

A Good Man

Jennifer L. Armstrong



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Chapter One

Cats!

They were everywhere.

Maggie surveyed the scene with dismay. Last night she had found a cat, near starving, in the woodpile. Immediately, she had returned to her kitchen to take inventory of what she had that would be acceptable to a cat.

A starving cat would eat anything, she had decided.

Grabbing a pie tin from the recycling bin, she had taken the last slice of bread from its bag on the counter, torn it into little pieces and poured her remaining milk on top.

Taking the dish out to the cat, it had been both gratifying and heartbreaking to watch the cat gobble it down. Inspired, she had returned to her kitchen to open a can of tuna for her. That too, had been well-received.

The cat seemed tame. Though a common grey color, she had white paws that gave the impression that she was wearing elegant gloves. Maggie had given her a pat on the head and promised to return in the morning with something in the way of breakfast.

In the morning, the cat was waiting . . . with her four kittens.

Maggie looked down at the small bowl of leftover chicken

before putting it on the ground. It wouldn't be enough.

She could barely afford to feed herself, never mind cats.

And now that man was looking at her again.

It had been like this all week, ever since she had moved in. The man would come out on his deck and just stare at her. OK, it wasn't exactly to stare. He would put an item in his recycling bin. One night he had been making hamburgers on his BBQ. But he always seemed to be looking her way. And it wasn't in a friendly, welcoming neighbourly kind of way. It was as if he were trying to spot some kind of an infraction on her property. Broken eaves trough. Improper disposal of compost.

If he had been old or strange, it would have been creepy. But he was about her age and attractive. Though the scowl on his face didn't do much for his looks. Unlike Robbie, he was light-haired and green-eyed. Much taller than Robbie too.

Would she always compare men to Robbie?

Maggie turned her attention back to the cats. The food was going fast.

The mother cat must have had the kittens in the woodpile, she decided. The wood had been left there by the previous owner, who had evidently used the woodstove in the house. Maggie found the woodstove terrifying and had no intention of attempting to get a fire going in it. Thankfully, it was spring now and there would be no need to think about heating the house for at least another six months.

"You'll have to get them all spayed," the man called out to her.

She could not believe her ears.

Was he talking to her?

She turned to look at him.

"They're not my cats," she called back.

He was standing on his deck, arms crossed, just watching the whole scene.

"Looks like they are now," he said.

"They probably belonged to the previous owner."

"They didn't." There was a sharpness in his voice. Why should a man care about cats? She decided to ignore him.

"Now, now," she said, to the mother cat, who she had already named Tabby in her mind. "I'll get you and your little ones some more food." Where? Certainly not from her own kitchen. Could cats eat grass?

"If you don't get them spayed by the time they're able to have kittens themselves, you'll have a real problem on your hands," the man called out.

Cheerful.

"I'm sure it will all work itself out somehow," she said. "All things work together for the good . . ." She didn't finish the sentence. It was from Paul's letter to the Romans. *All things work together for the good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.* She doubted very much that Mr. Negativity was one of the ones called to God's purpose.

She started heading to the front of her house.

"Do you know how many kittens a cat can have in her lifetime?"

She resisted the urge to tell him she could not care less.

He stepped off his deck and crossed the driveway to come closer to her.

They both lived in aluminum-siding cottages, the kind that still took up a significant portion of Keswick, Ontario. Hers was white, his was blue. Many of these older, smaller homes were getting knocked-down and replaced with larger brick ones as Keswick moved toward becoming just one of the many bedroom communities serving Toronto. Farmers were selling their properties and whole subdivisions were going up all around the town. Still, in this older section, very little had changed. There were still patio lanterns along pathways at night and Maggie was only a ten-minute walk from Lake Simcoe.

"They have about two litters a year," he said. "Each litter can have up to seven kittens. And a cat lives to be about fifteen. You do the math."

She wasn't about to. She was three steps away from her front door.

"And then you have to think about the kittens," he continued. "Each female in the batch will do the same. And they can have their first litter when they're less than a year old . . ."

"Are you a vet?" she said.

"No," he said. It was the first time there was actually a smidgen of a smile on his face. "I'm a computer programmer. But I spend a lot of time on the internet." Now the smile was obvious.

"Reading about cats?" Maggie said. She couldn't help grinning

herself.

Now that he was smiling, he was much nicer to look at. Dressed casually in a checked shirt and khaki pants, she noticed that he was barefoot. Very brave of him to traverse their shared loose-stone driveway.

He nodded.

"And everything else. I work from home, so I figure the commute time is my own."

"Makes sense," she said.

"I'm Douglas, by the way," he said.

"I'm Maggie," she said. "I see you out on your deck a lot." Dumb. But he didn't seem to mind.

He nodded.

"My kitchen is too small for a recycling bin," he said. "So I leave it out on my deck. Every time I finish a pop, I have to step out."

"You step out a lot," she said.

"I know. Bad habit. I'll have to break it sometime. Any suggestions?"

"Tea? Coffee?" she said. "Though I guess you can have too much of those too. How 'bout herbal tea?"

He shook his head.

"I've never been able to get into it."

"Me too," she said. "I love some of the boxes, but then I never actually drink it when I bring it home."

He nodded. There was a brief silence. They had reached the end of their back-and-forth.

"Well," she said. "I really need to get inside." And figure out what else to feed the cats.

"I'll let you go," he said. "Nice meeting you."

"Same," she said.

He walked back across the driveway. As she stepped into her house, she looked over at his deck. He was standing there. Watching her.

Now it didn't seem so strange.

Chapter Two

I'm sorry," said the lady behind the desk. "We have an opening for shelving books, but we generally give that position to the high school students. You're more than qualified to work here, but we just aren't looking for people at this time."

Maggie nodded and tried to keep the panic from taking over.

This was the only library in town. It was within walking distance of her home. There were other libraries in the area, but they would need a car to get to. And Maggie had lost the car when she had lost Robbie. Unlike Toronto, Keswick offered minimal and infrequent bus service.

As she walked out of the Head Librarian's office, she faced the reality that she would not be getting a job in her field of expertise. Which meant that she would probably end up with a low-paying job in one of the many fast-food places that were scattered throughout the town.

She pulled a pair of sunglasses from her purse and slipped them on, more to hide the tears than to shield her eyes from the sun.

Libraries were soothing places. It was the only world she knew.

At the Maranatha Bible College in Orillia, Ontario, she had worked part-time in the library. After receiving an Associate of Arts in Theology, she had returned home to Toronto to take a Librarian Sciences program at York University. That was where she had met Robbie. He was in Economics. Dark-haired, dark-eyed, Italian. What clinched it for her was that they attended the same large community church. Although they had both been active in the Singles group, there was an understanding among everyone that Maggie and Robbie were together.

She had never pushed for a definition of their relationship.

She knew that Robbie's priorities were to get his education out of the way, get his career moving and then save up for a down payment on a house.

So she had been patient.

In the meantime, he had let her use his car to get to work, while he took the TTC, the Toronto Transit Commission. All her friends had agreed that if that wasn't a sure sign of his love, nothing was.

"Dan would never let me use his car," said Cindy, her best friend at the time.

Except that Cindy and Dan were now married and Cindy used the car all the time.

Maggie had waited and waited, while all their friends kept getting married. She and Robbie had gone to every wedding together and all her friends had said, "You'll be next." But Robbie had seemed content to just leave things the way they were.

"Give him time," her friends had started saying.

What else could Maggie do? She was now 27-years-old, the only single man she knew was Robbie and the only final hurdle was for him was to save for that down payment on a house.

And then it had happened.

A petite brunette named Sasha had shown up for a Singles bowling night. Maggie had barely paid attention to her. She was from some small town up north, come down to the big city to make her way. But Robbie had certainly focused his attention on her.

And the next thing Maggie knew, Robbie was buying a house and announcing his engagement to Sasha.

The traitor had had the money in the bank the whole time. He just hadn't bothered to mention to Maggie that he was holding

on a bit longer in case something better came along.

Staying in Toronto had lost its appeal. Remembering the days along Lake Simcoe, at Maranatha, she had decided to start over. Orillia was too far north, but Keswick was only an hour's drive from Toronto and her mom would still be able to visit her.

Crossing the library parking lot, Maggie rethought her decision. Maybe Toronto wouldn't be so bad, after all. But as she looked over at the green farmer's field across the road from the library, she thought, *you wouldn't see that in Toronto.*

It was soothing to be able to still see fields of corn just outside of town, and to be able to walk to a lake and watch the sunset.

"I will make this work," she thought out loud. "Oh God!" she added. "Please make this work!" There was no use pretending that she didn't need a lot of divine assistance right now.

Her savings were down to \$18.97. She would probably spend \$2.51 of that on a large coffee and a toasted bagel from Tim Hortons on the way back home. It might also be a good idea to stop at the Canadian Tire and check out their pet section. A big bag of dry cat food would be useful.

The bag of cat food weighed 20 kilograms. Definitely not something to lug home.

So Maggie had settled for two cans of cat food. After Tabby and her kittens consumed that, they could all be like the poor widow that Elisha encountered (or was that Elijah?) who was going to just prepare one last meal for her and her son before dying of starvation.

But there was a surprise waiting for her on her doorstep.

A 20 kilogram bag of cat food. And a note.

Thought this might come in handy.

She didn't have to ask who had left it. How had she ever misread the man? She glanced over at the deck but he wasn't there.

Unlocking her door, she hauled the bag inside.

Designating two of her bowls for the cats, she filled one up with food and one up with water and took them outside. This would take care of the cats for a while.

But what about her?

Tabby and her kittens came out of the woodpile and

immediately began to devour the offering. Maggie crouched down to give Tabby a pet on the head. When she tried to touch a kitten, it jumped back. The kittens were adorable. Small and fluffy, a mix of white and grey, like their mother. The father must have been a tabby cat too. But wasn't that typical of men? Love them and leave them?

Maggie straightened up.

As she turned back to the house, she heard a familiar voice.

"How are they all doing?"

Douglas was out on his deck, tossing a Dr. Pepper can into the blue recycling bin.

"Fine!" she called back. "Thanks to you!"

He shrugged.

"If they're not yours, I figure they're the responsibility of the neighbourhood, so I thought I should do my bit."

"Well, thanks again."

"Anytime."

There was a moment of silence.

"I tried to pet one of the kittens," she said. "Didn't seem to like it though."

Douglas crossed over the driveway. This time he was wearing flip-flops, with a white cotton shirt and some cut-off jean shorts.

"You have to get them adjusted to people within the first six weeks of their lives," he said. "That's the most critical time for making them into good little pets."

"Did you get that from the internet?" Maggie grinned.

Douglas grinned back.

"Yep." He moved closer to the cats who were now all around the water bowl. "I would say these guys are about two months old. It may be too late. They were born wild and they'll probably stay wild."

"The mother seems tame enough."

"True," said Douglas, bending down to pet her head. "Probably abandoned."

"How could the previous owner not notice a mother cat in her woodpile?" Maggie asked.

"Oh, Sandy never came back here," said Douglas. "She was always straight to her car and straight to work."

Must be nice to have a car and a job, thought Maggie.

Out loud, she said, "But didn't she use the wood in winter?"

Chapter Two

Douglas made a noise that sounded like a snort.

“Not Sandy. She wouldn't want to risk breaking a nail picking up a piece of wood.”

“That wood must have been there for a while, then.”

Douglas nodded.

“Sandy was here for about five years, I think.”

Maggie had a feeling there was a story there. But Douglas said he had to return to his work. She nodded and picked up the now-empty bowl. It was the middle of the day. Everyone had a job to do. Everyone except her.

She looked down at Tabby. Poor dear. How had she managed to make it this far on her own? She looked thin, as if she had given so much of herself to keep her kittens alive.

“Dear God,” Maggie whispered. “Help me so I can help her.”

Chapter Three

The Keswick Community Church was unlike the one in Toronto.

It was made up of farmers and their whole families. Many of the families were connected by marriage, sometimes twice over. The rest of the church was young families who had moved to Keswick for the affordable housing. Most of the men worked in Toronto, while the women stayed home and raised the children in suburban subdivisions.

There were a few other singles, but older and some of them were a little odd. One of them took his shoes off during the church service. Another one, in his late fifties, was serious-looking, although he sang the praise-and-worship songs with enthusiasm.

Even though everyone was friendly, Maggie was finding it hard to make friends. And today, all she could think of during the sermon, was how she only had one can of maple-flavoured brown beans, a half-empty box of teabags and a nearly empty can of coffee grinds on her shelf at home.

The sermon was about God's abundant provision.

Maggie looked around at the farmers and their families. They

could probably relate to the message. Most of them looked healthy and well-fed. Maggie had had a cup of black tea and a peppermint from her purse for breakfast and would have been more able to relate to a message about fasting and afflicting one's soul.

The final praise song was about "Jehovah Jireh, my provider."

At least there were cookies and coffee after the service. But the cookies went fast and you had to battle your way through determined twelve-year olds to get at them. By the time Maggie made it to the fellowship hall, only the coffee was left. Normally, she drank hers regular, but today she made it a double-double. The cream and sugar might be her only lunch.

"Hello, dear."

An elderly lady was fixing herself a cup of tea at the table set up at the back of the room.

"Hello," said Maggie, smiling pleasantly.

"You're new here, aren't you?" said the lady. She was a head shorter than Maggie and reminded her of her grandmother.

Maggie nodded.

"It's my second week."

"Are you a new Christian, dear?"

They now both had their drinks and Maggie felt obligated to follow the lady to one of the couches that had been set up around the room. It was obvious that the couches had been donated over the years by people who wanted to update their furniture. Most of them looked older than Maggie.

"No, I'm just new to Keswick."

They sat down on a couch that had faded orange and brown flowers.

"I moved here 56 years ago," the lady said. "I was a new bride. We came from Toronto."

"That's where I'm from," said Maggie.

"I imagine it's changed a lot," said the lady, sipping her tea. "I haven't been back. I found that I liked small town living."

"I can see how that would happen." Maggie's hands were wrapped around her mug. With the amount of cream she had put in it, it was only warm.

They sat in comfortable silence. There was enough activity in the room that it did not seem awkward to not speak.

"Where do you and your husband live?" Maggie asked after a

while.

"My husband passed away," said the lady. "That was six years ago."

"I'm sorry," said Maggie.

The lady nodded her acknowledgment of the sympathy.

"I sold our house and I'm in Keswick Gardens now. It's just me and my cat."

"I have a cat, too," said Maggie. "Cats, actually. One stray mother and her four kittens."

"I'm sure they're adorable," said the lady, sounding genuinely interested.

Maggie smiled, actually feeling some maternal pride.

"Yes, they are," she agreed. "But it's a little up-in-the-air right now, with them being outside and all."

"I understand," said the lady. "I took care of a feral cat once. Always put a little food out for him. He was a congenial fellow."

Maggie nodded politely. Her coffee was almost done.

She was thinking about heading out. It would be a hike back. She lived in the centre of town and for some reason, all the churches were either on the north or south end of Keswick.

"Do you have any plans for the afternoon?" the lady asked, suddenly.

"Only to go home and feed the cats," said Maggie.

"Perhaps you would like to come to my apartment for lunch."

The invitation was both unexpected and appreciated.

"I would love that!" she said.

"Good," said the lady. "I haven't introduced myself. I'm Emily."

"Hi Emily," said Maggie, shaking her hand. "I'm Maggie."

Emily's ride to church turned out to be the serious-looking man in his fifties. According to Emily, Brad was sought after by all the ladies.

Brad took this in stride as the three of them headed out a side door to where his car was parked.

Emily got the front seat and Maggie shared the back-seat with a box of music. Turned out, Brad was director of the small choir at Keswick Community Church. In the short drive, she found out that the choir only performed once a month and that the group had mixed opinions regarding contemporary worship. A few outspoken individuals preferred the newer songs. Most were in

favour of the classic hymns.

Although Brad was also invited to lunch, he declined, just dropping them off at the front door of the apartment.

