery store to pick up a few items for his new pet. He picked out several packages including a leash, a pooper scooper (since he had seen on

TV that's proper these days), doggie treats, and he also stacked several different varieties of dog food, since of course he did not know what Scamp would prefer.

"Maris found a stray."

Joe felt he needed to explain to Marybeth since she looked at him with questioning eyes as he made his purchases at the store.

"Are you going to keep it?"

"Well, I'm going to try."

"I think it's great, I've heard having pets helps people live longer."

"Then let's hope Scamp does his job."



Joe stopped his car at the park. It was a nice evening for a walk, and Scamp had a lot of pent up energy, it would probably be a good idea for him to run some of it off. He attached the leash to the little dog and then tightened the laces on his tennis shoes. He laughed to himself because he felt he was preparing like a prize fighter he'd seen on a TV show. He could almost hear the theme music in his head.

Joe and Scamp barely started their walk when he saw a familiar looking woman sitting on a bench, tossing bread to the ducks, Emma. He wondered why she was in the park at this hour.

"Hello, Emma. I didn't want to startle you, but I did want to say hello."

"Oh my goodness, Joe, it's always good to see you. What do you have here?"

"Maris thought I needed a little friend. We've named him Scamp. We were just out taking our first walk. It may take some time for him to get the hang of the leash. He doesn't seem to like it very much. How is everything going at your place?"

"Well, he is just a little bit. "Really better than I would have ever thought. Stephen and Debby are making plans to spend more time with me, and Braden is going to be able to stay with me, for now. I've always wanted Stephen and his family to be more a part of my life and that seems to finally be happening. But it's all coming at a price. I don't know if I can learn all the things that Stephen wants me to, and I don't know if I can make all the changes he has in mind either."

"The dog's an ornery mess! I kinda thought you might be feeling all that. I've been praying for you Emma; that you would be able to embrace all that the Lord has in store for you."

"That's another thing Joe; you know I've lived a simple life, a good life. I've never intentionally hurt anyone. Honestly, I don't know what God wants from me."

"He wants everything for you. He loves you. He sent his Son, Jesus, to die for you. He wants to comfort you. He wants to show you all the mysteries of His Word, the Bible. He wants to disciple you as one of His believers. Emma you are a good person and I don't believe there is anyone that would dispute that fact, but being good is simply not enough in the eternal scheme of things. The true facts of life are that we are born, we live, and we die. Each and everyone one of us will give an account for the choices we make. It's a simple thing to explain I made one choice – Jesus. That choice is the answer I'll give, because my sins have been washed clean by the blood of Jesus. You know even making the choice wasn't all my doing, because God called out to me first."

The Bible teaches that no one would seek God, but the Holy Spirit woos man or woman, boy or girl to salvation.

Emma listened intently. Still she had so many questions.

“I’ve been to church many times before. I see people at church, but they act quite different in other places.”

“Yep, there are a lot of people like that. You know some people may be new Christians who have not learned a lot yet, not fair to expect a lot from them. Others may have been involved in church for years and have chosen not to learn very much. Jesus taught a story, or rather a parable, about wheat and tares. The wheat would be true believers or disciples, those that have bought hook, line, and sinker every word of the Bible. This group of people is in church because they love the Lord and they love the Lord’s people. They are there to worship him and be with other believers. But then he also taught that there were tares too, which are nonbelievers.”

“So I’m a tare?”

“Well I believe you are a seeker, Emma. No, you see tares are more like the people who have been involved in church and who still need to be persuaded by the Holy Spirit to be born again. He said the tares were in the field along with the wheat. Besides, you’ve been checking out the field. You know God accepts people as they are and in the condition they are in, but He does not want or expect them to stay that way. He expects them to begin learning more about Him, and the best way to do that is by studying and meditating on the Bible. The Bible teaches Christians start out like babies. A baby requires milk to grow – same as a Christian. They can understand simple truths of the Word but soon they will require more nourishment – the meat of the Word. But of course this is a gradual process since everyone grows at different rates.

“Oh, I think I understand all that. I am looking forward to Braden’s baptism especially since all of my family will be attending.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Except for Maris, the rest of my son’s family only comes at holidays or special occasions.”

“It’s getting late, how about I see you home?”

“Oh that would be lovely, maybe you would like to see my new PC?”

“I would be interested in whatever you would like for me to see, but I don’t know any more about computers than you do. I don’t think I would handle having to learn how to use one as well as you have.”

## Chapter 9

“Mother, you look very nice!”

“Thank you Stephen, I don’t think you have ever given me such a wonderful compliment.”

“Mother, I was hoping we would have a chance to look over those files and the software this afternoon.”

“That will be just fine; I hope I’m not too much trouble, I’m afraid I may not learn as quickly as you’d like.”

“It is not any trouble, it’s important to me to get you up and running on the new equipment as soon as is possible and we will be as patient as possible”

“By the way, I have prepared a nice pot roast for lunch and I hope that it’s not too much of an inconvenience, but I have invited Braden’s friend Maris and Joe.”

“Not him again.”

“Stephen, please give Joe a chance, he has been very nice to me and I value his friendship.”

“I won’t make any promises. At least not until I’ve had him checked out thoroughly with the local authorities.”

“Oh you! What ever will I do with you?”



“So this is the church I keep hearing so much about.”

Stephen, Debby, and Emma entered the well kept sanctuary. Maris approached them and explained the church had all but faded away due to the efforts of the previous pastor and his desire to build a modern mega church. At first the church grew but then attendance dipped to an all time low. The new pastor had been kind and faithful in helping the former members return as well as reach new people for Christ after the prior pastor finally decided he’d done enough damage.

“This is where we sat before, second row, piano side.”

Emma pointed the way to the pew.

Just as Maris finished her history lesson she saw her grandfather smiling as he approached them.

“Not too many are brave enough to sit so close to the preaching.”

The pastor preached on John 3:16. Joe noticed Stephen seemed particularly uncomfortable. He knew he would need to pray for Stephen to listen with his heart as well as his head.

Emma sat between Joe and Stephen. They all had a perfect view for Braden’s baptism. Joe was glad no one would be distracted during the sermon. Stephen and Debby seemed to be attentive to every second of the services, especially the sermon. It seemed like only a few moments until Braden left them to get ready for his baptism. As the lights dimmed, Emma felt tears run down her cheeks and fall onto her hands. She had never witnessed anything so wonderful. Joe reached for her hand to let her know he certainly understood her emotions. Debby also wiped away a tear and was grateful for the tissue Joe offered her. Stephen was uncomfortable he didn’t like not having complete control, especially of his emotions. The pastor preached a sermon on salvation and living a committed Christian life to be an example to those that don’t attend church regularly. He thought the message was quite a concept. He didn’t know anyone that fit the preacher’s description, but he wished he did.



Emma was busy in the kitchen when the door bells jangled and Stephen led Joe and Maris through the small office into the kitchen. Joe was holding his usual little bouquet tied with a yellow ribbon. Debby smiled as she took the simple garden flowers from him to display them on the dinner table in a vase.

“These are lovely, do you grow them yourself?”

“Oh yes, gardening is just a little hobby I have, I grew up on a farm and you know what they say, you can take the boy out of the farm but you can’t take the farm out of the boy.”

Debby laughed as she added the flowers as a finishing touch to the table.

“Shall we all sit down; Joe would you ask the blessing?”

“I would be honored Emma.”

*Lord, I truly thank you for your love and mercy. Thank you for Braden who has come to you humbly and obediently for salvation and baptism. May you use him in a mighty way in your service. Thank You for the provision of food, may it sustain each of us for your honor and glory. Amen.*

Everyone sat in silence as if they were trying to fully understand Joe’s prayer concerning Braden. Stephen wondered what his son would do next. To make matters worse it seemed his mother was probably a bigger question than Braden. He always wanted his son to follow him in the family business. He certainly worked very hard to make his mother proud of him. He watched her struggle all of his life as a simple bookkeeper. He was determined to be a successful accountant, working with numbers like his mother.

“Braden, what do you plan to study at the university?”

Joe genuinely wanted to know.

“I haven’t really decided yet, sir. I thought I would take the basics for a couple of years and then by that time maybe the Lord will show me what He would have me to do.”

“I thought we had already settled this issue, you are going to major in accounting and join me at the firm so you can someday take over the business.”

Stephen felt the anger and frustration building inside him.

Emma could tell Stephen had been bullying her grandson into doing what he wanted and not considering Braden’s wishes. She was grateful when Debby interrupted her thoughts with a positive suggestion.

“Mom, can I help you clear these dishes away, and bring out the dessert? That chocolate cake certainly looked wonderful, scratchy isn’t it?”

“Oh, I would love for you to and of course it’s scratchy.”

The two ladies shared a mutual look of trepidation as they took their leave into the kitchen. Emma wondered to herself what she could say to relieve Stephen’s frustration and Braden’s anxiety about school.

“That cake sure looks wonderful!”

Joe knew he needed to turn the conversation around at least until Stephen and Debby had a chance to get used to the idea that their son had become a Christian.

Braden looked at each person as if he was looking for an ally to help him and Maris find a way to leave a tense situation.

Everyone seemed to sit in a tense silence for what seemed to be hours.

“You know Hun; I think I would really like to have some ice cream. Mom is that little soda fountain still around the corner?”

Debby was the first to speak up.

Debby seemed to read her son’s mind. She also wanted this visit with Emma to be better than any other visit her family had had. Debby had never been close to her

own family, and she had always wanted to give Braden special memories, unfortunately not many happened. She also wanted to help her husband get accustomed with the changes seemingly crashing down around him.

"I'd be glad to help you clean up so Stephen and Debby can get that ice cream. I also think those kids might want to go and see what is going on at the youth fellowship."



"Joe, I have never been so relieved in all my life. I don't know when a visit with Stephen's family has been more strained."

"I hope everyone can work out their differences."

Joe's sincerity made Emma relieved, but she also wanted to weep for her son and grandson. Joe talked about the power of prayer. Emma wondered if it would help. She certainly knew it couldn't hurt.

"Emma, I was wondering if you happened to give any more thought to that ladies bible study. I don't want to overstep any boundary, but I hear a lot of the ladies at the church enjoy it. I have seen a lot of growth in many of them. And Lord knows there are others I wish would grow. Any way, they seem to be a very close group and I think you would have a chance to get to know them."

"I think I might enjoy that, when did you say it is?"

"Remember, they call it the Brown Bag Bible Study and they meet at noon on Thursdays in the church's fellowship hall. Of course the name says it all, you'll need to bring a sack lunch and it is over by 1 p.m. There are a lot of ladies that work, but not all of them. Some are moms just needing a few minutes with grown-ups, and others are retired. I've heard a lot of good things about it."

"OK, I think I can manage a sack lunch and I like that I'll get back to work quickly."

"Yeah, that's why it is set up like that."