"I ask him every Sunday if he would like to have lunch with me," said Emily, searching around in her purse for her key. Brad had already driven away and they were still standing by the glass doors to get into the building. Finally, Emily found a keychain.

"I can't imagine why he doesn't accept," said Emily, but Maggie noticed a sparkle in her eye. "All the ladies go after Brad."

"Isn't he a bit . . . ?" Maggie didn't want to say, *old*.

"Yes, he is quiet," said Emily. "So it's hard for the ladies to get to know him. But I'd like to see him settled down."

He looked pretty settled to me, thought Maggie. They were now inside the building, waiting by the elevator doors.

Emily's apartment was only on the second floor. She unlocked her door and Maggie tried not to gape. A whole lifetime had been packed into one small apartment. They went down a narrow hallway lined with photos, framed news clippings and children's artwork. The small living room offered even more to look at.

Knick knacks filled every flat surface. It was obvious that the furniture had been meant for a bigger home and that this probably represented only a fraction of what Emily had once owned. Emily motioned for Maggie to sit down on one of the two long couches that dominated the room. In the centre of one of them lay a large, white and orange cat.

"His name is Albert," said Emily as she went into the tiny kitchen that ran off the main room.

"Hi Albert," said Maggie to the half-dozing cat, before taking a seat on the other couch. "Can I help you with anything?" she called out to Emily.

"No, dear," Emily called back. "I have a stew I can heat up. I make it in large batches and then put it in the freezer in small portions. Cooking for one, you know."

Maggie did know.

Two portions of stew came out of the freezer and were put in the microwave. Emily brought a glass of lemonade for Maggie and then returned to the kitchen.

"Are your people in Toronto?" asked Emily, as she came back with a basket that had a few slices of bread in it.

"Yes," said Maggie, quickly swallowing her lemonade. "My

parents. Although, really, my mother is the only family I have. She and Dad got a divorce a few years ago.”

“Is your mother a believer?” Emily asked, looking around for a place to put the basket. There was no room on the coffee table. It ended up on an end table.

“She became one when dad left her,” Maggie said.

“It’s unfortunate that we seem to need tragedy to bring us closer to God.”

Maggie nodded as Emily turned back to the kitchen. The microwave was ping-pong.

“My faith increased by about tenfold after my husband died,” Emily called from the kitchen.

“Really?” said Maggie. That would have only been in the last six years.

In the kitchen, Maggie could see Emily nodding as she spooned some stew out of a microwave dish and into a ceramic bowl. It smelled so good after skipping breakfast. Maggie was having a hard time restraining herself from gobbling a piece of bread while she waited.

Emily put the two bowls on a tray and added spoons and serviettes.

She carried the tray into the living room and placed it on the end table.

“Would you like to ask grace, dear?” said Emily.

“Sure,” said Maggie, as she finished her lemonade. “Father, thank you for this lunch and thank you for new friends. We ask that you bless this meal and time together. Amen.”

“Amen,” said Emily.

They started on their stew.

“This is delicious!” said Maggie. It wasn’t even the hunger. The beef stew had all the basics – potatoes, carrots and onions – but there was something different about it.

Emily looked pleased.

“Would you like to know the secret?” she asked.

Maggie nodded.

“Nutmeg,” Emily announced.

“I would have never guessed,” said Maggie looking down at her bowl.

“And Worcestershire sauce,” Emily added. “But it’s really the nutmeg.”

Maggie nodded. If God was planning to include food in her future, she would definitely try this recipe on . . . She caught herself almost thinking, *Douglas*. But that was silly. She barely knew the man. The cats, she decided. She would try this recipe on Tabby and her kittens.

"So tell me about yourself, dear," said Emily. "You live here in Keswick. Do you work in Keswick too?"

That was a sensitive topic.

"No," said Maggie, honestly. "I'm looking. And it's not going well. I need to find something soon."

"What are you interested in?" asked Emily. It was almost a childish question. As if someone could just find a job based on her interests.

"Well, my field is Library Sciences," said Maggie. "But the library doesn't need anyone with my qualifications."

"Hmm," said Emily. She wasn't eating her stew quite as quickly as Maggie and seemed more interested in her guest than in her meal.

"So I'm probably going to have to get a job at, oh, I don't know, Tim Hortons," said Maggie.

"I like Tim Hortons," said Emily with that sparkle in her eye.

"Oh don't get me wrong," said Maggie quickly. "I like Tim Hortons too. And I'm sure they have flexible hours. But I just need something a little more . . ."

"I understand," said Emily.

The conversation turned to the photos on Emily's wall. There was one of Emily on her wedding day, three of each of her children on their wedding days, and finally, her granddaughter on her wedding day.

It was funny how a wedding was such a high-point in a person's life. Enough to take special photos of and keep them up on the wall for the rest of one's earthly life.

If Maggie had married Robbie, they would have had an enormous Italian wedding with at least five hundred guests. Second and third cousins would have been invited. People would have come from as far away as Palermo for the occasion.

Now Sasha would get all that.

The meal finished with a pot of tea and a plate of shortbread cookies. Emily said that biscuits were her one vice. She always had to have biscuits in the apartment.

Maggie appreciated the vice. The portion of stew had been small and the bread had not filled her up. Several cups of tea and the cookies left her feeling more satisfied.

"Shall I call Brad to drive you home?" Emily asked.

Maggie smiled to herself. She wondered how much Brad would appreciate that.

"No, thanks," she said. "It's only a twenty-minute walk from here and the weather is lovely."

"That it is," Emily agreed, standing up.

Emily walked her guest right down to the front lobby and Maggie gave her a gentle hug and a genuine thank you for the wonderful meal.

"Any time dear," said Emily. "I love company."

Thank God for that, Maggie thought. It felt like an answer to prayer.

Then Maggie was out in the sun and on the Queensway, the main road that went down the centre of town. Keswick was a rectangle with most businesses located on the Queensway, though that was all changing as subdivisions went up all around the edges of town.

She was halfway home when she heard a honk.

With so many people out, walking dogs or pushing strollers, she tuned out the noise. But then she heard someone call, "Maggie!"

It was Douglas.

He was driving by in the silver Mazda Miata that she usually saw parked in his driveway. He pulled into a bank parking lot.

"Want a lift?" he called out.

"Sure," she said.

She was beginning to realize that if she didn't conserve energy, she would be hungry again by the time she got home.

"Out doing your shopping?" she asked, climbing into the front seat. The back seat had a box full of groceries. There were also two cases of pop.

He nodded.

"I've gotten into the habit of doing it on Sunday mornings. But I might rethink that. Working from home, I really should do it during the week when it's quieter."

He was giving her time to put on her seatbelt.

"True," said Maggie, fiddling with the buckle. At the same

time, she felt a letdown. If he always did his shopping Sunday mornings, that meant he didn't go to church.

"You?" he asked.

"I shop any day," she answered, absently, finally strapped in.

He laughed as they pulled out of the bank parking lot.

"No, I mean, what were you doing?"

"Oh," she said. "I went to church. I go to Keswick Community. And then a darling older lady invited me back to her place for lunch."

Douglas was silent for a moment and then he politely said, "That's nice."

Maggie knew the tone. It was the way an unbeliever responded when a Christian brought up anything to do with church.

"Would you be interested in coming to church with me, Douglas?" Might as well get it out into the open.

He shrugged while he made a lane change to avoid a car turning in to an auto parts store.

"I've been to Keswick Community, actually."

"Did a friend invite you?"

"Yeah, I went with a friend," said Douglas.

"Did you like it?" It didn't matter that he wasn't enjoying the conversation. Soon they would be home and then he could never talk to her again if he wanted to.

"Yeah, Keswick Community was fine. It was the friend who was the problem."

"Well," said Maggie. "Not everyone who says they're Christian is a Christian."

They were now paused, waiting for a break in traffic so that they could turn down their own road.

"I found that out the hard way," said Douglas.

There was silence as they drove down their road.

Douglas pulled into their shared driveway.

Maggie wondered if she should probe or just drop it. But Douglas answered her unspoken question.

"She was the woman who lived here before you moved in. Sandy."

Chapter Four

So Douglas has issues with Sandy, Maggie thought.

No wonder he kept looking Maggie's way when she moved in. It was probably habit after five years of being neighbours with Sandy.

They pulled into Douglas's parking spot.

Maggie thanked him as he started getting his groceries out of the backseat.

"Any time," said Douglas.

Somehow Maggie did not think it was said in the same spirit as Emily had said it. With Emily, there was the sense that if Maggie phoned up tomorrow and invited herself over for lunch, she would be welcomed with genuine pleasure, or at least, with Christian charity.

Maggie went inside, hung her purse on a coatrack left behind by Sandy and went into the kitchen to fill up the cat bowl with food.

Taking it back outside, she looked around the woodpile, but there was no sign of Tabby and her kittens. She put down the bowl and scouted out her backyard. No Tabby. She stood by her chain-link fence and surveyed everyone else's backyards. No

Tabby.

Maggie was alarmed.

Maggie went back to the woodpile and tried to see among the pieces of wood. But there didn't seem to be any life.

She didn't want to move anything around in case it set off an avalanche.

What should she do?

She looked around. There was really only one person she could talk to about it.

She crossed back over the driveway and went up the steps to Douglas's deck. Then suddenly she felt shy. Hesitantly, she knocked.

The door was opened right away. It opened into Douglas's kitchen where he was putting away his groceries.

"Hi Douglas," Maggie said, trying to sound like a sensible neighbour. "Uh, I'm just looking around for Tabby and her crew and I can't seem to find them."

Douglas was holding a bottle of ketchup.

He did a quick scan of everything over Maggie's shoulder, as if he might spot the cats ambling along the driveway.

"I haven't seen them, Maggie," he said, leaning back slightly to put the ketchup on a counter. "But you know, sometimes mother cats move their kittens. They do it if they don't feel safe. I read it . . ."

"I know, I know," Maggie interrupted. "You read it on the internet. But what could be safer than the woodpile?"

"I dunno," said Douglas. "Maybe a piece of wood fell and it upset her. You just don't know with cats."

"That's true," Maggie said, now doing her own survey of things. "But is it possible that someone might have called the animal people? You know, those people who pick up strays?"

Douglas shook his head.

"I doubt it. This is a very mind-your-own-business kind of neighbourhood. Except, of course, if you're the cause of a cat infestation. Did I tell you how many kittens one cat can have in her lifetime . . .?"

"Yeah, you did," Maggie said quickly. "Well, I guess I'll just have to look around. Thanks anyway."

"Don't worry too much about it, Maggie," said Douglas. "Here." He reached down on the floor and picked up something.

"Want a pop?"

"Sure," said Maggie, taking the can. She could have a calorie-laden drink for dinner.

She turned to walk away.

"I meant, with me," said Douglas.

"Oh, right." Maggie turned back. "Sorry."

"I know," said Douglas. "You're worried about the cats."

Actually, it was more his whole attitude toward church. But he stepped aside to let her in and she found herself standing in a tiny kitchen with only one counter running down one side. The little space left was taken up by appliances. And everything, including the tiles on the floor, looked as if they had been with the home right from the time it had been erected.

"Let me just put away my groceries and then we'll look together, OK?"

"OK," said Maggie. That was nice of him. She broke the tab on her cola and took a sip. Douglas put a small carton of milk in the fridge. A couple of boxes of macaroni and cheese went up on a shelf. Some frozen dinners went into the freezer. Some apples were put in a fruit bowl on the counter. A jar of peanut butter joined the macaroni and cheese.

He didn't know how blessed he was to just be able to casually put away food like this.

When Douglas was finished, and the cardboard box added to the recycling bin, they set out in search of Tabby and her kittens.

"A mother cat is called a queen," said Douglas, conversationally.

"That's interesting," said Maggie. He knew more about cats than she did.

Behind both of their properties was a five-acre piece of real estate for sale. Instinctively, that's where they were heading. It had some dilapidated homes that looked long abandoned. Douglas explained that the owner was hoping to sell the whole property to a developer.

"I heard that his asking price is way too high," said Douglas. "If you're planning on living here for a while, you don't have to worry about a subdivision going up in your backyard."

Douglas pointed out an old shed behind one of the houses.

"Let's check there," he suggested.

Maggie nodded.

This was wild country, considering they were in the centre of town. The grass was past her knees.

"This is a great place to catch mice," said Douglas. "That's probably how the mother, er, Tabby, kept herself and her kittens alive."

"Poor dear," said Maggie. "Out here all on her own, trying to take care of her small family."

"Well," said Douglas. "We anthropomorphize the whole thing and see it in human terms. When those kittens are four months old, she'll stop weaning them and practically push them out to make it on their own."

That only increased Maggie's desire to find them all and bring them back to a safe place. But what safe place? Her home? She was hardly in a position to just go out and casually purchase kitty litter for them all. And once Douglas's bag of food ran out, they would be better off out here catching mice.

Douglas pushed open the creaky door of the shed. There were plenty of spider webs and some gardening pots on a shelf, but no kittens.

There were a few other sheds and odd buildings to check out, but the cats didn't seem to be in any of them. The houses, despite being abandoned were locked and boarded up.

"Well, that's that," said Douglas. "What next?"

"I dunno," said Maggie. Distress was taking over. It felt an awful lot like the panic that had come over her when she realized she would not be able to just walk into the library and get a job.

"All I can think is, we go back and wait," said Douglas. "Mother cat is smart. She'll know to go to where the food is. Leave a bit out for her and check out there every day."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

They walked back without talking. Maggie felt her nerves tingling. The anxiety of not having a job and now losing the cats was almost overwhelming. The crazy part was, finding the cats wouldn't solve anything. But somehow, she just had to see them again.

"Want to come in for some, oh, I don't know, tea?" Douglas asked when they were back on their communal driveway. "I think my mother brought some last time she visited me. Good stuff. She's English and she always brings the best."

Maggie nodded, numb. The upside to having tea with Douglas

was that she could drink it her preferred way, with milk.

Douglas hadn't bothered to lock his door and they were just about to go into his small kitchen when Maggie heard something.

"What was that?" she asked, grabbing Douglas's arm.

"What? I didn't hear anything . . ."

"Shh!" she said, letting go of his arm. "Listen."

Sure enough, when they were quiet, there was a small sound, something between a squeak and a meow.

They looked at each other, eyes wide.

"Where's it coming from?" Maggie whispered.

Douglas didn't answer right away.

He walked down the steps and bent over to peer under his deck.

"Here they are!" he said, looking up and grinning.

Maggie hurried down the steps and practically fell to her knees. There they all were! Tucked away in the shadows, but unmistakably, it was Tabby and her four kittens.

"Oh, you little dears!" she said. "You had me so worried!" Maggie could feel tears starting to form. All her nervous energy was now draining out at the sight of the cat and her kittens.

Douglas disappeared and returned a few moments later with a bowl filled with milk. He gently nudged it under the deck.

"She needs to keep up her strength," he said.

Relief flowed over Maggie. God was taking care of Tabby.

"Still want that tea?" Douglas asked.

"Definitely," said Maggie, standing up.

They went back inside to Douglas's kitchen. He put the kettle on and then showed her around the rest of his house.

The living room was the largest room. Douglas explained that it had originally had that synthetic wood-panelling that was popular in the seventies. But it had made the room too dark and small. He had ripped it out and repainted the walls a light blue.

The rest of the room paid homage to the First Nations people.

"Lake Simcoe was a centre for the Ojibwa," he said. His couch was covered with a large patterned blanket that he had purchased at one of their festivals a few years back. On the walls, there were photos of the lake as it had been over the years, including snaps of the Ojibwa in their traditional costumes.

"My mother likes to talk about how Lake Simcoe was a place

for the second sons of the British Empire to come and make their fortunes,” he said. “Have you seen all those huge homes down on Lake Drive?”

Maggie shook her head. Her visits to the lake were only to the park closest to her home.

“I’ll take you for a drive sometime,” said Douglas, moving along the wall to point out various views of the lake.

When the kettle started whistling, Douglas went into the kitchen. Maggie took the chance to really look around. In one corner was a desk with a computer. Probably where he worked all day. And surfed the net.

There were some chairs that looked handmade, rustic wooden ones that you’d be afraid to sit on in case they were antique. The only other significant item in the room was a long wooden bookshelf packed with books. While she waited, she read some of the titles on the spine. Lots of history, especially about the local area. Many more about Canada.

“What do you like in your tea, Maggie?” Douglas called from the kitchen.

“Lots of milk,” she replied, continuing to survey the shelf.

There were a few thrillers. But mostly Douglas seemed to like to learn when he read.

Douglas came back into the room carrying two huge steaming mugs of tea.

“I love this!” said Maggie, taking hers from him. Her mug was deep burgundy with a moose pattern. Douglas’s mug was baby blue with a polar bear pattern.

Douglas laughed.

“I bought those when I first moved here. You know how it is, it’s a thrill to have your own place and buy things for it.”

Maggie nodded as they both sat down on the couch. She might know that thrill someday. When she got her first paycheck.

“Why did you move to this area?” Maggie asked.

“Well,” said Douglas, leaning back. “You’ve probably figured out that I like history. I couldn’t afford to go to university and pursue it, so I ended up at Seneca College doing computer programming. But I figured no one could stop me from moving here and reading more. I’d like to write a book about this area someday.”

"That's really great," said Maggie. She admired how Douglas had continued to pursue his dream even when faced with financial realities.

"That's how I met Sandy," Douglas continued. "She was my neighbour, of course. But she was also a real-estate agent. She would let me pose as a potential buyer so that I could look in some of the older homes around here. Before World War 1, this place was really an outpost of the British Empire. There were elegant parties down by the lake. All sorts of homes and buildings went up at that time that are still standing today. Have you had a chance to visit the Georgina Pioneer Village?"

Maggie shook her head.

"I'll have to take you sometime. It'll be opening up again soon. It's closed for the winter. There's a lot of history there . . ."

He stopped talking.

"But I'm boring you, aren't I?"

She shook her head. It was just the opposite. He was becoming more and more attractive to her by the minute and that was alarming. He was even talking about doing things together. But he didn't share her Christian faith. Being her neighbour, she would get to see him every day and she didn't know if she would be able to keep her sense of detachment.

"Not at all, Douglas," she said, putting her large mug down on the coffee table. She stood up and walked over to the bookshelf to pretend to be examining the books. She wanted to get a grip on her feelings. Church was the place to meet a man.

That brought back the memory of the man who liked to take his shoes off during the sermon. And, of course, there was Brad. While her eyes focused on a book entitled, *Lord Simcoe's Empire*, her mind was thinking that the future did not look bright as far as men were concerned.

Douglas had stood up to join her.

"Now this is a really interesting book if you want to learn more about the lake," he said, pulling a volume off the shelf. He handed it to her. *History, Myths and Legends of Lake Simcoe*.

"Looks good," she said. "I'd love to read it."

"Here you go," he said, handing it to her. "After reading it, it's worth taking a drive around the lake and checking out all the places mentioned in it."

Now why did she have to say that? Not that she wouldn't

enjoy reading it, but then when she did, they would have just that much more in common.

"I'm familiar with the Orillia area," she said, taking the book from him and returning to her tea and her spot on the couch. "I went to Bible college there."

"Oh yes?" said Douglas. That polite, but disinterested tone again.

She nodded.

Might as well push it a bit.

"Yes, my faith is very important to me. I have a degree in Library Sciences, but I would have liked to pursue my studies in Theology."

"Well," said Douglas. "The Bible is a form of history."

She appreciated his effort to connect their interests. Not that it helped. Anyone who said that the Bible was good history probably didn't want to pursue its moral teachings.

"But there's no money in it, eh?" he said. "Unless you become a pastor, or something."

"Exactly," she said. Her tea was cooling down and she was drinking it in larger gulps now, to finish it and head back to her house. Even if no dinner waited, it would be better than sitting here with this attractive man, growing more and more lonely at the realization that they could never be together.

But Douglas seemed oblivious of her desire to hurry through the tea and continued to tell her about the area. He knew not only the history of the lake and of the town, but even of the street they lived on.

"This area has been through many ups-and-downs," he said. "After World War 1, it attracted mostly people from Toronto, who would come here for the summer to enjoy their cottages. That would be the time when our homes were built. Most of them were just one-room cottages. You can look at the roofs to see where rooms were added on. Come on!" Douglas had stood up. He was leading her back out through the kitchen. On his deck, he pointed up at her roof.

"See, your living room was the first room to be built."

How does he know which room is my living room? Then she realized, Sandy. No doubt Douglas had been in Sandy's house many times.

"Then you can follow the line of the roof and see that that portion was added later."

She followed his finger and could see what he meant.

"Now, your woodstove would have been put in at a time when someone decided to live year round here. No one bothered with woodstoves for a summer cottage." He was now pointing at her chimney.

"Makes sense," she said.

As his hand came down, it brushed against her arm.

"Sorry," he said. He stepped off of his deck to go stand out on the driveway. Maggie followed, after taking a quick peek at the cats. They were all there, sleeping.

"Now, my house is a little different . . ."

She let him ramble on. Obviously, he knew more about his house than hers. In fact, he had been around the whole place, including the attic, and he had found many clues about his home. He found some old newspapers in the attic that went back to 1947. One of his walls had actually been insulated with nothing more than dried out cobs of corn.

"I had it all replaced, of course. The first year I was here I wondered why my heating bill was so high."

Maggie tried to return his grin. Heating bills. That was something she didn't want to think about.

Their tea would be cold by the time they went back inside. She would use that as an excuse to say good-bye and forget about this whole crazy thing.

Chapter Five

She ended up staying for dinner.

Douglas had gotten out a photo album when they went back inside and showed her all his snapshots of the lake. Each photo seemed to have a historical anecdote to go along with it. If she had been bored, it would have been less painful.

When she had finally announced that it was time for her to go back to her place, he had said, “Hey! Why don't you stay for dinner? I bought a frozen lasagna and it's too big for just me.”

The thought of lasagna was too enticing to say no. So while the lasagna heated up in the oven, they had gone outside to check on the cats. Douglas had saved her a trip back to her house for cat food by opening up a can of pink salmon for them, and putting out more milk.

At this rate, the cats would be eating better than her, she thought.

Douglas didn't have a kitchen or dining-room table. He said he just had his meals in the living room, with the History Channel on television. That was another thing he had that Maggie couldn't afford, satellite TV, although he watched it on his computer screen. Something about his computer screen being high-

definition. Tonight, there was a show on about immigrants in New York during the time between the two world wars and the contributions that they had made to the city. One Armenian businessman, C. Howard, had developed a violet-flavoured candy that was a success even though it was during the depression.

Unlike Robbie, who would only speak to Maggie during the commercials when they watched television together, Douglas liked to talk throughout everything.

He said he was pretty sure that his grandmother used to carry those violet candies around in her purse. Maggie said they sounded lovely. Douglas said that he would have to look them up on eBay and see if they were still being made.

The evening passed pleasantly, too pleasantly.

She was afraid that the intimacy generated by the homey evening might make Douglas want to get closer physically, but he was good about staying on his side of the couch the whole time and although he escorted her back to her front door, he didn't attempt a goodnight kiss or any other gesture of affection.

Once inside, Maggie leaned back against her door.

Why? she thought. *Why can't he be a Christian?*

Still, she couldn't complain. She felt full. Twice today, God had provided her with a meal.

Give us this day our daily bread.

As she brushed her teeth and got ready for bed, she decided, tomorrow was another day. She would hit the ground running when it came to looking for a job.

Before she set out, Maggie left some dry food and a bowl of water by Douglas's deck. She didn't think he would mind.

Obviously any job she took would have to be within walking distance, the closer the better. Keswick had a new Walmart on the outskirts of town, but that would be her last choice. In the immediate vicinity, she could choose from several fast food places, Boston Pizza and a Chinese food restaurant. One step into the Chinese food restaurant told her that it was entirely a family-run business.

When she went into Boston Pizza, a disinterested hostess told her, to the best of her knowledge, they weren't hiring.

OK. So now Maggie was back out in the sun, on the busy Queensway, trying to decide where to go next.

There was a thriving marina and boat industry centred around the lake, but her lack of expertise made her decide not to pursue a position in that industry.

Walking along the Queensway, she passed a day-care. It looked busy. It was one of many in the town. People always needed day-care. Too bad she hadn't gotten her degree in Early Childhood Education. More people probably used the daycares than they did the library.

Her long walk eventually took her to a large outdoor plaza.

There was a busy drugstore, but if they were hiring they would have had a sign up. A small boutique looked appealing. But it was the sort of thing that only needed one person manning it. An electronics store. Two young men behind the counter. Not exactly her thing. A family-run fish-and-chips restaurant. A jewellers. Finally, a grocery store. They probably had job applicants up to their ears.

Tim Hortons had a sign out, Now Hiring, but somehow she couldn't bring herself to go in and fill out an application. She loved getting her coffee and bagels from there, but working among people ten years younger would only remind her of all the lost opportunities in her own life.

Blockbuster Video was hiring. Again, same problem as Tim Hortons. Too many young people.

Maggie turned back.

She had walked too far anyhow. If she ended up with a job on her feet, the last thing she would want is a forty-minute hike back in the dark. As it was, this whole excursion had left her feeling hungry and thirsty. Thirst was easily satisfied by the bottle of water in her purse. The bottle itself no longer contained its original spring water but had been filled and refilled with Maggie's tap water.

To take care of the hunger, she'd have to return home to the can of beans and the bag of cat food. She hoped the day would never come when the cat food would become tempting.

She retraced her route. As she passed the drugstore, she almost collided with someone coming out.

"Sorry," said the male voice. "Maggie, isn't it?"

It was Brad.

"Oh, hello," she said. He was carrying a small bag that looked like a filled prescription.

"Just out and about?" he asked.

She nodded. He didn't need to hear about her job-hunting woes.

"Well, I'm just taking this over to Emily." He held up the bag. "Would you like a lift in that direction?"

"Sure!" she said.

They were standing right in front of his car. This time, she took the front seat.

"That's nice of you to look after Emily," she said, as he backed out of his parking spot.

"She's a good sort," he said.

"That she is," Maggie agreed.

"Do you want to stop by with me?" he asked. "She loves company."

"I wouldn't want to impose . . ."

"You wouldn't be," Brad assured her. "I can only stay five minutes. And I always get the impression that she'd like a longer visit."

"You have to get back to work?"

He nodded.

"Yep. I take an hour for lunch, but it's a bit of a drive."

"Where are you coming from?" She was just asking to be polite. She hoped he didn't think she was nosy. They were now driving north along the Queensway.

"I live in Keswick, but I work in Sutton."

Maggie nodded. She hadn't had a chance to visit Sutton yet. It was the next small town north of Keswick.

The rest of the drive was without conversation. Brad was definitely quiet, like Emily had said.

They pulled into the parking lot of the Keswick Gardens senior's apartment.

It was a short stroll to the front door. Brad pointed out some garden plots that had been separated for the use of the residents.

"That's Emily's," he said pointing to one.

Maggie saw a small patch of what looked like dried herbs. It was too early in spring for fresh planting. The temperature could still go down to zero at night as late as the middle of May.

When Brad buzzed her apartment, Emily sounded genuinely pleased that he had Maggie with him. She greeted them at her door, giving Maggie a big hug, as if they were old friends. Maggie

returned the hug with equal affection.

"I can't stay," said Brad, handing Emily the bag with the prescription. "But I've brought you Maggie." A thought occurred to him. "I'm not keeping you from anything important, am I?"

"Maggie is trained in Library Sciences," said Emily, proudly. "Just like you."

That was a surprise.

Brad was equally as interested.

"Really?" he said. "Are you working in the Keswick branch?"

"No, unfortunately," she said. "They don't need anyone right now."

"We do in Sutton," said Brad, thoughtfully. "Tell me a bit about your work experience."

Maggie told him that she had worked in the library of the Maranatha Bible College. Then, after that, she had gotten her Librarian Sciences diploma and worked at one of smaller branches of the Toronto Public Library, as an assistant librarian.

Brad nodded.

"That's the position we're looking for."

"Really?" It was Emily who said this.

Getting to Sutton would be a problem, but this seemed too good not to pursue.

"Who would I talk to about applying for the position?" Maggie asked.

"The head librarian," said Brad.

"OK," she said. "I'll have to do that."

"You already have."

Emily had a wide smile on her face. But it took Maggie a moment to get it.

"You're the head librarian!"

Brad nodded.

"The job's yours if you want it."

"I'll take it," she said quickly.

"Good," he said. "Be at the library tomorrow at eight. 5279 Black River Road. The library doesn't open until 10. But I can give you a bit of training and have you up to speed in no time."

"Thanks so much!" said Maggie, dazed.

Then Brad was gone and Emily was taking her arm and leading her into the apartment.

"Well, this is worth celebrating, isn't it?"

Maggie nodded. She didn't know what to think. She couldn't believe she had a job, and in her field! But she had no way of getting there. Perhaps she could rent a car, just until she had enough money to make a down payment on her own car. But renting a car would seriously cut into her paycheck . . .

Emily said she would make a cup of tea for them both.

"I was just about to make myself a sandwich," she called, from the kitchen, as Maggie took a seat on her couch. Albert was across from her, snoozing. "Would you like one?"

"That would be wonderful," she said. Once again, Jehovah Jireh was coming through for her. Hopefully there would be some more cookies too.

Emily talked the whole time while she prepared two cheese sandwiches. She talked about the people at church, asked Maggie if she wanted mayonnaise on her sandwich (definitely), discussed the fact that tomorrow from 8-12 the water in the apartment would be turned off for routine maintenance, once again brought up the idea that Brad needed someone to steady him and settle him down, and finally, came into the living room with a tray while she mused on the topic of whether the church choir should perform more often than just once a month.

But when she saw the look on Maggie's face, she paused.

"What is it, dear? You look lost in thought." Emily put the tray down on the end table.

"Oh, I'm sorry Emily," said Maggie. "I didn't mean to be so rude. I just . . ."

"What is it, dear?" Emily asked again, as she poured them both a cup of tea.

"It's the job tomorrow," said Maggie, deciding to be candid. "I love it. But I have no way of getting to it."

"You don't have a car?" said Emily.

Maggie shook her head.

"That's why I applied to the Keswick branch."

The same smile that had been on Emily's face when Maggie realized Brad was the head librarian was back on her face.

"I have a car, dear."

Maggie just stared.

"It's true," said Emily, nodding as she handed Maggie her plate. "It was my husband's. I can't bear to let it go. It's the last thing I have of his. But I would love for you to use it for as long

as you need to.”

“I couldn't possibly . . .”

“But you must,” said Emily, firmly. She bowed her head and said, “Our father in heaven, thank you for bringing Maggie and I together. We both need each other and you knew that. Please bless this food we are about to eat together. Amen.”

“Amen.”

Emily looked up.

“See, it's all done now.”

Maggie nodded, dazed for a second time. Only half an hour ago, she was a near-starving waif. Now she was a woman with a job and a car.

Emily got up to poke around in a roll-top desk in the corner.

“Ahh, here they are,” she said, at last. She held up some keys.

“These are my old house keys,” she said, as she came back to the couch. “One of these must be for the car.”

“Where is the car?” Maggie asked.

“Just out in the parking lot,” said Emily. “We're all entitled to a spot. But I never drove the car. It was always my husband's. I thought about selling it, but something in me just didn't want to let it go. Now I see it was the Holy Spirit saving it for you!”

Maggie couldn't argue with that. God certainly knew her needs.

After their lunch, Emily put on a sweater and came downstairs with her to show her the car. It was parked in a far corner of the parking lot. Though an older model, starting to rust from exposure, it was still in good shape. Emily wasn't sure about the gas situation, but her son had driven it here for her six years ago, so she figured it must have something in it.

Trying a few keys on the ring, Emily finally found the one that worked. Maggie slid into the driver's seat. The interior was a bit musty, but that would air out.