## Chapter 10

Emma checked her makeup and hair in the ladies' room mirror after going back to her car for the sack lunch she forgot. She was nervous! She wondered if she should have talked Debby into going with her, but she knew Debby probably wanted a few minutes away from her old mother-in-law and the computer lessons. Emma just could not imagine learning a computer would be so difficult! Windows, indeed! Certainly Stephen remembered his mother didn't do windows. The thought made her chuckle as she saw ladies entering the fellowship hall. She heard lots of laughter. Maybe this will be okay after all.

"Hi, Emma. Joe McDougal told me you might be joining us today. And I'm so glad you did. My name's Sara Gray. Please sit next to me."

Emma was relieved that Sara Gray had been so kind to offer her a seat next to her. She felt as though everyone in the room was staring holes through her. Sara was certainly a kind and very polished lady.

"Mrs. Sara, I have a couple of prayer requests."

A young expectant mother spoke up as Sara showed Emma her chair.

Everyone chuckled that Sara's daughter addressed her formally. Sara gave her daughter a look that made Kalli sink back in her chair.

"Now everyone knows the church keeps an updated prayer list and there are special times set aside for prayer requests so none will be left out. This is the Bible study time, so we try to focus on the Word."

"But there's a couple in the church that's splitting up and boy howdy are they ever fighting over the kids..."

"I would like for everyone to meet Emma Denby, is that right? And thank you, we will certainly remember this family in our opening and closing prayers today and I will be happy to add them to the Prayer Warriors' list. But since time is short, we must get into our lesson."

Emma didn't understand what had just happened, but she saw all the ladies listened intently to Mrs. Sara while diving into dozens of lunch bags.

"We need to veer off Romans again this week, I felt the Lord leading me to this lesson in 3<sup>rd</sup> John. It is the story of 3 Christians. Two are shining examples, but one is a trouble maker. The first is Gaius who was a model Christian in his church. The Apostle John wanted Gaius to financially prosper as his soul had prospered. This would have made Gaius a very rich man since he desired to grow spiritually. We need to remember Gaius and ask ourselves would we want someone praying that our prosperity in life and our physical health be brought to the level of our spiritual lives. Would the answer to this prayer make us wealthy and healthy or sickly paupers?"

The second person is Diotrephes; he wanted to run the church. This man had been causing a lot of trouble for everyone around him. He tried to hurt everyone that got in his way or didn't share his opinions. Diotrephes was a control freak.

The last person in our story is Demetrius, who was probably the Apostle John's mailman. He too, like Gaius had a good reputation and was worthy of mentoring others.

The first thing we can do to apply what we've learned from our three friends is first to decide who we are most like. If we are like Gaius or Demetrius; then we can be encouraged to continue to grow in the wisdom of God's word. However, if we are somewhat closer to Diotrephes, we need to take a step back and consider what he did and what we might be doing and then learn from the experience. We can ask the Lord to forgive us and as we already know, he is faithful. Then we can study and meditate on Gaius and Demetrius' examples and try to follow them.

I trust you all have learned more about 3 John and will read, study, and meditate on the book for yourselves. Also, next week, you'll need to read the first two chapters of Job."

Emma sat stunned by the lesson she heard. She had hardly eaten anything. She had no idea such practical stories existed in the Bible. Sara interrupted Emma's concentration by pointing out the short cut to the parking lot and offered to walk with her.

"Emma thanks for coming to our Bible study today. I am always thrilled to see new people. I'm sure you don't understand Kalli's prayer request, and why I cut her short. Hopefully, everyone else understood. Kalli is my daughter, who loves to gossip, bless her heart. If people are not careful, prayer requests can become gossip fodder. The Bible study simply does not have enough time. It's set up so everyone can give the scriptures their full attention. Besides, Joe McDougal heads up the Prayer Warriors. He is sensitive to delicate situations and has such a heart for people's needs. Should any of the ladies have a burden for the prayer needs of this family or any others they can certainly come during that time and pour out their souls."

"I had never heard that before; I didn't realize the Bible covered such areas. That was John 3." Emma was still soaking in all that she had learned.

"Yes it was and if one is of a mind to search, the Bible contains practical truths for everything. I certainly hope to see you next week. And Emma, if you need anything, please call me. Time is not a problem, day or night."



Joe couldn't wait to call Emma and find out how the Bible study went. He knew Sara Gray would be a wonderful mentor for Emma. Sara and her husband, Chuck, had been dear friends for many years. They helped him through his wife's passing. Sara Gray and Sarah McDougal had been great friends. They each took turns teaching the Bible study for a couple of decades. He felt sure Sara would see Emma as a lovely woman seeking the Lord.



"Mom, where are the Newsbury account files?"

Emma looked up from her computer to find Stephen rummaging through file cabinets. She had been lost thinking about the story Mrs. Sara had told during the Bible study. Emma couldn't wait to finish her computer lesson so she could look up that book and read it again.

"Mother, how is the session going?"

Stephen pulled a chair next to his mother. He was afraid she was getting frustrated. He showed her so many things; surely it all had run together.

"Oh Stephen, I'm sorry, you were looking for those Newsbury files. They are over here. Debby wanted to do some more organization work on them."

"Mother, I'm worried I've put too much on you."

"Oh no, Stephen - I went to the ladies' Bible study at the church today. We studied John 3."

"Mom all I've ever seen of churchgoers is that they say one thing and do something totally different."

“Well I’ve honestly seen a lot of that too through the years Stephen, but now everything is different. Joe is a good man, he prays all the time and he truly lives what he says he believes. I’ve noticed at the church that most everyone is different. Like Joe and Sara; they are good examples. Others are like Sara’s daughter, well not such a good example. Joe was telling me no one is righteous, even if they go to church all the time. Regular church goers make mistakes.”

“You really like Joe don’t you Mother?”

“I like him very much. We have a good time together and right now we are only friends. We’ve not known each other long enough for any thing else.”

“Do you think that you’ll marry Joe?”

Emma ached to see the pain in Stephen’s eyes.

“Stephen, I loved your father more than life. No one could ever replace him, not even Joe.”

“You think Braden will be okay with all these decisions he is making?”

“Braden is perfect! He will become the man that you desire if you give him a chance. You and Debby have done a beautiful job raising him to be the caring and loving young man that he is.”

“Thank you Mom. How’s the computer coming along?”

“Oh it’s more of a challenge than I thought, and I thought I could never get along with it.”

“Let me show you a few things that will become helpful, in time.”

“Thank you Stephen.”

“For what?”

“Sharing you with me. I love you.”

“I love you too Mom.”

## Chapter 11

“Alright you little scamp. Whatever am I going to do with you?”

“Joe? I thought you might be home. Is everything alright?”

Emma knocked and called through the screen. Joe couldn’t believe what a mess one little puppy could make, trash strewn throughout the house, torn up chair cushions, shoes, not to mention the usual puppy messes. Then the first time Emma calls on him, he shows frustration with the dog.

“Hello Emma. Everything’s fine. The puppy Maris talked me into keeping is destroying my house and my life.”

“I’ll trade you a computer for him.”

“Well after looking at this mess I could certainly get into a bargaining mood. The computer can be turned off, put in a box, and thrown away. But the dog has quite a personality.”

“Somehow I don’t think my son would agree with that. I certainly enjoyed the walk with the puppy the other night. I came by because I wanted to let you know how the Bible study went. It was wonderful! We studied John 3. I didn’t know anything about it before I went home and read it for myself.”

Scamp quickly jumped on Emma’s lap to take a nap.”

“Emma that’s wonderful. I am so glad. So you met Sara Gray? Did you get to talk to her much? By the way, how did you do that?”

“Do what?”

Joe was amazed at how taken Scamp was with Emma. Emma continued her story as if Scamp wasn’t there curled up on her lap.

“Oh yes, she’s very nice; she made me feel right at home. She is certainly a gentile lady.”

“Yes, she is. I thought you two would get along very well. She is a very special southern lady.”

“I can’t wait until next week; I wonder what we’ll be studying then?”

“I’m glad that you enjoyed it, how about I clean this mess up and then we go out for ice cream?”

“Oh that would be lovely; I think the little dog could use some positive exercise too.”

Emma helped Joe clean up after Scamp. Scamp was so excited to go with them; he even tolerated the leash that already had chew marks.



The evening was clear with stars twinkling so bright Emma and Joe both thought about the night they met and the patio lights that made everything sparkle. They both smiled to themselves and then caught each other’s eyes. Both laughed as they thought they knew what the other was thinking. Scamp began to whine; he was wrapped up in his own leash.

“I think it might take a while to leash train him.”

“I think it’s going to take a long time to train him in a lot of things. Emma, I want you to know you mean a lot to me. I care very much for you and I’m concerned for you. I’ve been praying for you every chance I get. But you see I’m very concerned for your soul and your eternal destination. If you have any questions, I would be happy to help you find answers.”

“Joe, I know you would like for me to become a Christian, and I’ve always felt God was out there somewhere, I’ve always tried to be a good person, always tried to do what’s right.”

“Actually, Emma the Bible says one must believe in Jesus – He is the only way to God. You see the relationship between God and man was broken because of sin. Jesus came and offered himself as a sacrifice to cover that sin so we can be close to God and have a relationship with Him again. In John 14:6, Jesus said he is the way and no one can come to the Father except by him. The way to Jesus is simply to believe he is God’s son and ask for his forgiveness and presence in your life.”

“That sounds easy.”

“It is easy enough for a child to understand, but it is the greatest stumbling block in the world for a lot of people. They try to make it too hard – they try to add stuff to it.”

“I’ll consider what you’ve said Joe.”

“I know you will Emma. And I know the Holy Spirit will make everything even clearer to you. But promise me one thing, don’t consider too long. Time is a precious commodity; we never know how much of it we have.”

“I don’t want to think about places like hell.”

“Well that’s not what I was thinking about, but it is part of the situation. Those that do not accept Jesus as their Savior, according to the Bible, will spend eternity in the lake of fire that was not even made for any man or woman, but for Satan and his fallen angels. Actually, I was referring that the Christian life is a great adventure. The sooner you get saved or born again, the sooner you join the great adventure. There is a peace inside, so much that no matter what happens to you, you can still say it is well with my soul. There is so much to learn from the Bible, there are people to love and be close to.

“So the Christian life is not a bed of roses.”

“Oh no, there are still problems, still sorrows, still weaknesses. But we are all growing and learning together.”

“Joe, I just don’t feel I’ve missed out on anything in life by not going to church all the time.”

“Emma it’s not about going to church all the time. It’s about having a relationship with Jesus. You know Jesus loved the church, he died for the church. And by going to church we have a place to worship Him, learn about Him, get encouraged, and love others. I wonder sometimes how I’d make it without my church family. They are precious to me.”

“OK, I’ll think about all of it Joe. It looks like Scamp might be finally ready to go home. He has wound himself around the bench seat and has gone to sleep.”

“I hope he continues that when he gets home.”