Emily opened up the glove compartment and showed her that the insurance was up-to-date.

“I'll take over those payments,” said Maggie, looking down at the papers. A broker's card was stapled to one corner. She would call him tomorrow and try to sort it out.

“Would you like to go for a drive anywhere?” she asked, turning to Emily.

“No, my dear,” said Emily. “Too many memories.”

"I understand," said Maggie, getting out and giving the elderly lady a hug. "I can't thank you enough . . ."

"You don't have to," said Emily, returning the hug. "God wants us to share what we have, and I'm happy to do it."

"I can pick you up every week for church," Maggie offered.

"Oh no! You mustn't do that!" Emily's eyes sparkled. "Then Brad wouldn't come and get me!"

Maggie grinned.

So maybe it wasn't *all* the ladies who were interested in Brad. Maybe it was just Emily.

"Fair enough," she said. "But you must promise to call me up anytime you need *anything*, OK?"

Emily nodded. "Maybe we could do our grocery shopping together."

"Good plan," said Maggie.

"Well, my dear," said Emily. "You get in there and try it out. You'll have to get used to it a bit before your drive to Sutton tomorrow."

With another hug, the women parted. While Emily returned to the apartment, Maggie sat in the driver's seat and familiarized herself with the new vehicle.

When she started the engine, there was about a quarter of a tank of gas left. The first thing to do would be to get that filled, she decided.

Now that she had a job, she could put things on the credit card knowing she would be able to cover it when the bill came in.

After a stop at the nearest gas station, it was a straight drive down the Queensway to get home. Although it was only 1:30, it already felt like a full day. It would be good to get home and rest up for tomorrow. She would put out some food for the cats and then kick off her shoes and take an afternoon nap.

But there was another surprise waiting for her when she got back to her house.

Chapter Six

It's wonderful!" she said to Douglas.
He shrugged modestly.

She had found it on her deck when she had arrived home.

It was a large wooden box on cement blocks, with a ramp leading up to a small doorway. The top was on hinges and when she opened it up, she discovered it was filled with pine bedding. Right away, she knew what it was for. She had hurried across the driveway to knock on Douglas's door.

"I found some blueprints online for a cat home," he said. "I had some wood knocking about in my garage, so I thought I'd give it a go. Maybe it will keep them from moving around too much."

"I love it," she said. "Thank you so much!"

"The fun part is still ahead," he said grinning. "Now we have to try to get them into it!"

"True."

"Catnip along the ramp might do the trick," he said. "Although, according to the internet, not all cats are affected by it. Kittens certainly aren't, but where the mother goes, the kittens will follow."

"Doesn't the mother cat carry her kittens around by the scruff of their necks?"

They had been talking on his deck and now they both went down the steps to peek underneath. Again, the five cats were all sleeping.

"That's more when they're only a few weeks old," said Douglas, straightening up. "These ones are moving around on their own now. In fact, while I was working in the garage, I saw some of them watching me from under the deck. One of them even came out on the driveway."

"Oh dear," said Maggie, already worrying. "We must keep them safe. I don't want them getting run over."

"Well, we're the only two people using this driveway," Douglas glanced over at her new car, now parked in her narrow gravel driveway. "So if we're both careful, they should be fine. Anyway, I have to get back to the computer. Why don't you come over for dinner tonight? I have some lasagna leftover. Then afterward, we could work on getting those cats out from under there."

Lasagna sounded just as tempting tonight as it did last night. Her cupboards were still empty.

"Sure," she said, deciding to treat it like God's provision. "But how are we going to do it? I mean, aren't mother cats very protective?"

"I'll get on my work gloves and let her claw at me if that's what it comes to." He gave her a smile. "I usually knock off at about five. Is that OK for you?"

"Perfect," she said. That would give her a chance to rest up from the morning. "See you then."

She returned to her house feeling light-headed. A job! A car! Five cats! It would be nice to think there was also a man in her new life. But she'd better let that one go or she'd just be asking for more heartbreak.

As it turned out, Douglas didn't have to put on his work gloves. When they went outside after dinner, all the kittens were playing on Douglas's driveway in the cool of the evening.

"You grab two and I'll grab two," he said. "Mother cat will follow."

Quickly, he picked up two of the rolling cats and started for the cat home on Maggie's deck. Maggie followed his example and

scooped up the remaining two. Whoever thought kittens were harmless little balls of fluff had never tried to abduct one against its will. Both were resisting with all their might and one was even managing to scratch up her arm. Even more disconcerting, Tabby was running alongside, hissing at her.

"It'll be OK," she said, trying to sound reassuring. Her nerves felt as shredded as her arm.

But Douglas was calm under pressure. He already had his two kittens inside the home and was holding open the lid so that Maggie could add hers. He even had the presence of mind to block off the doorway so that they couldn't escape.

"Get Tabby in with them, quick!" he said.

Maggie grabbed Tabby around the middle and stuck the meowing cat in with her kittens. Before Douglas put down the lid, Maggie was on the receiving end of a baleful look from Tabby.

"Don't worry," said Douglas. "They'll get used to the idea. Especially if you leave their food right outside the ramp.

"Well, that's that," said Maggie, taking a deep breath.

Douglas put his ear to the doorway.

"I hear purring," he said. "She's probably giving them all a good lick after their contact with humans."

They laughed.

"They should be able to survive the winter in this too," Douglas continued. "We live in a fairly temperate zone compared to most of Canada. I read some discussion forums. Feral cats can easily survive our winters if they have a dry, sheltered home like this. The cement blocks keep it high enough that the bottom won't touch the snow."

"That's great news," said Maggie. "I'd love to have them indoors with me, but realistically, they might not go along with the idea."

"I was thinking," said Douglas, looking down at his sandaled feet. "It's a big financial load, caring for all these critters. Would you let me help you pay for the cost to have them all spayed?"

Maggie just stared and then she recovered.

"Yes! Thank you! Yes, let's do that. I'll call a vet and set up an appointment or something . . ."

He nodded.

"Well, I'll let you go. Have a good night."

"Thanks again for dinner," she said.

With a pleasant smile and a wave, he headed back to his house. Maggie just watched.

Oh God! she prayed. After that, there were no more words. Lead her not into temptation? Make Douglas a Christian? What could she possibly ask for? God had been so good to her. He had given her a job, a car and now all the cats were safely in their home. He had answered her prayer and helped her to be able to help the cats. But what was his will for Douglas?

"*Four hundred and eleven dollars?*" Maggie couldn't believe her ears. "You mean, for all of them?"

The voice on the other end clarified that that would be for each kitten. And it would cost more for Tabby since she had already been in heat. It was her lunch break and Maggie was using the phone in her small office to call around the various vets. The voice on the other end also pointed out to her that before they got spayed, all cats would need to get their mandatory rabies shots. That would be an additional \$74 each. Maggie's brain could hardly do the math she was so distraught. Even if she and Douglas split the cost, the bill would still be well over a thousand dollars each.

Brad had been candid that Assistant Librarian wasn't the most lucrative position, but he had smiled and said that when he retired in twelve years, she would be the obvious candidate for his job.

The work was familiar and she felt right at home in the spacious rural library. One entire wall was a window looking out on a church and a wide green lawn. Two hours had been more than enough to walk her through her responsibilities.

Now it was just the cats that were her worry.

She tried a few more vets, and got similar quotes. There was one veterinarian office who offered significantly lower rates, but not surprisingly, they were not taking additional patients. They were overloaded as it was.

Obviously, this was the reason people stopped at one or two pets. Who could afford the vet bills? It was enough that she would now be buying cat food for the next fifteen years. At least with the cats being outdoors, kitty litter wouldn't be an expense.

Maggie didn't know how she would break the news to

Douglas. Did he realize what he was getting into when he promised to help her out financially?

As Assistant Librarian, she was required to stay until closing. The library closed at 9 p.m. on weekdays, but Brad said that tomorrow she could come in at 1 o'clock. As head librarian, he always opened the library, and so usually left at around 5 o'clock.

Brad was courteous, but distant. Maggie got the impression that he was one of those people who was a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Getting home so late that night, she didn't think she'd have a chance to talk to Douglas about the cost of getting the cats spayed. But when she pulled into her driveway, she saw that his living room light was still on.

She went straight across the driveway and knocked on his door. The deck light came on first and then the door was opened.

"Maggie!" Douglas smiled. He had a Dr. Pepper in his hand and she could hear the television in the background.

"Hi Douglas," she said, almost out of breath at the news she had to deliver. "I had to talk to you tonight."

"Sure," he said, stepping back to let her in. "Would you like talk in the living room?"

"No, that's OK, I won't keep you," she said. She didn't want to think about a late night evening in his living room. "I called the vets in town today. And Douglas, you wouldn't believe the prices . . ."

"Oh, I know," he interrupted. "I was doing a little research on the topic myself today. But did you know that the OSPCA will do it for \$60 a cat?"

The Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. She had no idea they spayed and neutered animals.

"No, I didn't," she said. "That's fabulous!"

Douglas nodded.

"And Tabby can have it done too, for the same price. Any cat between four months and five years old."

"Let's do it then!" said Maggie.

"Here, I wrote the number down for you, just in case," said Douglas going into his living room. Maggie could see him over at his desk. He came back and handed it to her. "I was going to leave this in your mailbox."

Maggie looked down at the paper in her hand. It would have

been nice if he had said he was going to stop by with it.

What was she thinking? He wasn't a Christian. She had no right to expect anything from him.

"The cats need rabies shots, too," she said.

"The OSPCA does that," said Douglas, taking a swig of his pop. "\$15 a cat."

Maggie shook her head. Unbelievable. This could actually work.

"They have a PDF document at their site, all the pre-op information," Douglas continued. "I'll print it out for you."

"Thanks so much," she said, truly grateful. The heavy burden of paying for the cats to be spayed had been eased considerably.

"Any time," said Douglas giving her a smile before wishing her a goodnight.

She returned the wishes and then headed back.

"We're going to be OK," she whispered into the cat home, before going into her own house. It might have been her imagination, but she thought she heard Tabby meow.

Her mornings were her own now, but she usually slept in after her late night at work.

She had phoned the OSPCA number and left all the pertinent information about her cats on their waiting list. Ten days later, she had gotten a phone call back, confirming her desire to book five cats in for surgery and arranging a date for it. The kittens were scheduled for an autumn appointment, past their four-month old mark.

She had gone over to Douglas's with the news and he had marked his calendar, saying they would go down to Newmarket together. Newmarket was the largest town south of Keswick. Douglas said it was fortunate that the OSPCA had a branch in Newmarket. They only had two branches in Ontario and the other one was on the other side of Lake Simcoe, in Barrie.

Maggie agreed, although she wouldn't have chosen the word, fortunate. She would have said blessed.

That was all they'd seen of each other in the last two weeks though. Douglas had left the pre-operation information in her mailbox.

Maggie had been spending time with Emily, either taking her out to do grocery shopping in the morning, or else, just stopping

by for tea and a talk. The Sunday afternoon visit wasn't repeated though. The library was open Sunday afternoons and Brad had scheduled her in for the short shift. Maggie didn't mind. The library was quiet on Sundays and she enjoyed her work.

The first pay cheque was cause for rejoicing. On Monday, her one full day off, she drove over to Emily's and despite her friend's protests, took her out for a chicken dinner at Swiss Chalet.

"I owe it all to you," she said to her new friend, over dessert of lemon merengue pie.

Emily blushed.

"It was God, dear. You know that."

Maggie nodded her agreement as she accepted another cup of coffee from the waitress. Emily had some more hot water added to her little silver teapot. But there was no reason why Emily shouldn't share in the celebration.

Over the course of their time together, Maggie had mentioned her feelings for her neighbour, as well as her whole wretched tale of being jilted by Robbie.

Emily had strongly advised to keep her emotions level when it came to her unsaved neighbour, though she candidly admitted, she'd have a hard time doing it herself.

"A man who likes cats is a good man," she said.

As for Robbie, Emily's opinion was that all things work out for the best, even if it doesn't seem that way at the time.

That night, after she had dropped Emily off, she was restless.

Shouldn't have had that last cup of coffee, she thought, as she lay in her bed, unable to sleep.

She sat up in her bed and switched on the lamp. She didn't feel like TV. Maybe if she had Douglas's options it would have been more tempting, but the little rabbit ears on her small set only got a Barrie station across the lake and a very fuzzy CBC, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Instead, what she really felt like was some direction from God.

She did something silly.

She let the Bible fall open to a scripture hoping it would have some special meaning for her.

And Sheba passed through all the land of Israel to Abel of Bethmaacah and all the Bichrites congregated together and followed him . . .

That wasn't helpful.

But she didn't do it a second time. What did she want God to say? That it was perfectly OK to pursue a romantic interest with an unbeliever?

She kept reading through Samuel, just for the edification of it. To try to get her mind off of Douglas. It wasn't even as if he were interested in her. He had his own life. He had his own history with Sandy that he was still trying to work through. Even if she could haul him to church, that wouldn't make him a Christian or mean that he wanted to walk down the aisle and get married to her in it.

Maggie read until she was tired and then put the Bible down on the bedside table. If God could provide her with a job and a car, he could certainly meet her need in this way. In the meantime, she would just have to stop thinking about it so much or she would make herself crazy.

Chapter Seven

Haven't seen you around much," Douglas called out, the next morning.

Maggie had to be at work in three hours, but in the meantime, she was planting some annuals alongside the house. A few days earlier, she had gone to a garden centre and splurged on a mix of petunias, pansies, zinnias and snapdragons. She was sure that her arrangement would horrify any true gardener, but she loved the colour it provided along the path to her front door.

She stood up and brushed the dirt off of her hands. Her heart was already beating faster.

"Yep," she said, as he crossed over to her side of the driveway. "It's work. I'm gone all afternoon. And all evening, for that matter."

"I noticed," he said. "Where do you work?"

She told him about her position as Assistant Librarian. He was impressed. Then he strolled over to the cat home to open the lid and take a peek inside. The cats were curled up, sleeping.

"I've noticed they like to play on the front lawn," he said.

She nodded.

Tabby was no longer nursing her babies, but they all still

seemed to want to hang together. The kittens would dash all over the front yard, while Tabby would watch them from the top of the cat home.

"They even come out to visit me when I feed them. But they won't let me pick them up. All I'm allowed to do is pet them while they eat."

Douglas grinned.

"We'll have a lot of fun capturing them for their appointment, won't we?"

The way he said it, it made it seem as if they had a great adventure ahead of them.

"True," she said.

Douglas closed the lid of the cat home.

"I should have put a camera in it, or something," he said. "Some guy on the internet did that. He had a tiny security camera in the corner of his cat home and he was able to watch them from his computer inside."

"That would have been cool," said Maggie.

"I'll know for next time," said Douglas grinning.

He turned to look at the side of the house.

"I like what you're doing to the place," he said, nodding toward the flowers. "Sandy never did anything like that. The irony was she was always telling her clients to plant flowers. It makes a house seem more attractive and makes it more likely to sell."

"I see you have some things over there," she said, looking over at some flowering bushes underneath his windows.

"Mom came here the first year I got this place and planted a whole bunch of perennials. She knew I'm not much of a gardener so she tried to do it all in a way that it'll take care of itself."

"Those are lilies, aren't they?" She pointed.

Douglas nodded.

"They're pretty hardy. So are the peonies. And there are more and more of them every year."

"If I ever have the time, I wouldn't mind planting some berry bushes," she said.

"Berry bushes are good," said Douglas, nodding and grinning. The way he said it was flirty. It left her flustered. He noticed and laughed and said he'd better stop slacking off and get back to

work.

“OK, see you around,” she managed to say.

At least it didn't take any brain cells to put plants into the ground. Her brain had turned to oatmeal. Why did he have this effect on her?

It was like Emily said, she finally decided, a man who liked cats was a good man. If Douglas had had a big ferocious Rottweiler who chased her kittens, he wouldn't be nearly as attractive.

That was it, she decided, standing up. She would have to stop thinking of him as the cat-loving man that he was and start thinking of him as . . .