Emma readied herself for bed, grabbed her Bible, and got under the covers. She had already read through practical Romans so she decided to start on the gospel of John. As she read, she realized the Bible made a clear picture of Jesus. Emma could not believe she had lived so many years without ever reading all this for herself. After a couple of hours, she laid her Bible aside and just sat on her bed and contemplated all of what she had read, heard, experienced. She read the account of Jesus’ baptism and the beginning of his ministry. She had heard the sincerity of kindness from Joe and Sara, and she had experienced so many warm things that were very hard for her to explain. She realized she knew more than anything else that accepting Jesus as her Savior was the most important thing she could do. She wanted to believe on Him for herself, not to please anyone else.

“Lord, you know all things. You know my heart right at this moment. I have lived a long time and not considered the Bible or You. I am so sorry for all the sin in my life – I simply ask you forgive me. I need you to be my Lord and Savior. I want the peace Joe talks about. I want the love Braden tells me he feels with his new church family. Thank you Jesus for saving me and filling me with your presence.”

Emma opened her eyes expecting to see or feel different – she didn’t. She felt somewhat relieved, expectant, happy, content. She reached for the phone to call Joe.

“Oh my, 3:30, I can’t believe the time. I don’t think I should call anyone. But how will I ever get to sleep? How will I ever get through the computer lessons without any?”

## Chapter 12

“Grandma, Grandma are you OK?”

“Braden, what’s wrong?”

“You were sleeping so soundly and so late I got worried, so I thought I’d wake you up.”

Emma looked at the clock 10:45! She’d never slept that late in her life. She had also never stayed up so late either.

“I’m so sorry Braden. I was up reading my Bible last night. Well never mind, I have something to tell you that is simply glorious. I knelt beside my bed last night and prayed and asked Jesus to forgive my sins and become Lord of my life.”

“Really? That’s the best news Grandma. You’ve made my day, no my entire year.”

“Well I don’t know about all that.”

“I do. I’ve been praying for you since I got saved. Have you told Joe yet?”

“No, you are the first to know. Have you had breakfast yet? I’ll make you some before you rush off.”

“No need Grandma, I’ve already eaten and I’ve made you some this morning.”

Emma gathered her robe and headed for the kitchen. She would certainly need to hurry if she was going to get as much done as Debby was expecting on the St. Clair account. Today she felt as if nothing really mattered. She could not believe the overwhelming peace that surrounded her. She had always been such a worrier. Finances, loneliness it all seemed so trivial, all so distant now. All she wanted to do was go and tell everyone she had truly met Jesus.



“Good morning Mom, did you have a chance to work on that account we talked about yesterday?”

The phone rang as Emma tried to get to the door to help Debby, who was struggling to get inside while balancing several plastic account boxes.

“Hello, oh hello Joe; how are you? Oh, I’m just fine. Well actually, Debby and I are working on some accounts today, I just don’t know...”

“Mom, you go ahead and say yes, whatever it is. I’ll work on these.”

“Oh, Debby you’ve done so much I can’t leave you with all that work.”

“Yes, you can. I insist. Besides, it will cost you, because I want details.”

Emma gave Debby a stern look that quickly melted just thinking of all the blessings that filled her life. All of a sudden everything she could have ever dreamed of was happening as never before.

“Yes, Joe I’d be happy to join you for lunch. I have a surprise to share with you.”

“Mom before you go, I need to know two things did you file the report with the state and what’s the latest with Joe?”

“Debby, yes I did mail the report and Joe and I are still just friends.”

She secretly knew not too long ago she exactly which pile the copy would have been in but now it was just anyone’s guess. It would show up, eventually.

“Oh, that’s been your story. Now tell me the rest of it.”

“There’s nothing more to tell. We just enjoy each others company that’s all. So that’s my ‘story’ and I’m sticking to it.”

Both laughed as Emma gathered her purse and sweater. Debby settled in to Emma’s new chair and began entering the necessary data.



Emma felt flushed as she parked her car. Here again, at what had become their place, the pizza parlor. She wondered how she should tell Joe about her salvation. She peeked into the dark room as her eyes tried to adjust. Her nose didn’t have any difficulty maneuvering as the aroma of freshly baked pizza filled her senses. She knew right where to look, in the corner by the kitchen. Sure enough, there was Joe sitting at the only table with flowers.

“Hi Joe, I hope you haven’t be waiting long.”

“Oh no not long at all, I hope you don’t mind but I did take some liberty and order the same as last time.”

“That will be just perfect.”

Joe helped Emma get settled into her chair as pizza and sodas were brought to their table. Joe took Emma’s hand, bowed his head, and gave thanks for the food. Emma felt like she could burst with the excitement of the news she had to share with him.

“Joe, I simply can’t wait any longer there’s something I must tell you.”

“Emma, you know you can tell me anything.”

“Last night, I read the Gospel of John. I’m not sure how long I read but then I read parts of it again. The life of Jesus was truly extraordinary! Joe, after I laid my Bible down I just sat for a long while and thought about what I read. Joe, I’ve lived a good life, been a good daughter, a good wife, a good mother, a good business owner, a good citizen, but none of that is enough. I know I’ll never be good enough to stand before the one written of in that book, Jesus. I understand it’s only through the sacrifice he made for me on that cross that I can be eternally set free from sin’s penalties. I then knelt by my bed and asked Jesus to forgive my sins and be the Lord and Master of my life.”

“Well, glory! That’s about the best news I’ve heard in years. Emma you don’t know what it does for me to hear your testimony. Do you have any plans of what you need to do next?”

“What I need to do? I didn’t know there was anything I needed to do.”

“Oh yes, there’s plenty to do. It’s important to make your testimony public, by baptism and joining with the church. It’s also important to learn more of the Bible. You are going to continue with the ladies’ Bible study, aren’t you?”

“I really do enjoy it. Mrs. Gray is such a gracious lady.”

“Yes, she certainly is. You see Emma, when Jesus ascended to heaven, he left the Great Commission and part of it is making disciples. This means after people get saved or born again, they need to learn more of the Bible so they can grow into mature Christians. I know Sara Gray would be a wonderful mentor. I’ll call her this afternoon and find out what she thinks.”

“Well, whatever you think Joe. It all of course is so new to me.”

“So you’ll just trust me on this one, huh?”

“Sure, she is a lovely lady.”

“You know it’s like entering a whole new world. If you have questions, Sara will be able to answer a lot of them for you. And of course I will do my best to help you too.”

## Chapter 13

Emma looked up from the computer when she heard the door jingle. Millie Barton struggled trying to free her purse, caught in the door.

“Hello, is there something I can help you with? Oh, I remember you; you are from the ladies’ Bible study aren’t you? It’s so nice to see you again.”

“Yes, I am. My name is Millie Barton. I came by because I believe there are some issues that need resolution. I realize you are new to our church, and probably don’t understand all the history. You see most of us have gone to that Bible study since it started. Now I don’t go around spreading stuff, I just get right to the dead center of a problem and let the truth be what it will. I heard Sara Gray is mentoring you. Now I know you probably didn’t know Sara Gray and Sarah McDougal started that Bible study some twenty-two years ago. Those two were best friends and quite inseparable until Sarah McDougal died. Now I’ve heard all about you and Joe McDougal keeping company. Now I know that’s none of my business, but the Good Lord knows Sarah hasn’t been gone very long, rest her soul. Joe certainly didn’t wait for her poor lifeless body to get cold before he starts looking to get, how do they say it these days, involved. Now like I’ve told you, I don’t get into gossip or any wickedness like that; I’m a Christian woman that simply can’t tolerate or turn a blind eye to injustices.”

Emma was shocked. She couldn’t even think how she might remedy the situation.

“Grandma, can you help me with the door?”

Braden was overloaded with books. He knew he probably needed to make two trips to get everything he had purchased for school.

“Is everything all right ladies?”

He couldn’t help but notice his grandmother’s ashen color; she looked as though her entire world had fallen apart. He felt as though he had walked into the middle of a mine field. He recognized the older lady from church, she always seemed so grouchy. He knew everyone walked on eggshells around her.

“Well I think I should be going; I trust our little talk was of a mutual benefit?”

She watched Millie leave the same bustling way she came in. Emma reached for the edge of the table as she tried to steady herself. Braden had never seen his grandmother look as she did.

“Grandma, are you all right, do I need to take you to the doctor?”

“Braden, honey would you bring me a glass of water?”

The pain he saw on her face nearly brought tears to his eyes. He could not imagine what had happened. He prayed as he brought her a glass of water; her hand shaking as she reached for it hoping not to drop it and make an even bigger fool of herself.

“Braden, everything is going to be just fine. I need to come to terms with some ‘issues’ as I have been informed and then everything will be just fine.”

“Grandma, I don’t understand, what was that lady doing here? Did she say something to hurt you?”

“No, Braden, I’m fine, everything will be just fine. There are just some things I didn’t know, and now I do. So everything will be fine.”

“Grandma, please let me help.”

Braden watched as Emma set down the half empty glass and reached for her purse. He felt she was in a lot of pain, but he knew all he could do was pray. She really didn’t know where she would go. Where could she go? She couldn’t go to Joe. She had no idea Joe’s wife and Sara Gray were so close. When she and Joe first met, she often thought of Sarah and the life they had together. How special it must have been. She would never rob Joe of his memories of Sarah. After all they had a son, Ethan. She just didn’t know what to do or where to go. It had been a long time since she had hurt so much.



Joe stood and watched Emma as she sat on the bench by Sarah’s grave. He could only imagine Emma’s pain. He was grateful for Braden’s phone call about Millie Barton, that woman is just plain mean. He had no idea what was said but he was very familiar with Millie’s tactics, to completely destroy.

Emma heard a rustle behind her. She fought back tears and tried to compose herself as she turned to face Joe.

“Joe, I’m so sorry I didn’t know you would be coming by here. I wouldn’t want to...”

“Emma, I don’t know what happened with Millie, but I can just imagine.”

“How did you know? Braden called you.”

“Yes, he did. And I’m glad he did too. Someone needs to teach that old bat a lesson. She has caused many people a lot of pain.”

“She’s right; I have no business trying to ingratiate myself with you not to mention Sara Gray. You knew they were best friends, why didn’t you say anything?”

“Sara Gray is a lovely woman of grace, with a big heart. Not a small one like Millie. Believe me there’s enough room in Sara’s heart for you as well as Sarah’s memory. She loved Sarah like a sister and I can imagine that’s what she will think of you too.”

“Joe, how is it you always know just the right things to say and show up at just the right time. I can feel horrible, and you make everything right.”

“How about we take a walk down by the duck pond? I know Sarah is gone and her passing has left a void in my life. You have filled that void in your own way. Emma there’s something I’ve wanted to talk to you about. Sarah meant the world to me. She did to a lot of people. She was a good and loving lady. Everyone who knew her loved her very much. She left a void in my life and in my heart with her passing even though I know she’s happy to be with the Lord. Emma, I would like for our relationship to continue to grow. And I want you to know that my intentions toward you are honorable. I would like to ask your son if he would approve of the two of us becoming more serious.”

“Oh Joe I don’t think this is the time...”

“There may not be a better time. We’re certainly not getting any younger.”

## Chapter 14

Emma could hardly believe all that had happened to her in such a short time period. Braden came to stay with her; she met a very special friend, and also met the Lord, the greatest relationship she had ever experienced. Her life was full! She wondered if it could get any better. She needed to hurry and get ready for her Bible study. Braden had been sweet to make her favorite lunch, chicken salad on wheat. He even drew pictures on the bag. She thought she must be the most blessed grandmother that ever lived.

“Grandma, your lesson book and Bible are next to your lunch.”

“I’ve been working on that lesson all week, and I can’t wait to find out what Sara will add. She is a wonderful teacher. I don’t know when I have ever learned so much or had so much fun. I didn’t know my old brain could hold so much.”

“I’m proud of you Grandma. You’ve been a trooper.”

“Well what do you mean by that?”

“You just dive into everything that’s thrown at you. The computer and now the Bible study.”

“Oh, I would like to throw that computer...”



“Hey Emma, it’s about time you showed up, we were beginning to think we’d scared you off.”

“Oh hello Evie, I don’t scare that easy.”

Emma glanced across the room to see Millie glaring back. Emma wondered if she should run for the door, hide between Evie and Sara, or sit next to Mille. She chose hide, this time.

“Did everyone have a chance to go over the scripture list from last week?”

All the ladies made positive motions while each tore into their lunch containers after the blessing. Emma noticed most of the ladies had store-bought plastic lunch containers in feminine colors and decorations, but hers was definitely special with Braden’s stick figure artwork. Years ago she had gotten a picture he colored for her, it was probably still in her dresser drawer where she kept her favorite things. She really liked to go through her mementos...

“Emma, would you read Job 2:9-10 for us?”

“Of course.”

Emma read the verses and thought it all quite curious.

Everyone seemed to look at one another wondering what Sara would do with it.

Sara repeated the two verses as she finished her sandwich and took a drink of soda.

If you all have read your assignment, you would have read the first two chapters of Job. In looking at an overview of the book of Job: Job was a wealthy man; he was the Bill Gates of his time (Job 1:3). We first read a bizarre conversation

between God and Satan about Job. God allows Satan to tempt Job. In one day Job lost 10 children (7 sons and 3 daughters), camels, donkeys, sheep, etc. After he heard all the news that everything he worked for his whole life was gone, Job mourned. He shaved his head and sat in ashes to signify his deep level of grief. His three “friends” came to see him but just stared at him for a long time and then each one delivered a long sermon on sin. Job ends this portion of scripture by cursing the night he was conceived and the day he was born.

I would like to take a hard look at Mrs. Job. You know, she also lost everything that Job lost. All of her children died as well as her vast fortune was destroyed. She was also left with a husband who had become a social pariah. But even with her faults she is still quite fortunate because she was included in the greatest book that was ever written, the Bible! But she was only given one verse; only one verse to tell her story and leave an impression of her for us. She responds to her husband with all the terms of endearment, comfort, and encouragement she could muster: **Then said his wife unto him, Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die.** (Job 2:9)

Job lets her have it in the next verse: **But he said unto her, Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips?**

People have questioned as to why the lives of the children were taken and her life was spared. One commentary I read stated that perhaps Satan knew her personality and planned to use it against Job in his trial before God. But maybe she was spared because God told Satan that Job’s life was to be spared. Could this have been a picture of God’s view of marriage in that two become one, so maybe her life and his were so intertwined that she was spared as being part of Job? Another reason could have been that God knew Job would be restored and his help meet was important in God’s plan for Job’s restoration. Maybe she was a really nice person in a horrible situation and took it out on her husband. Maybe she just made a bad first impression. I think we all could relate to that.

It doesn’t really matter why God through His sovereign will, allowed her to live. Mrs. Job had only one chance to make a good impression and blew it. We too have opportunities to make good impressions. Sadly, her husband was a social outcast during his trial but after he is restored it is her that has continued to receive grief because of her bitter words of “comfort, and terms of endearment” to her husband in telling him to “curse God and die.” After Job is restored, God doubles everything he had before his trial, including the children (that would be 20 children)? There is no indication that she died and he remarried so all we can believe is what has been recorded in scriptures. She was his wife before his trial and was afterwards.

I hope and pray we will remember Mrs. Job the next time we are in the store or are meeting someone for the first time. A good or a bad impression lasts longer than we may think.

The ladies gathered their belongings and quietly headed for the parking lot.

“Sara, that lesson was wonderful! I so enjoy your teaching.”

“Thank you Emma. It means a lot to hear you say that.”

The two ladies walked out of the church together toward their cars, the sun shining in their eyes causing both to squint.

“Sara heard you and Sarah McDougal were very close...”

“Emma, please don’t. Yes, Sarah and I were as close as sisters, I cherish all the good times we had together, but I think if the situation were reversed I would want you and her to be good friends. I think she would say the same.”

“That’s kind of you.”

“No Emma, I think I’m blessed to know you. You encourage me in ways you just don’t see right now.”

“Well I never would have thought that.”

“Let’s have lunch together, just the two of us, no bags. I know of a great little tea room.”

“Sounds wonderful, I haven’t done anything like that in years.”

“Well then it is long over due!”



“Ok, Joe the gig is up we want to know what is going on with our Emma.”

“What do you mean?”

Joe helped Janie and Julie with their bags; he really would have preferred someone else had. Then he thought he should be ashamed of himself; he had never avoided anyone.

“Don’t be coy, give up some details.”

“Now girls, what kind of a man would I be if I...”

“Did what, kiss and tell?”

“Really! Now don’t go putting words in my mouth girls, don’t you two have some flowers to deliver?”

“Do we need to deliver some for you?”

Janie and Julie laughed as they got into Janie’s SUV. Joe could only shake his head and wonder what he had gotten himself into. He and Emma were certainly getting closer, but this was a high price. He knew Emma was worth more than fifty Janies and Julies could dish out. He would just have to figure out a way to deal with them or ditch them. He noticed the time when he stepped back inside the store, time to head off to the Prayer Warriors meeting, his favorite time of the week. He had headed up the group for nearly three decades. He enjoyed watching it grow. He always tried to be thankful for everyone the Lord sent his way. He had a group of about fourteen. They would meet together every Thursday night at the altar. Everyone simply came quietly into the church’s auditorium, picked up a new prayer list, studied it intently as they approached and knelt at the altar. There was never any talking except to the Lord as

each person quietly prayed for each need on the sheet. Other church members would comment from time to time about the sweet spirit and sound of praying saints. Tears came to his eyes just thinking about the joy he had through this ministry and how much he relied on it during the hard times after Sarah's death.



"Hey Grandma, how was the Bible study?"

"Oh it was very good. I'll be meeting Sara for lunch tomorrow at that fancy tea room down the street."

"That's great, I'm glad you found a friend."

"Oh I don't know if that's what you would call it. You know Sara is a very busy lady; there are a lot of people that need her all the time. She really doesn't have..."

"Grandma, don't sell yourself short, why wouldn't Sara want to be friends with you?"

"Well I guess because I haven't had very many friends through the years."

"I think God supplies all our need, just like the Bible says, Grandma. I know he does for me. I needed you and He supplied you. He would certainly supply your needs to, like me and of course Joe."

"Oh you, what ever will I do with you? You needed me?"

"Of course I did. Other kids would talk about their grandparents and all the cool stuff they did with them, stuff they got away with. I've really never had that before, but believe me I'm making up for lost time."



"Scamp, whatever could you have been thinking? You little scamp! There's paper, and clothes, and what's that mess over in the corner? Oh I don't even want to know. How am I ever going to get this mess cleaned up?"

"Knock, knock hi Grandpa."

"Well, I'm glad to see you Maris, and just in time I might add. Do you see what that little scamp did? I've a mind to take him to the pound myself."

"No Grandpa, please don't. I couldn't bear it. Eventually, he'll be good. He's just a puppy surely he'll grow out of most of it."

"Most of it? Why don't you at least help me shovel up this mess?"

"It is pretty bad. What's that smell?"

"Well what do you think? He's not house trained yet. And he's stubborn."

"Sorry, but you know he is really cute. Do you think he might be part Maltese? A brown Maltese, you don't see that everyday."

"Oh who knows, he's full blood mutt. Oh don't look at me like that."

"Grandpa, how are things going with you and Braden's grandmother?"

"Well there's nothing like getting right to the point is there Maris? We are good friends."

"You think it will be more than that?"

"You know I could ask you a few questions about you and Braden."

“Grandpa, it would be gross to be anything more than cousins.”  
The two laughed together as they finished cleaning.

## Chapter 15

“Mother, how do you think the computer work is going?”

Emma tried to look positive as Stephen came to sit by her with a pot of fresh coffee.

“Well, I just don’t really know if we are getting along much at all. You know I’ve just done things a certain way for so long.”

“Actually, she has been doing very well. She can input data for payroll, and generate checks already.”

Stephen looked impressed as his wife listed several other tasks even though Emma tried to remember how to do any of them. She thought it helped that the program, or whatever they called it, looked like a check. But the keystrokes were a little different from a real typewriter.

“Oh, there’s the phone. I’ll get that while you two talk. It’s probably Joe. Isn’t it cute?”

“I don’t think it’s all that ‘cute’ Debbie. Actually, we need to discuss her relationship with that man. I don’t think it’s a good idea for her to get involved with anyone. It could mess up her social security, not to mention a whole host of other things.”

“Hi Joe, yes I’m doing just fine. Oh yes, I would love to meet you at the pizza place tomorrow for lunch. Eleven sounds good to me.”

Emma hung up the phone feeling quite satisfied with herself and her relationship with Joe. She hoped one day Stephen would see how important it was for her to have friends. She had been by herself for so long it was hard to take in all the people that had suddenly made her life full.

“Everything ok Mother?”

“Oh yes of course it is. Stephen, I would appreciate very much for you and Debbie to come with me to church this Sunday.”

“Oh Mother not you too, I’ve been hoping you might help us straighten out Braden and all the crazy ideas he has. Did you know he has been talking about going into the ministry and quitting school to go to a bible college?”

“Really, I didn’t know he was thinking about all that.”

“Well Mother, if you would spend a little more time here and a little less time with Joe, you might know what is going on.”

“Stephen, that’s harsh!”

“It’s ok Debby, Stephen is right. I certainly don’t mean to be so selfish and self centered. I’m sorry.”

“Mother, please don’t I didn’t mean to hurt you. With all the things that have happened lately, it’s just so hard to get a handle on everything. I just feel so frustrated all the time.”

"I know Stephen, it's quite alright. I've thought a lot about all the changes that have come into my life. First Braden came here and I talked him into staying with me and now you and Debby are here. And then of course there is Joe; Stephen I do hope you like him and you can get to know him. Then I'm sure you'd like him. But you know most of all; I have a relationship with the Lord Jesus. That's meant more than anything. I feel at peace like never before. I feel content inside. I want you and Debbie to both have that peace and contentment. I also just want to read and study the Bible. I have never been so aware of anything, of everything in my entire life. I enjoy the ladies Bible study and going to church. There are so many people in my life these days and I'm am completely happy about every bit of it. I look back on my life and think how sad and lonely I was and it makes me want to cherish everyone and everything around me. Every day has truly become a gift. I am praying for you both to find Christ as well."