Oh, that was silly.

Maggie went into the house and lathered her hands with soap at the kitchen sink. She should have worn gardening gloves. Now she would have to go to work with ragged fingernails.

Thankfully, work was an oasis from her emotions.

Today, most of the afternoon was spent with a class of sixth graders who had come from the nearby public school on a field trip to learn how to do research. The subjects they had chosen for their papers were a wild array of topics and Maggie spent time with them, helping them find books about possums, local ghost stories, amateur horse competitions, improved methods of farming, Justin Bieber, the internet, natural disasters, the history of Lake Simcoe. The last request, made by a tall solemn blonde girl in braids, made her think of Douglas, but she pushed all thoughts of him from her mind. Particularly when she found the students putting the books they didn't want back on the shelf in no particular order.

If only something would come along that would drive all thoughts of Douglas from her mind. It was almost a prayer.

She should have known better. God had a way of answering her prayers.

A flashy red Nissan Roadster was parked in her spot when she came home. Maggie recognized it right way. She should. She'd driven it everywhere for two years.

It came with a man leaning against it. He was her height, dark hair, dark eyes, defined features and right now, obviously impatient.

"There you are!" he said, when she had barely managed to get out the door of her car. He hadn't exactly left space for her. "I was wondering when you'd get here."

Typical Robbie.

He arrived for an unexpected visit and blamed her when she didn't show up for it.

"Hi Robbie," she said. "What's up?"

"What's up?" he gave her one of his grins. Those grins used to melt her. They still almost did. "I haven't seen you for months and you say, what's up?"

What was going on?

She ignored his rhetorical question and concentrated instead on getting her keys out of her purse as she walked down her pathway with him only a step behind. Should she invite him in? They paused on her deck.

"What's this?" asked Robbie, looking at the wooden box.

"A home for a mother cat and her kittens."

"Oh." Robbie had already lost interest. "So Maggie, how have you been doing?"

"I've been fine," she said, cautiously. "How have *you* been doing?"

"Fine."

"How's Sasha?" she couldn't help asking.

"Oh, *her*," said Robbie. "I dunno."

"You're not together anymore?"

Robbie shook his head.

"My mom and her never got along. I didn't think it would work."

As if Robbie ever cared what his mother thought. Sasha must have dumped him.

Maggie wondered how much of the wedding had been planned at that point. Although Robbie was an evangelical Christian, his mother was a devout Catholic. She had probably already sent an invitation to the Pope.

"Listen, Maggie," Robbie's voice softened. "I'd really like it if we could have a coffee and talk . . . I feel like there's a lot we didn't have a chance to say."

That was an understatement. Although Maggie wasn't sure there was anything she wanted to say because whatever came out of her mouth wouldn't be edifying.

"The coffee, we can do right now," she said briskly, as she unlocked her door. At the same time, she was wondering if Douglas was anywhere near his window and if he was seeing her let a man into her house at this late hour. Is this the sort of thing Sandy did to turn him off Christianity?

Opening the door, she switched on the light. There was a way to avoid the appearance of evil. Her curtains were all still open and with the lights on, anyone who wanted to, could see everything going on in the living room.

"Have a seat," she said to Robbie. "I'll make the coffee."

"Let me help," he said.

"No, that's OK." She hung her purse on the coatrack and went straight into the kitchen. The offer from Robbie wasn't a generous one. He was a snob about coffee and thought that he was the only who knew how to make the perfect cup of Italian espresso. Well, he wouldn't be getting espresso tonight. He would be getting the store brand in her coffee maker.

Like Emily, Maggie had decided that it was a good practise to have a package of biscuits on hand. The particular brand that had caught her eye this week was a Voortman package of windmill cookies. She put some on a plate and when the coffee was done, brought it all out to the living room.

Robbie was on the couch. She sat down in her reading chair.

"*Oh God! Help me!*" she prayed. There were a few moments of quiet as they fixed their coffees.

"Are things going well for you here?" asked Robbie. He was sipping his coffee, probably without really tasting it. Just as well. It was weak compared to the way he liked it.

"Yep," she said. "I'm working at the library. And the mortgage on this house is a bargain."

Robbie looked around.

"I can see why."

Of course, Robbie was now on his way to becoming a homeowner in Toronto. Any of her achievements would be insignificant by comparison.

"Found a good church?" Robbie asked.

"Yep." She didn't want to elaborate. Robbie didn't need to know that the church was completely lacking in eligible men and she didn't think he'd have much to say about her friendship with Emily.

"Are you still at Toronto Community?" she asked.

Robbie shook his head.

That meant Sasha was still there. Maybe with a new man.

"Found another place?"

"Still working on that," said Robbie.

"Well, it's hard to beat Toronto Community. Always something going on."

Robbie agreed and then they were both silent as they drank the coffee. Robbie hadn't touched the cookies, but Maggie was hungry. Normally, she'd be having a light dinner now. But she didn't want to prepare a meal with Robbie there. It would seem too . . . intimate.

Kind of like when she and Douglas had eaten together.

But this wasn't the time to think about that.

She and Robbie had shared many meals together over the years. It had always been casual and easygoing between them. At the time, she hadn't realized that that was because Robbie wasn't really committed to the relationship. But now it seemed as if he might be ready to take it seriously, or he wouldn't be here.

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.

The expression just popped into her head. It was something her mother sometimes said. It wasn't exactly a Bible scripture, but maybe there was some truth to it. Robbie was right here, in front of her. He wouldn't be here if he wasn't open to the idea of some kind of reconciliation. Douglas was in his own little world, one where Christianity played no part.

Maybe she and Robbie could work this out. They had a lot of history together. The Sasha thing could be forgiven. Christians were supposed to forgive each other. And now that she had met Douglas, she knew how easily someone could get swept away.

But how would she put all of this into words?

Robbie solved that problem by speaking first.

"Maggie, I just have to say something." He looked pained. "I shouldn't have done what I did." This was hard for him. "I was stupid. We had something good and I threw it away. If you give me one more chance, I won't blow it."

OK, it sounded almost like song lyrics. And bad song lyrics at that. But even if Robbie was getting his words from something he had heard on the radio, at least he was saying them.

She nodded.

"I've learned a lot since coming here," she said. "About faith and about myself. I think I can give it a second chance."

Robbie looked relieved.

He leaned back.

"That's great. Do you think you could move back to Toronto . . . ?"

She shook her head.

"No. I have a life here now. In fact, I may even have a career."

"Fair enough," said Robbie, backing off right away. "In fact, I respect that you were able to just pick up like that and start over."

From Robbie, that was quite the compliment.

"I guess if I'm going to see you, I'll have to make the drive up," he said. "It's only an hour. I guess that's OK . . ." Robbie was already working this out in his mind.

"More like forty-five minutes the way you drive."

They smiled at each other.

"So . . ." said Robbie. "What is there to do up here?"

"Well, there's the lake," she said. "There's a lot of history associated with Lake Simcoe . . ."

She stopped herself. Now she was talking like Douglas.

"It's a great place to go and watch the sunset," she finished.

"Sounds romantic," he said, grinning.

It was too soon to think about romance. First, trust would have to be restored.

"So can I come back on Saturday?" he asked.

Maggie shook her head.

"I work Saturdays."

"Oh, that's right. The library. Well, what days do you have off?"

"Mondays."

"Mondays? That's it?"

She nodded. She wanted the extra-hours and Brad was good about scheduling her in for them. In fact, he appreciated it.

"What about coming back at night? You're home by what, about 9:30?"

"Sure," she said. "We'll have missed the sunset by then, though."

"That's OK." Robbie looked at his watch. "But I've got to get back now." He stood up.

"It's pretty interesting around here," said Maggie. She stood

up and walked outside with him. "Sometimes I just sit on this porch and watch the bats flying around overhead."

Thankfully the bats stayed high in the air. Not that she had anything to fear. Bats were just flying mice and with Tabby and the kittens playing near her feet, a low-flying bat was putting his life in danger.

"That's nice," said Robbie, absently. He was unlocking the door of his Roadster. He had glanced at her car but hadn't said anything.

Before he got into his car, he leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek. It wasn't something he usually did. Toronto Community Church had taken a strong stand against getting physically close before marriage.

Now climbing into his Roadster, the driver's window came down for a final good-bye. "I'll give you a call, OK?"

As he pulled out of the driveway, he gave her a wave, and then he was off, leaving behind a cloud of dust.

Maggie walked back to her door with heavy legs. It wasn't until she was standing by the cat home that she put her finger on what was bothering her. It was the kiss.

She hoped Douglas hadn't seen it.

When Maggie got home from work, her answering machine had the flashing red light. This was a first since moving here.

It was Robbie.

"Hey luv, just wanted to say, hi and see how you're doing. Call me later."

He knew she didn't get back until 9:30. He could have saved his call till then, she thought with irritation. It was long distance from Toronto to Keswick. Was he being cheap or was he just unaware of it?

She erased the message without listening to it again. It was good she didn't have a cell phone. That way Robbie couldn't bug her at work.

Where was this hostility coming from?

She kicked off her sandals and went into the kitchen. Now she had full shelves, like Douglas. She took down a can of tuna, knowing the kittens would love the juice and opened the refrigerator for some whipped dressing. The kettle went on the stovetop and soon she was in her living room with a cup of tea

and a tuna fish sandwich.

She couldn't help it. It wasn't Robbie. It was her.

He was just the same.

She had changed.

There was no going back.

She had come to Keswick in a state of emotional angst. Only God had kept her from starving in a ditch.

And God had brought the cats, Emily . . . and Douglas . . . into her life.

Though she wasn't foolish enough to pretend that Douglas was the man that God had chosen for her. He had been used by God to help her and the cats in their time of need. In fact, he was still scheduled to help her when they would all be going down to Newmarket for their surgery.

Should she tell Douglas that he wasn't needed anymore? Maybe Robbie could come with her instead.

Immediately, she dismissed the thought.

Robbie wouldn't let five cats into his Roadster.

So now, the decision was really whether to stay with Robbie and have a life with him, or to stay lonely and have a life by herself.

It wasn't an easy decision.

She sipped her tea and stared at the wall. She really should get shelves and put some books on them. It made a room homier. Douglas was probably reading right now, or watching the History Channel . . .

She steered her mind away from Douglas. Douglas had nothing to do with this decision.

No, that was wrong. Douglas had everything to do with this decision. Even if they were never meant to be together, Douglas had shown her that there were men other than Robbie. Attractive men. Interesting men. Just not Christian men.

Oh well.

Maggie sighed.

The decision was really made for her already. There was a time when it gave her a small thrill to have a message from Robbie waiting for her when she got home. Just losing the thrill would have been a warning sign, but to actually be annoyed, well, it didn't take a psychologist to tell her that this one wasn't worth fighting for.

And Douglas?

Was Douglas worth fighting for?

Yes, he was, she decided.

But who was she supposed to fight? It was beyond her ability to battle for his soul.

Chapter Eight

Maggie was out on her front deck the next day. Now that money wasn't a problem, Tabby and her kittens got a bowl of milk every morning along with their dry food.

"Hey neighbour!" called out a friendly voice.

She looked over at Douglas. He was out in a t-shirt and pyjama bottoms and was holding a mug of something hot. She could see the steam rising from it. Douglas had come out to pick up the community newspaper that got delivered to them twice a week.

"Hey, there!" she called back, keeping her voice light, although the sight of him was enough to get her heart pounding. "No pop today?"

He laughed.

"No, I do coffee in the morning. I'm even thinking of switching to tea during the day."

"Tea is good," she said, nodding. "Lots of antioxidants."

"How are Tabby and her kittens doing?" he asked.

"Frisky as ever," she called back.

Douglas crossed over the driveway as the bowl of milk

brought them all out down the ramp.

"They're getting bigger," he said.

She agreed.

"Good thing you made their home a fair size," she said.

Together, they stood and watched the cats lap up the milk.

"You're keeping them tame," he observed. "At least we'll know where they all are on the day of their appointment."

That reminded her of something, a concern that she had had ever since she read the OSPCA's pre-surgery document he had left in her mailbox.

"I read in their pre-op info that they're all going to have to have a separate carrying case."

Douglas nodded as he took a sip of his coffee.

"Yeah, I read that too. But I was thinking, we could call on my mom for help there. She has a couple of cats herself and would be able to lend us at least two. Another thing we could do is keep an eye on the second-hand places."

"Good idea!" she said. "We have a couple of months."

"Exactly," he said. "In fact, I'll be heading up to Stretch later today. I like browsing their books and sometimes they have some good ones. I can start looking then. But I should probably do some work first."

He grinned and crossed back over the driveway, giving her a little wave before disappearing into his house.

Again, problem solved.

Maggie went back into her house. There was something she had to do today and she wasn't looking forward to it.

Maggie didn't think Robbie would take the news well.

But she didn't want him showing up at her home again in the evening, so she'd have to call him before going to work.

Picking up the phone, her stomach was sick with anxiety. She knew she was doing the right thing, but it wouldn't be an easy conversation.

He was already at work when she called him on his cell phone and he didn't sound pleased to be getting a personal call, but when she told him that she had done some thinking and didn't believe that it would work to try to reconcile, he forgot about work, changed his tone and nearly begged her to reconsider.

But she stood fast.

"I just don't think I can do it."

"It's about trust, isn't it?" he said.

"Partly."

He didn't hear her.

"Sasha was never important to me," he said. "I should have seen that right from the start."

She was tempted to agree, but didn't. Instead she said, "I think Sasha just brought out something that both of us weren't willing to admit. We invested a lot of time in each other, but we really weren't right for each other."

"I wouldn't say that . . ."

"Even if we put a lot of work into it," Maggie said. "It's possible that we might never end up being the people God would like us to be."

Now why did she say that? She was about to say, "It's possible we might not be able to make it work."

"Robbie," she said firmly. "I've thought this over and I can't do it. Period. I'm sorry. I really wish the best for you. But I'm not the one."

The deep breath and heavy sigh on the other end was an indication that Robbie had gotten it.

"OK Maggie," he said. "Take care of yourself."

And that was it.

There was a click in her ear.

Maggie put her phone back on the receiver.

Now she was free to think about her future. Or the lack, thereof.

Emily listened to the whole story with sympathy.

It was Monday. They had made their weekly shopping trip to the Food Basics near Emily's apartment and were now having a late afternoon tea and cookies in Emily's living room.

They both agreed that keeping Robbie in Maggie's past was the best plan.

And then Emily had her own news to report.

"I have a boyfriend!" she announced.

Maggie couldn't believe her ears.

"Emily!"

"It's true," Emily nodded. "I met him online."

"Online?"

Again, Emily nodded.

"I go to Club 55 every Tuesday for their computer classes. Stacey is the dear girl who teaches us all to do our email and surf the net."

Maggie couldn't imagine Emily on a computer.

"Then she signed me up on a Christian dating service," Emily continued. "And I met someone!"

"Wow! What's he like?"

"He's an older man," said Emily, solemnly. "From Tobermory."

"Where's Tobermory?"

"I had to look it up on the internet too," said Emily. "It's quite a ways north of here, but he's going to visit me on Sunday! I was hoping you and Brad could be here for dinner."

"Oh, but don't you two want to be alone?"

"I'll have spent the whole day with him by then. It might be nice to have some other people over to form an impression of Tim. I want your feedback, Maggie."

"I'm honoured. And, of course, I'll come." The library closed at five on Sundays.

After they were done with their tea, Emily switched on the TV and got out her knitting. Maggie could have gone home to her own TV, but it was soothing to watch it with someone else. Emily kept her television on TVOntario, so that eliminated the need to decide what to watch. It was showing a documentary about provincial parks in Ontario. Emily was a very enthusiastic viewer, often commenting on her desire to visit one of the parks and do some of the things those people on the television were doing. The thought of Emily canoeing her way through the Great Lakes was so entertaining that by the time Maggie said it was time she headed home, both Robbie and Douglas had been temporarily forgotten.

Maggie was on the front desk today.

So far, it had been a busy afternoon and it wasn't slowing down.

Right now, a woman with two active small boys was checking out three DVDs. Behind her was a lady waiting impatiently.

Once the woman and her children were out of the way, the lady moved forward to the desk and asked if there was anything

about pioneer cooking in the library.

Maggie told her that 641 was where the cookbooks were, but the lady insisted she had thoroughly checked out that section and found nothing about pioneer cooking. Maggie escorted her back to the cookbook section to look together. It would have to be pioneer cooking. More history. And history made her think of Douglas.

The lady was right. There was nothing about pioneer cooking in the cookbooks.

So they spent the next fifteen minutes going through the early Canadian history section. There wasn't anything entirely devoted to cooking, but there were chapters about it in some of the books, including several recipes. The lady explained that she home-schooled her children and that she wanted to teach them some Ontario history by trying out some old recipes.

Maggie nodded politely, but the whole time she was thinking that she'd have to mention this encounter to Douglas the next time she saw him.

Then she blushed.

Hopefully the lady didn't notice.

She didn't seem to. The lady was thanking her for her help and deciding which books she was going to check out. She said something about calling the Georgina Pioneer Village to see if they had a book of recipes. The Georgina Pioneer Village. Wasn't that something Douglas had mentioned?

Maggie was happy to return to the desk and try to concentrate on non-Douglas related activities.

When a mother with two preteen girls asked her for some help finding some books for her daughters, Maggie was relieved to be able to head further back into the library to the children's and young adult's books. Nothing there could possibly make her think of Douglas.

She led the girls to the shelves that had the young adult novels. One of them was happy to browse the Nancy Drews. The other wanted something "real."

"What sort of things do you like to read about?" Maggie asked the younger girl. The girl shrugged. Maggie looked up at the mother who was standing behind her. The mother also shrugged.

"Well," said Maggie, heading over to the Young Adult Non-

Fiction. "We have a lot of things about pioneer life." There she went again. Surprisingly, the young girl liked that idea and was soon into a book about children in early Upper Canada. It had all sorts of details, like how to make your own soap, how to get sap from a maple tree, and how to make your own toys. The mom mouthed, "thank you" and Maggie flashed her a smile before heading back to the front desk.

This obsession with Douglas had to end, she decided.

After five, the library got quiet. There was only one other person working with Maggie that night, an older woman named Phyllis who had been with the library for more than twenty years. It was agreed that Maggie would take her dinner break first. Phyllis wanted to use her break to give her daughter a call and her daughter didn't get home from work until six.

Back in her small office, Maggie fired up her computer. All the computers in the library had internet access, including her own. An idea had been forming in her mind. Ever since Emily had told Maggie that she had met someone online, Maggie had been toying with the idea herself.

It was a little scary and she had pushed the thought away at first. But the more she thought about it, the more she decided, it couldn't hurt. She certainly wasn't going to meet someone the way her life was currently going.

And the only way to get Douglas off her mind was to meet someone else.

She did a Google search for "Christian singles Canadian" and clicked the first result.

A quick browse around the site told her it was exactly what she was looking for and she started filling in the membership form. It asked her what her level of faith was, ranging from "Still sorting that out" all the way up to "It makes me what I am." She selected, "It makes me what I am." For the type of relationship she was seeking, she selected "Dating with marriage in mind." Under, "A bit about myself," she included that "It is essential that the man in my life like cats."

A photo was recommended but not required.

She could add that later, she decided. She gave her email address at the library. The site promised that all email would go through their server, so you wouldn't actually see the other person's email address. Good. Because hers included the name of

the library. And then, before she could chicken out, she hit the “submit” icon.

There. She sat back. It was in God's hands now.

She couldn't bring herself to browse the site and pick out anyone to email at this point. Let them find her. She didn't want to get attached to anyone unless he was a committed Christian looking for a serious relationship.

A quick check of her email the next day included a message welcoming her to a vibrant online community of faith. It assured her that many people had found love online and that she would too if she were persistent. Her profile was now online and she should make it a habit to browse the site daily if she wanted to have a successful experience. There were many other features that came with her account and she should check them out . . .

Maggie moved the message to a folder and got back to work. Brad had left her with a pile of new books to catalogue. It would probably take her most of the day to get through it.

Some of them looked interesting. One was about the secrets of Lake Simcoe. Another was a historical survey of some of the Victorian homes along Lake Simcoe.

She sighed. She couldn't get away from it. Douglas was everywhere.

Despite her desire to push all thoughts of Douglas away, she ended up taking out both books to read in the evenings. It wouldn't hurt to have a few interesting anecdotes of her own.

The following day, something happened that made Maggie confident Douglas would soon just be a friendly neighbour to her.

An email was waiting for her.

It came from a man who said he had read her profile and would like to get to know her a little better.

This was incredible! And she hadn't even gotten around to including a photo yet. Maybe that was for the best. This man could get to know her for who she was rather than build some fantasy around her photo.

He said he lived in York Region.

That was great! Keswick was in York Region. His user name was History 101, but he said that she could call him Christopher.

Maggie continued to read. He said he had laughed when he read her comment about cats. He didn't have any himself, but he'd always preferred them to dogs.

He sounded pleasant. Of course, he didn't go into a lot of detail about himself. For that, she knew she could check out his profile. Except, she glanced at her wrist watch, it was time for her to take the front desk. She would just have to read more about him later.

In the meantime though, she wanted to keep this connection alive. Maggie quickly typed a message saying she'd love to get to know him better and promised that her next email would be longer.

Well! That was something! Maggie emerged from her small office and took her place at the front desk beside one of the older ladies. There were a few students working this afternoon, putting returned books back on the shelves.

It took Maggie a few minutes to get settled into the library routine. This email was a real connection with a Christian man. But this wasn't the time to think about that.

The patrons that came into the library kept her busy. One lady wanted the *Hello!* issue that covered the Royal Wedding. It appeared to be missing. After confirming that it had not been checked out, Maggie returned with the woman to go through the periodicals. She had eventually found the issue the woman wanted, mixed in with the *Macleans*.

Back at the desk, a long line of people waiting to check out books and DVDs awaited her. The other lady working on the desk gave Maggie a grateful smile and together, they had the line taken care of in a few minutes.

Her dinner break was an opportunity to get back to the computer and check her email. A new message!

It was longer and said that he was glad to hear back from her. He asked her what sort of books she liked to read. That was a good question. She was a librarian, after all. She mentioned the two titles of the books she had checked out yesterday. The lake seemed like a safe theme. The rest of her email was about how she had grown up in Toronto, but now she was living ten minutes from the lake. Not only did she look forward to learning a little more history about the area, but it was just nice to be able to go and watch the sunset over it.

“Maggie?”

Brad appeared in her doorway.

She smiled. Brad was the ideal boss. He maintained high standards and yet, managed to be unobtrusive.

“I’m just heading out.”

Maggie nodded. He had been here since the library opened.

“Did Emily tell you about her dinner on Sunday?”

Maggie nodded again.

“I’m so happy for her,” she said. “Imagine, having a . . . new friend.”

“I know,” Brad agreed. “At her age.” He shook his head, but it was good-natured. “Anyway, I just wanted to make sure it will work out for you, time-wise and all.” That was very considerate. Maggie got off work at five and Emily had made the invitation for five-thirty. Emily was more of an early-to-bed, early-to-rise kind of person and she didn’t like things to be too late.

“I’ll go straight to Emily’s from here,” she assured Brad.

“That’s a good plan,” said Brad.

“Emily seems to want to get our impression of her friend.”

“I picked up on that too,” said Brad. “In any case, I shouldn’t have a hard time forming one. He’s staying overnight at my place.” Brad was turning away, ready to head out. He wished her a goodnight and then was gone.

The thought of Emily using one special man in her life to take care of another was amusing. Maggie grinned as she returned to her email.

Was her reply good enough?

She read it over quickly.

It sounded reasonable.

She signed off and hit “send.”

Now for his profile.

She hit the internet icon and went to the website. Like her, the man hadn’t included his photo in her profile. But his age was right. He was 31. Computer programmer. Just like Douglas. Unlike Douglas though, for faith, he had selected, “It makes me what I am.” He listed his favourite movies, mostly World War II war films, like *A Bridge Too Far*, *Valkyrie*, and most recently, *The King’s Speech*. His active hobbies included hiking and camping and his future goals included travel and home ownership.

OK, that all sounded fine. Maggie finished off her cheese

sandwich while she read it.

If he wanted to get together for coffee some time, she was willing.

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Sunday came and as she was heading down her path to her car, Douglas came out of his door and gave her a wave. She smiled and waved back. He went straight for his car and climbed in.

He was out of the driveway while she was still adjusting her seatbelt.

That was fine. They were neighbours. Friendly neighbours. The way things should be.

She backed out cautiously. Although she knew the kittens preferred her front lawn and the more secluded side of the house, she never wanted to accidentally run over one.

Douglas was probably off to do his grocery shopping. She drove along the Queensway, half-expecting to see his car parked in a lot along the way. In fact, her eyes were scanning for his car. Silly.

She sighed and took a deep breath. The sooner she had a chance to go out with her new email friend, the better. But so far, although he had been good at sending an email every day, he hadn't suggested a get-together. Maybe he was cautious and wanted to make sure they were a good match before they met in

person.

A thought occurred to her.

Christopher hadn't included his photo with his profile.

If he wasn't an attractive man, he was probably used to being rejected on the basis of his looks. Maybe he wanted to make sure that she knew what an interesting person he was before they met in person.

Fair enough. Not everyone was blessed with good looks. Douglas was, of course . . .

Maggie turned in to the church parking lot. She recognized Brad's car and pulled alongside.

She went inside, greeted a few people and made her way to the sanctuary. Emily was there sitting with an older man. He was tall and white-haired and very attentive to Emily.

Maggie tried to hide a grin.

Emily had caught herself a real prize. There weren't too many older men around.

Maggie went over to greet Emily with their usual hug. Today, Emily was as giddy as a teenager with a crush.

"Maggie, I'd like you to meet Tim," she said, and then turned rosy.

Maggie bit her lip to keep from outright laughing.

"Nice to meet you," she said, shaking Tim's hand.

"Likewise," said Tim, who had stood up for the meeting.

Brad's choir was at the front, preparing for the start of the service.

"I'll look forward to getting more acquainted later," said Maggie, giving them both a smile before taking a seat in a nearby pew.

When the service ended, Maggie headed out right away, with a quick "See you tonight!" to Emily.

Maggie arrived early at the library, unlocked the door for the other employee who would share the short shift with her and then went straight into her office to check her email.

Nothing.

Well, of course not, she told herself. He would be at church like every other Christian.

At one o'clock, she took the keys on the large key ring and unlocked the door used by the public. An older couple was waiting. They went straight to the DVDs. Another man came in a

few minutes later and was soon in one of the lounge chairs, reading the periodicals. It was usually the children who livened up the place, but today there were no young families.

Even though Brad scheduled her for the Sunday afternoon shift, he seemed to go out of his way to make it a day of rest for her. There was no work on Maggie's desk or anything left for her to do, except man the front desk while her student assistant rolled a cart of books throughout the library, reshelving them.

Rather than let her mind wander, Maggie spent the time filling out overdue book forms. Usually a student did it. Most people got their overdue messages via email, but there were still people who didn't have computers and had to receive a notice in the mail. Though it was only a four-hour shift, it still seemed to pass slowly.

Finally, it was time to let the few patrons in the library know that the library would be closing in five minutes. Then she was on her way to Emily's.

Being welcomed into Emily's warm apartment, with its wonderful aroma of dinner, was like coming home. Brad was already there, holding a wine glass filled with carbonated lemonade. Tim had an apron on and was in the small kitchen with Emily.

"They've been tittering like two school children," Brad said in a low voice to Maggie, as he poured her some of the lemonade from a bottle into a glass. He looked as if he was happy to have company in the living room.

"That's nice to see," said Maggie, smiling as she took her usual seat across from the sleeping Albert.

"Something smells good," she called out to Emily.

"Pot roast," said Emily giggling. "Tim's favourite."

"I think I smell cinnamon," said Maggie. "Is that your secret for pot roast?"

"That's apple pie for dessert," Emily called back. "Tim's favourite."

"I sense a theme," said Brad, dryly.

Soon they were all in the living room, with plates of pot roast and potatoes and carrots on their laps. Tim kept the conversation lively with his praise of Emily's cooking and his admiration for her lovely apartment. They talked about Emily's children and then they talked about Tim's children. Of course, both older

people's children were now middle-aged themselves. They giggled at the thought of telling their children about each other.

Brad asked Tim if he were interested in finding housing in Keswick. Tim looked down at Emily beside him and said that if Tobermory didn't interest Emily, then Keswick would be as good a place as any to live.

"Can you recommend a good real-estate agent?" he asked Brad.

"Well," said Brad, pausing in his eating. "I've been here for fifteen years. I started off in a cottage and now have a small brick bungalow in one of the new subdivisions. To be honest, I wish I'd stayed in my cottage. But the real-estate agent I had was pretty persuasive."

"I don't like people who are pushy," said Tim. "I'll want to avoid that one. What was his name?"

"Her name," said Brad. "Let me see . . ." He thought back. "Sandy something."

Maggie almost dropped her fork.

"Phillips, I think. Or maybe Peters. I can't remember. But you'd know her to see her. Long red hair, bright red lips . . ."

"I remember her," said Emily.

"Did you purchase your apartment through her, too?" asked Maggie.

"Oh dear, no," said Emily. "She attended the church."

Of course! Douglas had mentioned that to her but it had never clicked with Maggie that Emily might know of Sandy.

"Yes," said Brad. "That's why I went to her. I thought I would be able to trust her."

Maggie was still deep in thought.

"What is it, dear?" asked Emily. Good friend that she was, Emily had noticed that something was wrong.

"Well," said Maggie, carefully, looking down at her plate. "It's just that I think I'm actually living in Sandy's house."

The others found this mildly interesting.

"And my neighbour . . . Douglas," Maggie glanced at Emily who nodded gently. "I think he has issues with Sandy. Maybe she even turned him off Christianity."

"That's quite possible." Brad, who was usually decorum-personified, actually snorted.

Emily looked serious.

"Now I understand," she said, almost to herself.

"I don't," said Maggie, bewildered.

"It's not a nice story, dear," said Emily. She looked at her guests. "But we're all friends here and under the circumstances, you should probably know what happened."

Brad glanced at Maggie and then at Emily. He had picked up that there was even more going on than he knew.

There was a moment of silence.

Finally, Emily blurted it out.

"Sandy was having an affair with our youth pastor. We only found out about a month before you arrived, Maggie. It shook up the church. I think some of us are still recovering."

"I should add to that that the youth pastor was a married man with two small children," said Brad grimly.

"He left Keswick when it all came out," said Emily.

"Sandy did too," said Maggie, softly.

"We didn't realize that until you told us you were in her house," said Emily.

Again, there was silence.

Tim broke it by saying that the church attracted all sorts. There was general agreement and then Emily stood up to get her pie out of the oven. Maggie joined her in the kitchen while she put on the kettle for tea.

"I think it's possible Douglas was very affected by what happened with Sandy," said Maggie, softly.

"I agree, dear," said Emily, pulling out her tray from a cupboard under the counter. "You're still going to have to walk carefully."

Maggie agreed.

In some ways, this changed everything. In other ways, everything was the same. It didn't make Douglas a Christian, it just made him a man who had seen how some Christians didn't practise their faith.

After the pie and ice cream, they all agreed that they would make it an early night. Tim was heading out with a small overnight bag to stay at Brad's.

"Do you want me to stop by tomorrow to do a bit of grocery shopping?" Maggie asked mischievously.

"Do you mind if I give that a miss, dear?" asked Emily.

"Of course," said Maggie, giving her a gentle hug. "Enjoy

yourself, OK?"

Emily nodded and her three guests rode down together in the elevator to the main floor. Once in the parking lot, Maggie told Tim it was wonderful to meet him and wished him all the best. To Brad, she said she'd see him on Tuesday. He nodded and as the two men walked away, Maggie could hear them resume their discussion about real estate in Keswick.