"Mother, all that sounds great, but it just doesn't make sense to me. I've been taught to work hard and rely on myself."

"Stephen, I can't tell you how sorry I am that you feel that way. I'm just going to keep praying for you that you will see with your heart and come to the saving knowledge of Jesus. Please come to church with me?"

"Mom, Stephen knows how much it means to you. We'll come, but neither one of us are into all that religious stuff."

"I'm not into religious stuff either. Pastor has taught that religion and ritual are one in the same. Christianity is a relationship. You two are married; you have a relationship. Your marriage grows, gets better through time because your relationship grows. A marriage that doesn't grow usually fails and ends in divorce. A Christian can experience doubts because the relationship is not what it should be. "

"I don't buy into any of that. Everyone knows what Christianity is. It's just believing in God and going to church."



Emma rushed out of her office door in order to keep her lunch appointment with Sara. Time always had a way of getting from her. One minute she was logging into her computer then before she knew it, it was time to go. She knew she had been frustrated for some time, but she had no idea it had been four hours. Hopefully, Sara would understand. At least they had made lunch arrangements for the tea room that was down from her place. She had never been there even though it was close. Emma had not had many lady friends. It had been just Stephen and her. Then after Stephen went to college, it was just her.

"Hi, Emma! It's so nice to see you. I guess you found the place ok?"

"Oh yes, my office is just a few doors down."

"Oh you probably eat here all the time; we can go somewhere else if you like."

"No really this is fine. Actually, I've not been here before. What do you suggest to order?"

"I've never had anything that wasn't absolutely wonderful. Dessert is a must! But if you are counting calories, points, or carbs; we can get two plates and share one. My personal favorite is the lava cake."

"I probably won't get much work done this afternoon if I eat all that. I only need enough strength to fight that computer."

"I love email, surfing, and shopping online. I can't imagine life without the Internet."

"You certainly have more going for you than I do, maybe you can share some of your secrets?"

"Oh absolutely, but tell me how are things going for you? Are the Bible study members treating you ok?"

"Oh I'm just fine. I'm still getting to know everyone."

"Ok you've forced me to get to the point, Emma, I know Millie very well. I heard she came to see you. I want you to know no one shares Millie's opinion about anything. Through the years she has done a lot of hurtful things to a lot of people."

"I guess I don't understand. I thought all church people were supposed to be good."

"Well they all should be, but they're not all good. You just need to remember each one is human. We get certain ideas in our heads which are hard to shake. Millie has had a lot of heartaches in her life. Granted, she's brought most of it on herself. You know what I like to do? I like to tattle. When I'm upset, I used to get on my knees but if I did that these days I wouldn't be able to get up so I find a quiet place in the house and I tattle. I let the Lord know what has happened, why I'm hurting or why I'm angry. Years ago, I tattled on my husband, Chuck, it was amazing! I'd be hurt and angry and I would tell the Lord all about it. You know what happened? It seemed like time after time, Chuck would come home from work the same day and he would ask me to sit with him and he would just pour his soul out to me about all the things he had done wrong. It was all the things I had complained about to the Lord. He even used a lot of the same words I did. That doesn't just happen, you know. After a while I saw how great tattling worked for my husband, so I started tattling on everyone else as well. There've even been times the Lord would let me know I got what I'd asked for and it was me who was in the wrong. You know the Bible says in 1 Peter 5:7, "casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you." That is one of my favorite verses and one I truly believe in. I've found by letting Him know how I feel and what I'm going through has helped me a lot through the years. People can be wonderful blessings, but they can also be a pain."

Emma laughed. Sara was certainly a southern lady who spoke her mind with a genteel attitude. Maybe she wanted to learn that from her as well as the Bible.



The phone jangled as Emma opened the door, and then the answering machine clicked on. It was Joe. He wanted to meet her at the ice cream parlor again tonight. Emma thought that would be fun. She would have something to look forward to while she tried to get data put into that program and run off reports. She sat down at her desk, turned on the computer, and punched in the speed dial number Braden had assigned to Joe. She then clicked on the program and started typing in the numbers and sending the report to print.

“Hi Joe, I got your message I would love to have ice cream with you tonight. Of course Scamp can go. He’s so cute.”

She laughed at him for saying she wouldn’t think Scamp was so cute if she cleaned up after him. Emma hung up the phone and reached for another file.

“Hey Grandma, how’d your day go?”

“Hello Braden, sweetheart, just fine; I had lunch at that little tea room with Sara Gray. She is so nice; we had a lot of laughs too.”

Emma finished the file and reached for another one. Braden stared at her.

“Grandma, I thought you were having problems with the computer.”

“I would throw it in the trash if I thought I could get away with it, but your father would have a fit.”

“Grandma, how many files have you worked on today?”

Emma stopped and looked at the two piles on her desk. She had a to-do pile and another refile-at-the-end-of-the-day pile like Debby suggested. She sat and thought about each file and what she had done with each one. There were only two files left in her to-do stack. She couldn’t believe her eyes. Her office was clean, mail was ready to be dropped off at the post office, and she accomplished more in six hours than she did in two or three pre-computer days.

“Braden, I don’t know which is more incredible, that the computer really is helpful or that I’m actually using it. I can’t wait to tell Stephen and Debby. They will be so surprised.”

“I’m proud of you Grandma.”

“That’s sweet of you to say Honey. Oh look at the time; I need to freshen up to meet Joe in just thirty minutes.”

“Where’s the hot date?”

“Very funny, no ‘hot’ date, more like a cold one at the ice cream parlor. Tell me, you and Maris still friends?”

“Yes, we’re planning to be cousins soon.”

“What ever will I do with you?”



Joe watched Emma walk into the ice cream parlor. She had a nice walk. Joe took care of the orders, he already knew what Emma would want, homemade vanilla. Emma would say, if a place can’t do vanilla right, it certainly couldn’t do anything else right, besides vanilla is the best. Joe smiled to himself and looked down at Scamp who was already begging. He was spoiled! He liked anything with coffee in it. Especially, grounds from the trashcan. Joe heard it wasn’t good idea to feed a dog people food, but Scamp wasn’t just a dog, he was a full-blooded, dumpster diving, pound puppy, mutt, of the finest quality. Emma sat down next to Joe and handed Scamp the sample-size bowl of cappuccino ice cream. Scamp gulped, licked clean, and shoved the bowl away as an announcement he was ready for seconds.

“Would you like to take a walk with me down to the water’s edge?”

The night was warm but a cool breeze lifted from the water. Emma drew her sweater around her.

“Emma I’ve enjoyed our friendship more than I can ever really explain.”

“Oh, I have...”

“Now let me finish or I won’t. I would very much like for our friendship to become more. Oh, I just don’t know how they say these things these days. Emma, I love you very much and I want to really have a serious relationship with you.”



“Is that Joe and Emma?”

“Yes, it is. Who would have thought? We were exactly right in setting those two up. Let’s go find out how they are doing.”

“Hey Joe, Emma yoo-hoo.”

“Oh no, not those two. How fast can you run?”

“Oh my, you’ve got to be kidding! Hi, Janie. How are you Julie? I haven’t seen either of you in days. How is the flower shop?”

“We saw the two of you over here and thought we would stop by and see how you were doing. So how are you doing?”

Scamp tugged on his leash to get closer to trash bin for marking. Joe merely shook his head and wondered how this could happen. Here he was with Emma and his two benefactresses and a dog without shame. How could he salvage the evening, he had plans, high hopes. He wanted to pop the question that is if the question still got popped.

Emma tried to make small talk to Janie and Julie, but found her mind drifting. She noticed Joe walked the dog a little, or had the dog walked Joe?

“Hey Julie, maybe we should go and leave these two alone...”

Joe didn’t think he liked the girls’ attitudes. They seemed quite smug. He sighed. How would he ever get back to where he was? The whole mood was wrong.

Both breathed a sigh of relief as Janie and Julie saw the pastor and his wife also out for an evening stroll.

“Joe, what does your son think about you carrying on with me?”

“Well he hasn’t said much. He was embarrassed with what his wife did. Nancy is a handful, always getting the whole family into trouble. She seems to thrive on it. You wouldn’t believe what she’s done to those girls. Maris seems to take it all in stride but I’m afraid Megan looks to her mother as a mentor. That’s just plain scary.”

“Is Megan like her mother?”

“Oh she has those tendencies.”

“Braden hasn’t mentioned her at all, but he and Maris are quite good friends.”

“Maris loves the Lord. She came to church with me since she was a tiny thing. She loved Sunday school, Bible school in the summer, the works. Sarah would tell her bible stories every chance she got and Maris seemed to be a sponge, like you. It’s wonderful to be part of what’s happening to you Emma. It’s very special in deed. Don’t rush yourself. A lot of people think once they accept the Lord as their Savior, they get super holy and spiritual. In reality, you’ll spend the rest of your life learning and growing in the Lord praying to achieve the goals He has for you. It’s a special time and everyone around you appreciates watching a babe in Christ grow into a mature

Christian. It's a blessing to be a part, anyway that's how I feel and I know Sara Gray feels the same way. She enjoys descipling new Christians."

"Well thank you, but you know I feel out of touch, inadequate, just down right ignorant about the Bible and spiritual things."

"Well you probably are, but none of that's bad, it's exciting to grow spiritually, savor every moment of it."

"I'll try my best."

## Chapter 16

Emma pulled on her cozy warn pink chenille robe as she reached for her Bible. She pulled back the covers and snuggled deep into the pillows as she opened to the book of Genesis, nothing like starting right at the beginning. Her thoughts wondered for a few minutes...did she remember correctly, did Joe say he loved her earlier. Nah, she must have heard wrong. Getting old and senile are hard things. Where was she, oh yes Genesis. She looked up when the phone jangled. She wondered who it could be, hopefully Braden was ok.

"Hello, oh hello Joe. No, of course you aren't bothering me, I was just reading. Well I guess you can come over, just give me a few minutes.

Emma couldn't imagine why Joe wanted to see her at this hour of the night. By the time Emma got dressed, Joe was already standing at her door.

"Hi Emma. I'm sorry to bother you so late at night, but I just couldn't let this go a minute longer."

"Well, that's ok Joe. Whatever could be the matter?"

"I started something earlier I really want to finish. The water front would have been a perfect place, but at least this is private.

Emma glanced up to see headlights through the window. Well somewhat private, she thought. Braden was pulling into her driveway.

"Ok, I need to work fast. Emma, I tried to tell you earlier that I love you. And at my age, I can't afford to dilly-dally around with anything. Emma I would be proud if you would agree to us agreeing we have a relationship and would like to further that... huh well I mean I would like for us to get closer. I mean all of it in an honorable way of course. I guess I should talk to Stephen."

"Joe, talk to me. I wouldn't have ever thought anyone could take Hank's place and now I'm certain no one can. But you know you've never tried. You most definitely have made your own place and I truly do love you for that and for so many other things."

"You always make things easy for me; Emma would you do me the honor by being my wife?"

"Yes, I think I would like to do just that."

For the first time the two embrace as Braden stumbled into the house.

"Oh sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt anything."

He was surprised to find Joe over the house so late and the lights barely on. He wondered what had happened.

"Emma, if you wouldn't mind I would like to visit with Stephen in the morning."

"I understand and that will be just fine. You'll have to fill me in on how it turns out."

“Well I won’t be staying. It’s nice to see you Braden. What time did my granddaughter get home?”

“Oh about thirty minutes ago, I needed to stop by and pick up a few things at the store.”

Joe checked his watch as he left through the front door. He hadn’t felt so odd in a long time. He felt overwhelmed actually. Emma meant more to him than he ever thought he could feel again. He just didn’t understand it. He loved Sarah more than his own life, she was truly his world. She was so different from Emma, but yet he could see how strong his feelings were for her, completely amazing that an old man could have any feelings at all. He chuckled to himself. He silently prayed his meeting with Stephen would go well. He knew the first priority would be for Stephen to not reject the Lord because of his mother’s new relationship.



Joe straightened his tie and took a deep breath as he opened the door to the new *Numbers CPA*. He immediately recognized Debby who greeted him with a smile.

“Hello, Joe right? It’s a pleasure to see you again. May I get you something...coffee, water perhaps?”

“Oh, no thank you. I stopped by to visit with Stephen just for a few minutes if he can spare it.”

“Of course he can spare it; I’ll let him know you’re here.”

Debby stepped out of the room as Joe tugged at his tie and shirt. He thought to himself he needed to remember not to get it so tight. He always seemed to have this problem. How can a man who wears one so often forget to leave it a little looser...

“Hello Joe. Is there something I can help you with today?”

“Actually, yes I just wanted to speak to you for a few minutes if that would be alright?”

“Yes, of course it is, please come in. I was going over a few things, actually some of the accounts my mother works on. You know she is doing very well. I’ve been pleasantly surprised. She has really taken to that computer, but I’m not one bit surprised.”

“She would be delighted to hear you say that since she has struggled learning it and all. But you know that’s not why I came here today. I don’t want to take up too much of your time so I’ll get right to the point. I asked your mother to be my wife last night and I would be honored if you would give us your blessing. I don’t want to cause you or your family any hurt, and I certainly don’t want to take away from your father’s memory...”

“I see. What did Mother say?”

“She accepted.”

“I see. I think you both need to understand the tax consequences for your decision.”

“Stephen, it’s not about taxes. It is about Emma and me being very fond of each other and doing right. I love your mother very much. I don’t know how all this is going to work out, but all that will take care of itself.”

“What does your son think about this decision?”

“Actually, my son and I haven’t talked yet. There is proper order you know. I would be honored if you would give us your blessing if your son will agree.”

I’ll give my blessing if you and Mother will listen to all the tax ramifications from me and all the legal implications from your son. After you have heard everything, if you still want to get married, I will give my blessing.”

“Well that sounds fair enough. Stephen, I meant what I said about your father.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll call Ethan and set up a time for us all to sit down and discuss the situation.”

“Let me know what fits into his schedule and I’ll be there.”



Debby poured coffee and served freshly baked coffee cake. She felt completely unnerved by Joe’s daughter-in-law, Nancy. Nancy seemed cold and distant, but yet completely absorbed in the situation. Emma didn’t feel any better. She wondered what Joe’s son could see in such a woman.

“Ok, now that we all understand the bigger picture. What do you two want to do?”

Stephen looked at his mother hoping she would back out. He looked at the door thinking how quickly he could help her through it to the car. He really didn’t like this family very much. Too much old money. Too much...

“Stephen I promised we would hear you and Ethan out, which we have. Emma, I love you very much and I don’t want to change my mind one bit. I would be honored if you would be my wife and I truly want the children’s blessings.”

“Oh, Joe I feel exactly the same way. I haven’t been this happy in so many years.”

Stephen looked down at the floor feeling defeated. Ethan merely closed his eyes to hide the pain of losing his mother once again. Nancy scanned the room to watch each reaction. Debby smiled to herself and began to mentally plan the wedding.

## Chapter 17

“You look beautiful Mother. I have to admit I wasn’t crazy about this idea of you getting married, but it’s quite evident you are clearly very happy and I’m happy for you.”

“Thank you Stephen, it means the world to that me you think so.”

The doors to the church’s auditorium opened and Emma and Stephen walked into a full house. Everyone stood as the bride and her son made their way down the aisle during the traditional *Wedding March*. Emma finally saw Joe; looking quite dashing. She knew she is very fortunate indeed!



As the doors open, Joe sees Emma, beautiful! He wondered how it all got so big, so out of hand. People kept saying they wanted to do things for them and this one

or that one just had to have a part. The whole thing mushroomed into an extravaganza. Yep, he knows he's blessed!



"Everything is simple, elegant, and tasteful. You have completely out done yourselves ladies."

Pastor Wescott greeted Janie and Julie during the reception. He tried to make the rounds getting to meet new people as well as seeing to his own flock. He did want to get to know Emma's family better, and it was also a rare treat to see all of Joe's family.

"Did anyone tell you Pastor we introduced Emma and Joe?"

"Yes, we did. I told Janie they would make a cute couple and now here we are."

"Isn't this just wonderful?"

"Ok ladies but you might want to be a careful in the future. One of these days your matchmaking might backfire."

"I can't imagine how that could ever happen, can you Jules?"

"I think we need to find about new house plans, how about it Janie?"

"Honeymoon plans, Jules."



Emma wanted to duck and hide when she saw Janie and Julie heading their way. She wondered if Joe felt the same way.

"Emma, Joe we want to know everything."

"All of what?"

"So what are the living arrangements going to be? Will you live in her house or yours?"

"Where's the honeymoon going to be?"

Joe felt fire rise from his toes all the way to his eyebrows. How could two such lovely ladies be such pains?

"Well I guess we need to work all that out don't we? Emma and I will get it all settled eventually."

Joe did his best to guide his new bride to a safer location.

"Did we just get the brush-off?"

"Is this the backfiring the Preacher was talking about?"

"Oh surely not."



The Pastor struck the side of his glass of punch to get everyone's attention so he could toast the newlyweds.

"Brother Joe, Miss Emma, everyone I would like to make the customary toast and give you both my blessing. It's my heart's desire that you both will be very happy and enjoy each day as a special gift from the Lord. That you will grow together as husband

and wife as well as spiritually in the Lord. We pray you god speed to your new life together.”

“Thank you Pastor, I think that’s our cue Emma.”



Emma couldn’t believe it! Joe surprised her with tickets for a cruise. She would never have guessed when she read that romance novel she would one day take a cruise like the book. She looked forward to many days and years with Joe in their new life together. She would remember to thank the Lord and cherish each one.

## Chapter 18

Emma couldn’t believe all the decisions that still needed to be made. After looking at both of their homes, Joe and Emma decided to sell both houses and buy one of those newly built homes with a small yard. At least the two sons liked the investment opportunity the new house brought. Emma was looking forward to her new office at *Numbers CPA* and working with her son and daughter-in-law daily. Joe was looking forward to having help cleaning up after and training Scamp.

“Emma, sometimes I just don’t know where I am, but then I just wonder around until something looks familiar.”

“I know exactly what you mean, I feel like my life has been turned upside down. It just seems like yesterday I felt so alone and wondering where my life had gone. For so many years I felt as if life had simply passed me by, and you know what? It had. But now I am completely filled. First there is my new relationship with the Lord, which has grown through prayer, Bible study, and going to and helping out at the church. Then of course there is our relationship, I would never have thought that I could love anyone like Hank, you mean the world to me Joe. I’m closer to Stephen and Debby than ever before. I can hardly believe they sold that big house they just had built to move here of all places. And then of course there’s Braden, oh Joe you know I adore that kid. I never would have thought it possible to love as much as I do. And I feel more love than I’ve ever known.”

Joe handed Emma a Kleenex and let her continue to count her blessings out loud.

“Emma I’ve had a good and full life, I hope I never take anything for granted, and I certainly understand that it would be easy to do so. After we met, I felt like we were going to be special together. But I must admit I wondered if we were going to survive selling those two houses, but we did. I am counting my blessings today too. Yep, the Lord has certainly been good.”

Emma reached for the coffee pot as Joe grabbed some cups to head out to the patio. The yard was not what Joe was accustomed to, but in time he knew he would have it looking absolutely splendid. It was already warm. Emma quickly took off her sweater. Joe had already been working on the lawn as well as preparing some new flower beds and a small vegetable garden. Scamp plopped down at the edge of the patio to gnaw on a chew bone. Joe smiled as he watched the dog completely consume the bone that had been hidden for such a time as this.

"I love the smell of fresh cut grass."

"Yeah, I do too. I sure had to work on that edger to get it running."

"Joe, we can afford to buy a new one if you need it."

"Oh, I like to fix things when I can. Tinkering, I guess, is just half the fun. What do you think about a flower bed in that corner by the light pole?"

"Whatever you think Joe. I don't know a lot about gardening; except its hard work. I always paid a teenager to cut the grass in my backyard."

Joe walked around the yard to inspect where he might like to put in a new bed and what he might like to grow, and also to cover up some holes dug by Scamp. He wondered what might be done to remedy that problem.

"What do ya think Emma, flowers or veggies?"

Emma saw Joe grab a hold of the light pole to steady his balance.

"Joe are you alright?"

"Emma, my chest is tight and my arm sure is sore, I'm..."

"Joe, do you need to go to the hospital?"

"Oh, I don't know it's probably just indigestion."

"Why don't we have it checked out to make sure? Have you been having any other chest pains?"

"Well, actually yes the last few days I've noticed I've had what felt like indigestion, but I thought it was just all the extra work we've been doing on the house and yard."

Emma ran into the house to dial 9-1-1 and then tried to follow the instructions calmly. She was relieved Joe did not give her any trouble about going to the emergency room to check out his chest pains. By the time the paramedics arrived at the house, Emma was certain she had made the right decision to call them for help.

"Joe, my name is Tamar. How are you feeling?"

The lady paramedic calmly asked Joe questions while she took his vital signs and observed him closely.

"Where are you hurting? We're going to get you settled in the ambulance before taking you to the hospital.

Tamar continued to explain what was happening to Joe to reassure him she would take good care of him.

"Tamar is a good Bible name. Do you know the Lord, Tamar?"

My father died when I was little. He told me before he died he wanted me and my brothers and sister to have Bible names so people would feel comfortable to witness to us.

Joe tried to manage a laugh but chose to breathe the oxygen instead. He prayed for an opportunity to share the Gospel with this petite young girl with a long brown pony tail. He urged her to explain.

"I have two brothers, Noah and Jonah and one sister, Tirzah."

"All good stories." Joe pulled down his oxygen mask as Tamar put it back in place with a warning glance.

"You know all the stories? Most people only know Noah and Jonah."

"Joe could only nod his head. Emma watched in disbelief that Joe could feel up to talking about the Bible at a time like this. But then she understood the Bible becomes an integral part of a person.