Thoughtfully, Maggie walked to her own car.

In one way, she was eager to see Douglas, to somehow convey to him that she knew that he had been turned off by Christianity and to find out if he would consider giving it a second-chance. But at the same time, the story of Sandy wasn't one that she could just put forward for discussion. If he didn't tell her about it himself, she would have to pretend to be ignorant of it.

After all, she thought ruefully, as she unlocked the door of her car, if Douglas found out that she knew about Sandy, he could then add gossip to his list of grievances against Christians.

It's too bad she wouldn't be at work tomorrow to check her email. If her new man had sent a message, she wouldn't be able to reply to it until Tuesday. At some point, when she had some money in the bank, she'd have to get a personal computer for home. Right now, even a cell phone would be a strain on the budget.

When she got home, an incredible sight was waiting for her. Douglas was on her front lawn playing with the kittens.

She parked and joined him on the lawn.

The kittens were having a blast.

Douglas had container of small plastic balls with bells in each of them. As he rolled them on the grass, the kittens would pounce on them.

Douglas grinned.

"I saw them out here playing with a live mouse and I thought that might be a bit disturbing for you. So I went to the pet store and picked up these."

She didn't know what to say. A live mouse? She was glad she had missed that. But the fact that Douglas would get into his car and actually go buy some toys for the kittens, well, as Emily had said, "A man who likes cats is a good man."

Maggie dropped to her knees and started rolling the balls along with Douglas. The kittens were so frisky and one of them

even climbed onto Douglas's leg to get at the ball. Then she realized how close she was to a human and practically hopped like a rabbit to get away.

"There's nothing like a kitten," said Maggie, laughing.

"And four of them is four times the fun," said Douglas.

"Have you had dinner?" Maggie asked, as she stood up and brushed some grass off of her skirt.

Why did she say that?! It had just come out. She, of course, had had dinner. What was she going to do? Go inside and make Douglas a full meal and then not eat it herself?

"Yep," he said, also straightening up. "Frozen pizza. But I'd love a coffee, if you have it."

"Sure," she said, relieved. Unlocking the door, she let him in. This was the first time he had been in her place, at least, when it was her place.

"I have a lot more work to do to make it homey," she said, almost apologetic.

"Well, you've been busy," he said. "Long hours, eh?"

She nodded as she went into the kitchen. He must have noticed that she got home late.

"You don't have a computer," he called out from the living room.

That's something a computer programmer would notice. "No," she replied, as she got out the coffee grinds. "I use the one at work. I want to get one for home, but I want to get financially settled a bit."

"I understand."

She poured the water into the coffee-maker and joined him the living room. Douglas was in her comfy chair. She took the couch.

"Well, when you do get one," Douglas said. "Let me go shopping with you. You don't just buy a computer. You build one."

She smiled. That was a philosophy she was unfamiliar with.

"I wouldn't know where to begin," she said. "Thanks."

She could hear the coffee bubbling in the kitchen. Coffee for two always took a little longer. Maggie panicked at the silence that had fallen.

"Church was good today," she said. It just came out. It wasn't her plan to bring the topic up.

"Oh yeah?" Today he actually sounded interested.

"I have a dear friend, Emily," she hurried on. "An older lady, maybe late seventies. In fact, she's my only real friend there right now. She just met someone online."

"Really?" Douglas sounded even more interested.

"Yes," said Maggie nodding. "A Christian dating service. You know the kind, you post your profile and all that . . .?"

"And it worked?" said Douglas, grinning.

"It did for her," said Maggie. "She met a distinguished gentleman from Tobermory. They sound like they might make a go of it."

"Good for them," said Douglas, with genuine approval.

The coffee-maker had finished. Maggie returned to the kitchen and brought back a small tray with the pot, two mugs and some cream and sugar.

While they drank, they talked about a book Douglas was reading about the early buildings in the area. He was so good at keeping it interesting that she didn't have a chance to tell him about the books she was reading about Lake Simcoe. They were on her bedside table.

"Listen," he said, as he returned his mug to the tray. "The library's closed on Mondays, isn't it?"

She nodded.

"Why don't we take a tour of some of the places? I'd love to show you around the area and there are some buildings I haven't seen yet."

She hesitated.

A Christian shouldn't date a non-Christian. But, of course, this wasn't a date. It was just a day-trip around the area.

"Sure," she said. He knew they had no obligation to one another. She had never hidden her faith from him and she had never hinted that she was looking for a relationship.

"Great!" he said, standing up. "How 'bout nine? Does that work for you?"

She nodded.

"We can pick up some coffee and bagels to go," he added.

"Good plan," she said, getting up and joining him at the door.

"Til then," he said, giving her a grin and disappearing outside into the darkness.

"Oh Maggie!" she groaned to herself, as she leaned against the

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closed door. “What have you gotten yourself into?”

Chapter Ten

Maggie and Douglas had picked up a light breakfast at Tim Hortons and then driven straight north along Woodbine toward Sutton.

Maggie took this drive every day to work, but it felt different in Douglas's Mazda Miata.

As they reached the edge of Sutton, Douglas pulled into the parking lot of a strip mall to reorient himself on the map in his book.

"High Street is the main road in Sutton," Douglas said.

Maggie was familiar with the street. Like any picturesque small town main street, it had the shops and cafés. She had wanted to explore it, but everything was closed by the time she got off work.

"OK," he said. "Let's start with the spot where the railway ended. They had a train running up here from Toronto, more of a glorified tram service." He showed Maggie a picture of one of the train cars. "There was also a station in Keswick."

Maggie studied the picture.

"Those must have been romantic times," she said.

Then she regretted it. She didn't want to introduce an element

of romance into the day. But Douglas didn't take it the wrong way.

"I know what you mean," he said, pulling out of the parking lot. "I wish things were still like that."

After the railway terminus, they drove by what had once been the home of the town's one doctor, built in the late 1800's. After that, there were more Victorian homes to look at, as well as the original saw mill. A lovely old building that Maggie passed on her way to work turned out to have been one of the town's three hotels.

Although the buildings along High Street were now shops, most of them had been something different in the past. It took them forty-five minutes to drive slowly along the road, checking Douglas's book every few minutes. Thankfully, the street was quiet on an early Monday morning.

"There's also a walking tour we could do," said Douglas, when they had reached the end of the road and were now in a residential neighbourhood. "It's a little north of here, at Jackson's Point."

"Sure," said Maggie. It would be good to get out and move. Being in the car, in close proximity to Douglas – and his cologne – was having a dizzying effect on her. The fact that their hands kept brushing when they reached for their coffees wasn't helping.

Douglas chose a route that would take them past the lake.

It was a perfect spring day, with blue sky and white clouds. The sun reflected off of the surface of Lake Simcoe's water, creating contrast among the various shades of blue and green. The whole lakeshore was lined with homes, some of them tiny cottages, some of them huge mansions. It didn't take Douglas to point out to her that many of the homes dated back to an earlier era.

Along the way, Douglas told her about a Newmarket writer named Mazo de la Roche, who had used one of the local families and their majestic home as inspiration for her lengthy *Jalna* series.

"I've seen her books at the library," said Maggie. "I'll have to check them out."

"They lived at The Briars. It's an upscale resort now," said Douglas. "I couldn't afford a night there, but I could probably afford a meal."

Maggie didn't know how personally she should take that.

"Stephen Leacock's *Sunset Sketches of a Little Town* was also set on Lake Simcoe," Douglas continued.

That was something Maggie already knew. Stephen Leacock had been a resident of Orillia, although he said his fictitious town of Mariposa could have been any of seventy or eighty in the area.

Their first stop in Jackson's Point was the point itself.

Douglas parked the car in a small lot and they stepped out to the lake air. Strolling to the edge of the water, Douglas remarked, "The first name for this place was Frying Pan Point."

"Not very picturesque," remarked Maggie.

"No, it wasn't," Douglas agreed, grinning. "At some point, it became Bouchier Point, named for a captain who was part of Upper Canada's defence against the Americans. He had a long and illustrious career and his reward was a grant of 1200 acres that covered this whole area. It was actually his brother and his friends who settled the land, though. The name got changed to Jackson's Point when Bouchier married a Jackson girl."

"There's a lot of history here," said Maggie, knowing she sounded vague. But something about standing by the edge of the lake, the waves gently hitting the shore and Douglas beside her was having a limiting effect on her ability to think straight.

"And that's not the end of it." Douglas didn't seem to have a problem with the statement. "Bouchier left Canada at that point, after selling the land to his brother, and went to India. But he wasn't as successful there as he had been here. His wife died and he ended up moving back here with his second wife. They were the ones who built The Briars."

Maggie was impressed that he could tie it all together.

They walked along the lakeshore until they came to the first stop on their tour – the Jackson's Point Hotel. Douglas explained that the tram had come all the way up to Jackson's Point and this was the most popular destination for the visitors from Toronto. Most of the town had been taken up with cottages and boarding houses and hotels to accommodate the summer visitors. Even in winter, there had been a thriving ice industry.

He directed her attention to the harbour where the ice had once been harvested, put on wooden sleds and then packed in sawdust. The blocks had then been transported south to the city by rail.

"There was even a modest boat-building industry," said

Douglas. He consulted his book. "It looks like that old building there was the biggest one." He pointed to a barn-like structure on the edge of the harbour.

They moved inland and their walking tour took them past many of the giant homes that had once housed the tourists.

Finally, they ended up at a small, but elegant gazebo.

Douglas consulted his book.

"This is the Courting House," he announced. "A popular destination for lovers. Ah, summer love," he said, grinning at Maggie.

She felt herself turning red.

"Well, I'm actually quite hungry," said Douglas looking around. But there wasn't anything within sight offering food. "Want to head back?"

"Sure," said Maggie. That would be good. They were done their tour. He was hungry. They could both go home, him to his house, her to her house. He could eat a frozen dinner or a sandwich or whatever and she would never do this to herself again. It was painful to spend time with a man and to have to continually be putting the brakes on her emotions.

The drive back was quiet, but Douglas switched on the radio. It was tuned into a station that played classic songs for the residents of cottage country. Right now, it was a mix of music from the 60's, 70's and 80's. It was easier to just listen to the Bee Gees and Duran Duran than to try to think of something neutral to say.

But when they were only about five minutes from home, Douglas asked, "Do you feel chicken? Or burgers?"

He was slowing down and signalling to turn in to the small plaza that had a Harvey's, the Swiss Chalet and a Country Style.

"Chicken's fine," she said. And then instantly regretted it. Swiss Chalet was a sit-down restaurant where a waiter or waitress served you a full meal. She should have suggested a coffee and a sandwich at Country Style, or better yet, a burger to go from Harvey's.

"Chicken it is," Douglas said, pulling into a spot close to Swiss Chalet.

Part of her was still pleased that he wanted to prolong the day. But at the same time, didn't he realize this couldn't go anywhere?

In any case, he didn't seem weighted down by any concerns.

He was even whistling one of the tunes from the radio as they went into the restaurant.

It was already late afternoon. They had missed the lunch crowd and the large restaurant was quiet. The hostess put them in a corner booth and left them to read the menu.

Douglas pushed the menu away.

"I always get the chicken dinner," he said.

"Me too," she said. "With fries."

"Definitely with fries," he agreed.

They both smiled.

Even though the restaurant offered all sorts of healthy alternatives for a side dish, Maggie could never bring herself to order anything but the classic chicken and fries.

"Iced tea OK for you?" Douglas asked.

Maggie nodded.

"You're being good about avoiding pop," she said.

"Yeah, I've come up with some alternatives. I found an iced tea recipe online. A Snapple knock-off. It's a great way to use up those tea bags my mother keeps bringing me."

The waitress came over and took their order then left with the menus.

"I hope it comes quickly," said Douglas. "That walking made me hungry."

Maggie agreed.

"Something about being by water always makes me hungry," she said.

"Yeah, me too," said Douglas. "I don't know what it is. A bit of water in the air, maybe? Body has to use more energy to stay warm?"

"Good theory," said Maggie.

"I'll have to check it out on the internet."

"Do you even have time to work?" she said, grinning.

"I dunno," said Douglas. "It depends on your definition of work. Theoretically, I'm supposed to be on my computer from nine to five, just to be available for any video-conferencing. And to be able to answer messages right away."

For a moment, Maggie was horrified.

"Are you supposed to be working right now?"

Douglas laughed.

"No. I took the day off. I'm allowed to do that now and then."

Their iced teas arrived.

Douglas took a sip and then leaned over to say, "Not as good as mine."

"The internet recipe?" said Maggie, taking a sip of hers. "I'll have to try it sometime."

Oh, why did she have to say that? It was just too hard this, trying to be a friend with some guy who wasn't a Christian.

"You will," Douglas agreed. "I've gotten pretty good at making a batch a day. You have to stay on top of it, though. I mean, you have to give it a few hours to steep and then after that, it's got to have enough time in the fridge to cool down."

"Makes sense," said Maggie.

It was a good thing their food came quickly and she could then focus on that. Who knows what else she would invite herself over to do given enough time?

Douglas did a good job of keeping a light conversation going. He asked her a few questions about work in the library, what kind of history resources they had, what the typical patron took out.

"DVDs," said Maggie. "Definitely the DVDs go out the most. People like their amusement, I guess."

"Do you know what the word amusement means?"

"Let me guess," said Maggie. "You read it online?"

Douglas nodded. "At thesaurus.com. It means, without musing. As in, no thought."

Maggie smiled.

"I won't mention that to my patrons."

"Guess not," agreed Douglas.

The conversation turned to music. Maggie mentioned that very few people took out the music CDs anymore. Douglas said that, no surprise, he got all his music online these days.

"I think it's just the older people who still want to have something solid in their hand, like a CD," said Maggie. "Although I shouldn't stereotype. I mean, there's Emily going online and meeting a man. She just doesn't seem the type."

"Well, no one's too old for love."

"True," said Maggie.

There was silence for a few moments after that, but then Douglas was asking the waitress for more iced tea for both of them and the conversation got back onto a safe topic, food.

Douglas remarked that he'd like to eat more home-cooked

meals and move away from the frozen ones. Maggie didn't have time to worry that he might be thinking of any domestic arrangements with her in mind because he immediately began talking about buying himself a cookbook and trying out some recipes.

"The library is a great place to get cookbooks," said Maggie. "We have whole shelves of them."

"That's a good idea," said Douglas, thoughtfully. "I could take out a few and see which one I like best. My mom's only cookbook was *The Joy of Cooking*. But I think I'd want something a little simpler to start with."

"I noticed a cookbook called *Four Ingredient Recipes*," Maggie offered. She had seen it when she was helping the woman look for a pioneer cookbook.

"That sounds about my level," said Douglas. "I'll have to stop by and check it out."

"I could take it out for you," said Maggie. "I'm sure the Keswick branch has a copy, but I'd be happy to save you the trip and just bring you the Sutton copy."

"Even better," said Douglas.

There, she'd done it again. Another excuse to go over to his place.

Douglas was still hungry after the chicken, so the meal was prolonged with a piece of apple pie for him and a coffee for her. She asked him some questions about his mother, since she had come up a few times.

Douglas's mother didn't visit him often, but when she did, she came loaded down with provisions.

"She seems to think that I live in some outpost where only the basics are obtainable. I'll have to have you over for tea sometime right after she's visited me. She comes with a huge box full of English cookies – gingersnaps, Cadbury chocolate fingers, custard creams, lemon puffs, digestive biscuits. I don't tell her that there's a store in Newmarket that sells the very same brand items. I mean, even the grocery stores up here have things that are similar."

"I wouldn't mind a mom like that," said Maggie, smiling. Her mom had a philosophy that a woman should be able to make it on her own. But the philosophy had come about as a result of her husband leaving her at the same time that Maggie had left for

Bible college. Somehow, her parents had kept their marriage problems to themselves, although Maggie knew they had always been distant. It hadn't been easy, knowing her mother was in grief while she was more than two hours away, but her mother had insisted she pursue her studies, get a good education and make it in life without a man. It was an outlook that Maggie had never really been able to make her own.