The paramedic and her partner worked in proficient haste as they lifted Joe onto the stretcher and then into the ambulance with quick smooth movements.

Emma watched the ambulance drive off complete with lights and siren. She thought Joe's probably having a fit that such a fuss was made over him. She only wished she could have ridden with him, but Tamar said there simply wasn't enough room and she needed to focus on Joe.

It seemed like an eternity but she finally made it to the hospital, she thought Joe looked pale. She looked for a phone to call Stephen or should she call Ethan first. Oh she didn't know his number... After the examination, the doctor informed her Joe would need to have an angioplasty procedure and probably one or two stents to help his heart. Emma thought she and Joe would also need to make some changes in their lives by changing their diet as well as adding some exercises and probably hire out the yard work. They should stop having so many changes like computers, dogs, and buying and selling houses. She finally found the hospital phone to call Stephen, although she hesitated to call Ethan. She always dreaded any encounter with Nancy.



Emma sat quietly praying between Ethan and Stephen. She was thankful for both of them. She wondered if the two men had found peace or perhaps kindness between themselves. They certainly had a rocky beginning. Stephen winced when Ethan flipped open his cell phone to call Nancy. Debby arrived with coffee and donuts. Ethan looked surprised as Debby had obviously brought enough for him as well. He seemed to be processing the concern his new family seemed to have for his father.

Ethan sat solemn and quiet; though he was relieved he was not alone. He wondered where his own family might be until he looked up and saw Maris and Braden coming toward them. He knew they had probably been in the chapel praying. He wished he could trust and believe as easily as they did. Faith was for the young, he knew as they got older they would see they would have to take control of situations and circumstances.

"Any news?"

"Nothing, waiting's hard."

"Dad, where's Mom and Megan?"

"I talked to your mother earlier; she said they would be along shortly."

Maris noticed her dad looked wearied. She wondered if it was because her grandfather had had a heart attack or that her mother and sister were not here. She thought it was probably both.

After what seemed hours, a doctor finally emerged to let them know about Joe's condition. Fortunately, the angioplasty was successful, only one stent was needed. Emma thought to herself she couldn't remember a day filled with more blessings and having the feeling of being truly thankful for each one. She was also grateful for modern medicine. Joe's procedure had been less evasive than what people had to go through in the past. She knew they both would have to make changes in their ever changing lives. No more pizza or that wonderfully fattening ice cream they were having down at the waterfront park in the evenings. She was ready to take on whatever the doctor suggested to help Joe recover from his surgery quicker. The doctor gave them

instructions to go to the recovery waiting room. Emma was relieved to be making progress.

Ethan breathed a sigh of relief as the doctor gave the prognosis and recovery schedule for his father. He watched this woman, Emma, who seemed truly concerned for his father. He envied that. He wished he could have been as fortunate as his father had been to find two women that seemed to love him and care for him. He wished Nancy could show half as much concern for him. He knew he needed to check with his office and re-schedule the rest of his appointments for the day. He thought he might like to get to know Emma a little better. Stephen and Debby were also a bit of a mystery to him as well. They had obviously done quite well, but they bought that little CPA firm and moved to Sharon's Cross; didn't make a lot of sense to him. Perhaps it would do him some good to spend some time with them to figure it all out. Braden seemed polite and gentlemanly toward Maris. He never worried about his daughter whenever she said she and Braden would be together. He watched the two of them; they seemed close, like cousins. He wondered if Megan could be included and if she would take part in the friendship. He secretly hoped so. He also didn't understand Pastor Wescott just dropping everything as soon as he heard the problem. But here he was waiting and praying with them as if Joe was his own father. The concern seemed genuine. He wondered about Nancy, where could she be? He told her hours ago. The waiting room was full of people from the church. His first thought was busy-bodies; however, they too all seemed concerned.

## Chapter 19

Emma dropped her purse on the chair by the bed and fell to her knees. She prayed and sobbed until she had to move her legs before completely losing all feeling in them. She was exhausted, drained. She didn't bother with a nightgown just fell asleep on the bed as it was.

Emma heard the doorbell. She wondered who could be at the door this time of night. She prayed it was not about Joe. She opened the door as sunlight flooded in, it was morning already. Sara Gray walked passed her to the kitchen carrying a bag of groceries to make breakfast.

"My husband had a heart attack two years ago. It was awful. He had been having chest pains and never said a word. By the time the ambulance got to the hospital I could have killed him for scaring me to death."

Emma chuckled as she watched Sara empty the grocery bags she brought in tow.

"Emma, it will take these biscuits a little while to cook, if you would like to jump in the shower that will be just fine. I'll carry on here."

Emma did not have to think twice about the offer. She finally relaxed under the hot-steamy water. She prayed silently as she washed off the effects of the previous day.



Ethan looked in the mirror as he finished tying his tie in a perfect Windsor. He couldn't believe neither Nancy nor Megan went to the hospital. He felt devastated. His father could have died and his own wife and daughter were not there for his father or for him. Those other people were there; so many other people. People from the church, his father's old and new neighborhood, and fellow co-workers from the supermarket were all there. Even the paramedics that took him to the hospital came by to check on him. Emma was there.

Nancy entered the room wearing a slinky black peignoir. Ethan really didn't know what to say to her. He was angry and hurt.

"Ethan are you still angry because I didn't make it to the hospital? You know how much I hate those places; just full of germs and sick people."

"Nancy, my father could have died yesterday."

"Ethan, your father is going to be just fine; besides there's nothing I could have done by being there."

"Yes there is you could have supported me. Emma was there for Dad, and her son, Stephen was there for her. Stephen's wife, Debby, was there for him. That's what people do that love each other, they are there for each other."

"Ethan that's not fair. I don't have to "be there" to be there for you. I'm there for you, even when we're not in the same room."

"Nancy, I think you are only "there" for my bank account."

"Watch it; you wouldn't have that bank account if it wasn't for my father giving you a job at the firm."

Ethan grabbed his suit coat and slammed the front door. He couldn't believe Nancy was so self absorbed. He wondered what she had been doing while he was at the hospital, probably shopping or a spa.



Emma felt better after a soothing hot shower and delicious breakfast. She reached for the phone after the first ring. It was Stephen checking on her. He assured her she needed to take whatever time she needed and work would be there when she got back after Joe was better. She was grateful her son was also her boss, and a good boss at that. She could go to the hospital and stay with Joe. She was disappointed she was not allowed to stay with him the night before, but he was still in recovery and the hospital staff insisted she go home.

She arrived at the hospital just as Joe began to wake up. He wanted to know all about the procedure he had had and how she was doing with it all. She explained to him the doctor's instructions on the healthy diet and exercise program they both would need to begin. Joe assured her that he would be good and follow the doctor's orders, but she confided in him they both should follow the same regimen if they wanted celebrate any anniversaries. Joe asked how Ethan handled all of it. He was disappointed to hear that Nancy and Megan didn't show up. He knew Ethan was hurt. That girl had always been selfish and spoiled. He knew the greater tragedy was that Megan was growing up just like her mother.

"Knock, knock we thought we would stop by and try and cheer up the place a little."

Janie and Julie bustled through the door with flower arrangements, food baskets, and balloons.

“What’s up with all this, did someone die?”

“Oh you! Everyone loves you so much our phone has been ringing off the hook. We’ve got more out in the van. We’ll be right back.”

Emma looked at Joe as he looked at her; both overwhelmed.

“Ladies, would it be possible for us to have all the cards and perhaps you can drop off most of those in the children’s ward or the nursing home?”

Joe smiled as he watched Emma guide the two out of his room. He waived smiling and agreed with the suggestion. He knew he would be going home in no time and then they would have to move all the deliveries.



Joe was relieved that after just a few days, he was released to go home. He was thrilled until he saw how high the grass had grown while he was gone. He felt depressed because he would not be able to take care of it. He then heard the sound of a lawnmower. He looked out the window to the back yard to see Braden with the mower. Maris was also working in the backyard. Emma motioned for him to come outside. She had made some fizzy lemonade. Joe felt guilty everyone was working except him, but he was given a don’t-even-think-about-it look from all three. He enjoyed sitting on the patio sipping lemonade and watching the transformation of a jungle into a manicured lawn. Braden even got the old edger to work. Maybe it was time to invest in a new one as Emma had suggested. Especially if Braden helped out more, it was one thing for him to put that old one to work, but Braden did need something safer.

Ethan didn’t get an answer from ringing the doorbell but he did hear laughter coming from the backyard. He decided to peek over the gate just as he was caught.

“Ethan, come on back here. We have fresh lemonade and comfortable lawn chairs.”

He smiled at his father’s gracious invitation. He was glad to have his father so close.

“I just wanted to make sure you were doing ok, Dad.”

“Oh, I’m just fine. I have a lot of people trying to take good care of me. Braden is doing a great job on the lawn. It looked terrible. Maris can put in a few good solid hours of work too.”

Ethan smiled as he watched his daughter pulling weeds and grass from a flower bed his father had lovingly labored to put in. He wished his other daughter and his wife were here to help as well. He knew it wouldn’t do any good to wish for things that would never happen. Maris had always been more like his parents and Megan had always been more like her mother and maternal grandparents.



Emma was so relieved to have Joe back home. As they were relaxing before bed she told him about Sara coming over to cook her breakfast. She also filled him in

on the many phone calls and all the thank you cards that needed to be prepared for the flowers and gifts sent to from the church members and others. Joe sat back to take in all the information.

“In all that went on, did you see Nancy?”

“You know Joe; I don’t believe I saw her or Megan one time.”

Joe stared at the floor mentally shedding tears for his only son. He felt when the two married she was just too wrapped up in herself to be a good wife. She didn’t want children; the twins were an accident. Ethan always seemed to be loving and kind toward her which should have won her, but for some reason he just never did. He also knew it was probably better on Emma and the others that both Nancy and Megan keep their distance.

## Chapter 20

“Preacher, I cannot believe no one is tending to the church grounds as they did in my father’s day. Father would never have allowed grass between the cement; just untidy, just a shame! I don’t know what this world is coming to, nobody seems to care about God’s house like they used to. Why, I have a mind...”

Pastor Wescott greeted each member of his congregation and the guests. He tried to remember each name, knowing it was a small thing, but people always seemed to feel more welcome that he tried. He suffered to think what Millie Barton’s out burst each week was doing to their guests. He often made it a matter of prayer, but never felt any peace about sitting down and talking with her as strongly as he would like to talk to her.

“Pastor, I caught the sermon on the sidewalk this morning. Yes indeedie; each one of us should be just like that little clump of grass – just grow where we’re planted, be stubborn about it if need be. That what you think the Lord had in mind letting it grow there Pastor?”

Joe and Emma walked up to the church building arm in arm. It was his first Sunday back, he was thrilled. He felt like he had been gone a century. He frowned to see Millie Barton was giving Pastor a hard time, but then old Brother Blalock was a walking, talking blessing. He had an uncanny gift to see God in everything, and was certainly not afraid to share it so Miss Millie could hear.

“Joe and Emma, it’s so good to have you back. How are you feeling?”

“Oh much better Pastor, I’ve been looking forward to being in church. I’m getting stronger every day. Emma has made me stay on the diet the doctor ordered and I’m getting enough exercise to make Olympians jealous.”

“Pastor, the phone is for you.”

“Is it an emergency or can I return the call?”

The Pastor tried to hide his frustration. He couldn’t even greet his congregation without distractions.



Joe and Emma found their usual seats, second row, piano side, close to the action. The auditorium was filling up quickly, as usual. The Pastor seemed distraught.

He was fine when they arrived. Joe wondered if Millie Barton had gotten to him again. Joe started to worry; it seemed as if Pastor was shaking uncontrollably.

Pastor approached the pulpit and grabbed one side to steady himself. He cleared his throat and reached for a glass of water. He was grateful every Sunday one of the deacons would see to it he had fresh water while he preached. He wiped his brow, still trying to find some composure.

“Brothers and Sisters I don’t know where to begin. I don’t know where the beginning is or I would begin there. Something awful has happened. Within the days and weeks ahead all of our faith will be tested greatly. So I will encourage you to encourage each other. Our brother and sister in Christ, Chuck and Sara Gray, as we all know, were going up to their cabin to spend time with their daughter, Kirsti. On the way up the mountain, a deer ran in front of their car. I’m sorry to have to tell you that neither one of them survived.”

Quiet filled the room which finally gave way to sniffles and heavy hearts. Emma particularly felt the hurt; Joe sensed her pain as he took her hand. Many people began to gather at the alter to pray for the Grays two girls, to pray for the church, to pray for themselves. The Grays had been a large part of everyone lives. They had done so much for so many. Emma wondered what she could do to make things better, anything. She wondered about Sara’s daughters. She gasped to remember Kalli. Kalli is expecting a baby. What would happen to her? She knew she would need to go and try to help Kalli. She didn’t know what she needed to do, but she needed to try something. By the time the prayer service ended Emma felt like a woman on a mission. Joe was amazed by her tunnel vision, she was focused on Kalli. She had been praying for her and the baby. Joe waited for Emma as he brought the car to the side of the building. Emma informed Joe she wanted to go to Sara’s daughter.



Emma rang the doorbell at Kalli’s house as her husband, Brad opened it. She continued praying to herself.

“Hello, my name is Emma McDougal. I dropped by to see how Kalli is doing. I was in her mother’s Bible study.”

“Come in. Kalli’s resting now. She saw the doctor last night and he told us she and the baby are fine, but they can’t tolerate much more. I’m sure you understand.”

“Of course I do. Is there anything I can do? I loved Sara very much. She was a wonderful friend. I can’t imagine what Kalli is going through.”

“There’s something you can do. Would you mind sitting with her while I go to the store? We are expecting a lot of family to come in including Kalli’s sister Kirsti.”

“Oh I would love to, but if you would like to stay with Kalli I wouldn’t mind going to the store for you.”

“If you don’t mind Mrs. McDougal, I would love to stretch my legs a little and get some fresh air.”

“Of course you would. I’m sorry; yes I will gladly sit with Kalli.”



Emma decided to make some hot tea. Kalli was stirring when Emma got back into the bedroom.

“Hello, Ms. Denby, I’m mean...”

“Please, Kalli call me Emma. Brad left a little while ago to pick up some things from the store. I thought you might like some hot tea.”

“Thank you. It does smell good.”

“I found some brownies too; sure smelled good. I warmed them up to go with your tea.”

“Mom made them.”

“Kalli, I’m so sorry. I just didn’t know. I’ll find something else and put these in the freezer.”

“No, I want them. Thank you for being kind to me.”

“Your mother meant so much to me. I just want to try and give back something to her.”

“Oh yeah, the Bible study. She did that for a long time. She really liked it. She was excited about mentoring you. She loved doing things like that.”

Emma wiped a tear as she answered the door. Joe gave her an apologetic nod as he helped Brad bring the grocery bags into the house. After they put the food away and Kalli was resting, Joe and Emma decided to let Brad also get some rest. Tomorrow would be filled with more demands. Emma reached for Joe’s hand and he responded to her need for reassurance. She wondered what the next days, weeks, months would be like since the Grays had been involved in so many things at the church and the community. She would pray that the Lord would send a teacher so the Bible study would continue. She would also encourage others to keep coming. She would pray and help Kalli and Kirsti any way possible.

the end.

## Epilogue

By the world’s standard, Emma is a good woman. No one could find fault in a virtuous widow who raised a successful son and long-time business owner. However, she was still not fulfilled. Something was missing from her life. For so many years she had been lonely. Until one day, it all changed. That something was a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. In Romans 3:11, the Bible says, “...there is none that seeketh after God.” God first pursues man. Emma thought she understood about religion and she had not been impressed. She watched Christians say religious things but behave in a manner that did not match their testimony. Many people may feel the same way. However, she learned even someone who goes to church all the time and professes to be a Christian may need to grow spiritually. That person might be a babe in Christ. After Emma’s conversion she found others around her who had been in church many years but had not grown as much as she had in just a few short weeks. She met others that saw God working in everything around them whether a good situation or not. Emma wanted to learn all she could about God’s word so she could apply every part of it to her life. She wanted to give to others a little of what had been given to her. When

her friend Sara Gray is accidentally killed, Emma quickly goes to Kalli's side to help her mourn her mother without losing her baby. Emma truly learned lessons quickly. She also learned that the ladies in the Brown Bag Bible Study needed her too to carry on what had been going on before. Emma felt she didn't know enough to lead the Bible study, but she was willing to encourage others, and allow the Lord to use her how He saw fit.

### **Fizzy Lemonade**

Add powdered lemonade to equal portions of water and lemon/lime soda and garnish with thin slices of limes and lemons.

### **Emma's Challenge**

"Everyone talked about reading the Bible through it sounded impossible. I even wondered if anyone had really even done that. It seemed like climbing Mt. Everest or something. Finally, I decided to start right at the beginning with Genesis with just four chapters per day. At first I found the King James Version was difficult to read and understand but that version greatly improved my reading and comprehension skills. I've heard a lot of "academic" arguments but all I know is it has helped me to keep my mind sharp. When I got to Psalms, I read ten chapters if they were short; one if it was Psalm 119. I made it through the entire Bible in ten months! If I can do it anyone can and I challenge you my friend to read through the Bible whether you've not read through before or not read through in a while.

Here is a brief outline or roadmap that helped me to understand the Bible and keep all straight:

1. Creation – obviously creation of all things
2. Hebrew Fathers – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph
3. Exodus – leaving Egypt
4. Conquest – conquering the Promised Land
5. Judges – military leaders
6. United Kingdom – King Saul, David, Solomon
7. Divided Kingdom – civil war and Israel and Judah
8. Captivity – Assyria conquers Israel and Babylon conquers Judah
9. Return – Judah begins to return to the Promised Land and rebuild the walls around Jerusalem and then the Temple.
10. Gospel – Matthew, Mark, Luke & John; the life and ministry of Jesus
11. Acts of the Holy Spirit – with the first century church and the apostles

12. Epistles – the rest of the New Testament is a collection of letters.<sup>1</sup>

When I finished reading through, I started again. What an adventure!

### **Brown Bag Bible Study**

#### **Mrs. Job**

In looking at an overview of the book of Job: Job was a wealthy man; he was the Bill Gates of his time (Job 1:3). We first read a bizarre conversation between God and Satan about Job. God allows Satan to tempt Job. In one day Job lost 10 children (7 sons and 3 daughters), camels, donkeys, sheep, etc. After he heard all the news that everything he worked for his whole life was gone, Job mourned. He shaved his head and sat in ashes to signify his deep level of grief. His three “friends” came to see him but just stared at him for a long time and then each one delivered a long sermon on sin. Job ends this portion of scripture by cursing the night he was conceived and the day he was born.

I would like to take a hard look at Mrs. Job. You know, she also lost everything that Job lost. All of her children died as well as her vast fortune was destroyed. She was also left with a husband who had become a social pariah. But even with her faults she is still quite fortunate because she was included in the greatest book that was ever written, the Bible! But she was only given one verse; only one verse to tell her story and leave an impression of her for us. She responds to her husband with all the terms of endearment, comfort, and encouragement she could muster: **Then said his wife unto him, Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die.** (Job 2:9)

Job lets her have it in the next verse: **But he said unto her, Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips?**

People have questioned as to why the lives of the children were taken and her life was spared. One commentary I read stated that perhaps Satan knew her personality and planned to use it against Job in his trial before God. But maybe she was spared because God told Satan that Job’s life was to be spared. Could this have been a picture of God’s view of marriage in that two become one, so maybe her life and his were so intertwined that she was spared as being part of Job? Another reason could have been was that God knew Job would be restored and his help meet was important in God’s plan for Job’s restoration. Maybe she was a really nice person in a horrible situation and took it out on her husband. Maybe she just made a bad first impression. I think we all could relate to that.

It doesn’t really matter why God through His sovereign will, allowed her to live. Mrs. Job had only one chance to make a good impression and blew it. We too have opportunities to make good impressions. Sadly, her husband was a social outcast

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<sup>1</sup> Willmington’s Guide to the Bible, Willmington, Dr. D. H. L., Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Ill. 1984.

during his trial but after he is restored it is her that has continued to receive grief because of her bitter words of “comfort, and terms of endearment” to her husband in telling him to “curse God and die.” After Job is restored, God doubles everything he had before his trial, including the children (that would be 20 children)? There is no indication that she died and he remarried so all we can believe is what has been recorded in scriptures. She was his wife before his trial and was afterwards.

I hope and pray we will remember Mrs. Job the next time we are in the store or are meeting someone for the first time. A good or a bad impression lasts longer than we may think.

### **John 3**

This is the story of 3 Christians. Two are shining examples, but one is a trouble maker. The first is Gaius who was a model Christian in his church. The Apostle John wanted Gaius to financially prosper as his soul had prospered. This would have made Gaius a very rich man since he desired to grow spiritually. We need to remember Gaius and ask ourselves would we want someone praying that our prosperity in life and our physical health be brought to the level of our spiritual lives. Would the answer to this prayer make us wealthy and healthy or sickly paupers?

The second person is Diotrephes, he wanted to run the church. This man had been causing a lot of trouble for everyone around him. He tried to hurt everyone that got in his way or didn't share his opinions. Diotrephes was a control freak.

The last person in our story is Demetrius, who was probably the Apostle John's mailman. He too, like Gaius had a good reputation and was worthy of mentoring others.

The first thing we can do to apply what we've learned from our three friends is first to decide who we are most like. If we are like Gaius or Demetrius; then we can be encouraged to continue to grow in the wisdom of God's word. However, if we are somewhat closer to Diotrephes, we need to take a step back and consider what he did and what we might be doing and then learn from the experience. We can ask the Lord to forgive us and as we already know, he is faithful. Then we can study and meditate on Gaius and Demetrius' examples and try to follow them.