"She also comes with a lot of advice," said Douglas. "I don't have to tell you that she'd love to redo my living room. Last time she brought up a vase and a whole bouquet of flowers to put in them. The flowers died and the vase ended up on a shelf."

"You don't like flowers?" said Maggie, teasingly.

"Oh, I love flowers," said Douglas. "As much as any man, anyhow. But I'm not going to maintain an arrangement in my living room."

Maggie laughed.

"She doesn't like my moose and polar bear mugs either," Douglas continued. "If she had it her way, I'd be dining off of Queen Anne fine china."

"She sounds very . . ."

"Persistent," Douglas interrupted. "The word is persistent. She'll bring another bouquet next time she comes and she'll get down the vase and arrange it all just so."

"That's not so bad," said Maggie.

"Then I'll bring it over for you to appreciate," said Douglas. He grinned. "Just don't tell Mom."

Maggie started opening her purse when the bill arrived, but Douglas reached into a pocket for his wallet and said, "This one's on me."

"Thanks, Douglas," she said.

"No problem," he said. "It's not every day I get to take someone on a full tour of all the historical places that I love."

He put enough money down to cover the dinner and the tip and they stood up.

"How's that book coming along?" she asked him.

"Slow," he said, as they headed out. The restaurant was no longer empty. Tables were filling up with the early dinner crowd. "I like to get all my facts straight in my mind before I start writing. I have a whole folder full of notes that need to be sorted out. And with all the online research a person can do now,

well . . .” He shook his head as he pushed open the glass door for her. “There's a lot of information.”

“I can imagine,” she said. She almost started telling him about the two books she was reading, but then stopped. No need to generate more intimacy by letting him know she was reading up on his interests.

Instead, the conversation on the ride home was about the cats. Douglas said that they would be happy to see her. She replied that they would be happy to see the bowl of cat food that she would put out for them. He agreed that a cat's love was fickle, but that they were still splendid beasts.

In fact, the splendid beasts were running around on her front lawn when they pulled into the driveway. When they saw that it was Maggie in the passenger's seat, they all hurried over to the empty cat food bowl by their home.

Douglas laughed as they got out of the car.

“Your children want you,” he said.

Chapter Eleven

The first thing Maggie did when she went into work the next day was to go over to the cookbook section and pull *Four Ingredient Recipes* off the shelf. The second thing she did was check her email.

She had another message.

Her new friend had a lot to say. He said he hoped she'd enjoyed a peaceful Sunday of faith and fellowship.

He told her that he attended an active church of about five-hundred people. The building, however, was small and they had had to divide the group into two services. He said it was hard at first, because everyone was used to seeing the same people every week and didn't want to lose friends. But the whole thing had actually worked out for the best since he had ended up getting to know people he would have never met otherwise.

Glancing at her watch and seeing that it was already one, Maggie decided she'd have to compose a reply later.

The front desk didn't need help today, so she concentrated on the work that Brad had left on her desk. He had put her in charge of the monthly book club. It had been handled by the previous Assistant Librarian and basically consisted of a two-hour meeting

on every last Thursday of the month, from 7:00 until closing. The participants could choose from several different books, but they all had a similar theme. They were usually novels, but occasionally, a well-written work of nonfiction was discussed. The theme this month was India. As the person who presided over the meeting, Maggie would have to read all four books to be prepared. Brad assured her on a sticky note that she could use work-time to do it, if she had to.

He had left three of the books on her desk, but Maggie couldn't find the fourth one.

Maggie looked all over but couldn't see it. She had the title of all four books, but the fourth one didn't seem to be anywhere in her office. She stood up. Maybe there was a copy out on the shelves, although, she hesitated to take a copy that a patron might need for the upcoming meeting.

But there was no copy of the novel on the shelves.

Seeing Brad down an aisle, assisting someone, she decided to wait and ask him.

Moving closer, she could hear the older woman speaking.

"It's a growing church, Brad," she said. "It's the best place to be right now. We're healing and we're learning to let go of the past."

"Well, I can't really say I was especially traumatized by the whole thing," said Brad dryly. But the woman didn't seem to hear him.

"It's a growing church," she repeated. "The Baptists aren't that much different from the Community church. To be honest, I don't really know what they believe in. Baptism, I suppose."

Brad listened patiently.

"And it's growing," the woman added, just in case Brad hadn't got it.

"It's not really growing," said Brad. "It's just because of what happened with the youth pastor. A lot of the Keswick Community people decided to go there instead, once that all came out."

Ah, this was about Sandy.

The lady thought about what Brad said.

"Yes, I guess you can't really call it growing if it's just people moving around from one place to the other," she conceded. "But we would still love to have you there."

Brad shook his head.

"My place is with Keswick Community. But it was good to see you, Verna," he added.

"Now, Brad," said the lady, starting to move away. "Don't be a stranger. Come and visit us sometime, OK?"

Brad nodded, but it was more of an acknowledging nod than a commitment.

"Sorry," said Maggie, as she approached Brad. "But I just needed to know where . . ." She consulted the paper in her hand and read the title of the fourth book. ". . . is," she finished.

"Oh, that's right," said Brad, starting to walk in the direction of the front desk. "I was reading it myself. It's still in my office."

"That's OK," said Maggie. "You can hold onto it. That'll be the fourth one I read."

Brad nodded.

"I'll finish it off tonight and leave it on your desk tomorrow."

Maggie returned to her office.

Once again, she wished she could be like Brad. Content with his job, his church and a good book to read at night.

There were no lights on in Douglas's living room when she pulled into her driveway. She decided to hold onto the cookbook until daytime.

After a dinner of salad and canned ravioli, she turned her attention to her own book.

The first book about India was set shortly after the Raj, the rule of India by the British. Like Brad, Maggie had brought a book home with her to read.

The books about Lake Simcoe were temporarily put to the side on her bedside table. This new book was the story of a British officer and his wife who decided to stay on after the rest of the British left India. They had a chance to see what the Indians truly thought of the British. For a moment, it reminded Maggie of Bouchier and his attempt to make a successful life in India. It was amazing how history was all interconnected.

What made this story encouraging was the way the Indians could separate their rage at being ruled by outsiders from the individuals who were there staying in the same boarding house. Even though he had been part of the British establishment, they had accepted the former officer for who he was now, an older

gentleman with family concerns and health problems.

It was a good distraction for her, a far-away world, and a coming to terms with the fact that life didn't always turn out the way one hoped or expected.

"Resilience! Resilience! Resilience!" she told herself, quoting the main character in the book. That was pretty much the same as Christian perseverance. Yet the main character had practised resilience on behalf of the British Empire. And the Empire had let him down by pulling out of India. How much better to practise perseverance for a kingdom that had no end!

She was cheerful the next day.

Douglas or no Douglas, she had a full life. She had faith. If she ever shared her faith with him, it wouldn't be for the sake of converting him so they could be a couple, it would be so that he could share the same kingdom as her, one that didn't crumble like the British Empire had. His mother tried to recreate it by bringing him the English biscuits, but the truth was, Canada had very little to do with England anymore. Keswick itself was proof that kingdoms rise and kingdoms fall, but only one kingdom lasts.

As she left for work, Douglas was out on his deck, dropping something into his recycling bin.

"Not a pop can, I hope!" she called out.

He shook his head and grinned.

"Can of salmon," he called back. "I'll share my leftovers with your cats, I promise!"

And with a wave, he went back into his house.

What a considerate man, she thought, getting into the car. She'd have to start thinking of him as just a person and forget about the fact that he happened to be attractive and eligible. It occurred to her that she had forgotten to give him the cookbook.

When she got to work, the fourth book was waiting on her desk. It was thick. Brad was obviously an avid reader. She wouldn't read it on work time. She had enough hours at home that needed filling. These books were a Godsend to keep her mind off of Douglas.

And there was another email.

Still no mention of getting together, though. But it was an upbeat message wishing her a great day and asking her what she typically did with her days. She still had five minutes before her

official start time so she quickly typed in that she was busy with work and when she had time, she liked to read. Some of it was work-related but the most recent book she had read, secular though it was, was inspiring and she commented on how awesome God was, that he could communicate to her in so many different ways. She wished him a great day right back and then clicked "send."

She was fifteen minutes into her shift when Brad appeared in the doorway of her office.

"I have been commanded by Emily to bring you to dinner tonight," he announced solemnly.

"What?" she said, looking up from the library catalogue she was browsing.

He nodded.

"She wants our thoughts on Tim."

"Well," said Maggie. "I have an hour for dinner . . ."

"Is the desk covered for the whole evening?"

Maggie nodded. Two older ladies were on the desk until closing.

"Good," said Brad. "Then it won't be critical if you're a bit late getting back. I told her we'd leave here at five. Is that OK?"

"That's fine," said Maggie.

Having delivered his message, Brad returned to his office and Maggie didn't see him until five when she was heading out herself. She followed him in her car for the twenty-minute drive.

They both parked in the visitor's parking. As they walked toward the front doors, Brad asked, "So what's your verdict?"

Maggie grinned.

"Tim? He's tall, he's handsome, what more could a woman want?"

Brad shook his head.

"You women," he said, almost smiling. "I have the advantage though, in that I got to know him a bit better. He's made of solid stuff. Not radical in his theology. Exhibiting the basic fruits of the spirit. He doesn't even have a problem with that oversized fur ball called Albert who she seems to love so much."

Maggie laughed.

"Then Emily's got herself a good man."

Emily greeted them both with a hug.

"Come in, come in," she said, waving them into the small

apartment. "Now I know Maggie doesn't have much time so I have dinner waiting."

Emily had a plate of sandwiches already on the end table and some soup in a pot on the stove. Brad asked a blessing on the meal and then Maggie carried the bowls of vegetable soup into the living room.

"Well, my dears," said Emily, her eyes sparkling. "I want to hear your honest opinion of Tim."

Maggie glanced at Brad.

"We think you have a good man," she said to Emily.

"Really?" said Emily, pleased. "I was hoping I wasn't just blinded by love. Yes, he is pretty special, isn't he?"

Brad reached for a sandwich.

"He's getting a prize too, you know."

"Oh Brad," said Emily blushing.

It was delightful to see her like this and to know that love was possible at any point in one's life.

Once it was established that Tim was the right man for Emily, the conversation turned to Brad's encounter with Verna in the library.

"Yes," said Emily. "I lost at least three close friends to the Baptists. Not that it's *losing* them, really. But I just don't see them as often. And now they go to the Baptist Bible study and all the Baptist activities."

"About how many people went to the Baptist church after, er, Sandy?" asked Maggie.

Brad added another sandwich to his plate.

"Maybe a third. What do you think, Em?"

Emily nodded.

"Yes, at least a third."

"That's a lot!" said Maggie.

"It is," said Emily. "And it's been hard on our pastor. He's the same man and yet he's lost a third of the membership. I almost said, a third of his flock, but I've come to see through all of this that we only have one Shepherd and he doesn't fail us."

"It's an important lesson," Brad agreed. "I stayed with Keswick Community because I think we're going to be a stronger church because of this. We're learning to put our faith in God, not in any person."

That was a lesson Maggie could take to heart. She stirred her

soup to cool it down. Even with a man in her life, God was the only one who was faithful enough to be trusted at all times.

"But the more spirit-led we are, the more we'll be like God," she blurted out.

Brad nodded.

"Well, there's the key, isn't it?"

"The pleasures of the flesh have such a hold on us though, don't they?" said Emily. Coming from the white-haired, delicate-looking woman on the couch, it almost made Maggie smile. But the idea itself was sobering.

Maggie glanced at her watch. She only had twenty-five minutes before she had to be back at work.

Though Emily had some biscuits and tea, she asked if she could take a rain cheque on dessert.

"Of course, dear," said Emily. "You're welcome any time. And I'm going to ply Brad with biscuits until he tells me everything he knows about Tim."

Brad shook his head, but it was good-natured. He wished Maggie a good evening and said he'd see her tomorrow. Emily walked Maggie to the front door and Maggie leaned down to give her a kiss on the cheek.

"I'm so happy about you and Tim," she said. "When do you see him next?"

Emily's eyes were bright.

"I know it may seem foolish and that we're moving too fast, but he's in the process of finding a buyer for his house in Tobermory. He's going to move here and we're going to get to know each other a little bit better. At our age, we really don't want to wait."

"I understand," said Maggie. "And when you've found a good man, you certainly don't want to let him go!"

When she arrived home that night, Douglas's lights were still on. She decided the first thing to do would be to get that cookbook and bring it over to him. The upside of being a little late getting it to him was that she had the power to renew it.

Retrieving the book from her home, she hurried across the driveway, wanting to catch him before he went to bed.

It took a minute for him to come to his door and when he did, he was in a t-shirt and pyjama bottoms and had a toothbrush in

his one hand.

"I'm so sorry," she said blushing. "I just thought I should bring this over." She handed him the book.

He groaned.

"I should have had this tonight," he said. "I attempted to make a shepherd's pie. It was awful. Mom used to make it. I should have swallowed my pride and called her to find out how she seasoned it. I think that's where I screwed up."

"Mashed potatoes without seasoning don't taste very good," said Maggie.

"I found that out the hard way," said Douglas. "And she did the beef part in some kind of gravy. Oh well. I hope you don't mind, I fed it to your cats and they loved it."

She laughed.

"I'll bet they did. They're willing to eat anything. I accidentally bought a can of dog food and they all gobbled that down."

"Anyway, thanks!" he said, holding up the book. "I will use it. And if anything turns out, I'll invite you over for dinner sometime."

That hadn't been her plan, but, oh well. If it happened, she'd be gracious about it.

They wished each other a good night and Maggie returned to her property.

After Douglas's shepherd's pie, the cats didn't seem too interested in her offering of Tuna Delight cat food. But she left it for them in case they needed a midnight snack.

Going back inside, she made her own dinner. Macaroni and cheese with some frozen peas tossed in for the sake of extra nutrients. She brought the plate into the living room, got comfortable on the couch and finished the India novel while she was eating.

It wasn't exactly a happy ending. The captain had an opportunity to rethink his colonial attitude toward the Indians and to realize that most of his life had been based on prejudice and vain ambition. He came to the end of his life a better man, but not necessarily, a satisfied one.

In fact, the only character who came out of it all OK was Rajjie, a young Indian boy who had never known British occupation and didn't share the bitterness of his elders and was optimistic for the future of India.

Maggie put the book down and yawned. It was now close to one o'clock. Although well written, the second half of the book didn't offer any hope for her personally and the greatest point the author seemed to want to put forth was that people should be able to rule themselves.

Her faith told her the opposite.

People, left to themselves, made messes of their lives. That was probably the biggest argument against getting involved with Douglas. If he didn't want anything to do with Christianity, then he wouldn't want to live by the rules Maggie lived by. Down the road, it would be a mess.

Maggie grabbed a notepad. This was giving her some ideas for discussion at the book club meeting. The British had brought their Christian faith to India and the book had touched on the idea that it was repugnant to the Indians because they regarded it as a colonial religion.

The British, by being overseers, had failed miserably in conveying their faith to the Indians. The irony was that the everyday life of the Indian during the Raj was similar to the everyday life of the Jew in first-century Palestine. But how could the British tell people about a Saviour who washed his disciples' feet unless they were willing to do it themselves?

Maggie hoped it didn't sound too much like a sermon, but it would be nice if she could find a way to include her faith in the discussion.

As she was drifting off to sleep, she thought it might also be a good idea to share her thoughts with her new online friend and get his feedback.

Chapter Twelve

Maggie deliberately arrived at work early to check her email.

The notepad with her thoughts from last night was in her purse. She fired up her computer and sat down to compose what she hoped was a thought-provoking email.

He had sent her a message.

He said that like her, he enjoyed reading but work kept him busy. One thing that interested him though was missions. It was talked a lot about at his church and while he was still single, it was something he wanted to learn more about.

That was a good starting place for her own thoughts. She said she wanted to bounce some ideas off of him, in light of an upcoming book club meeting she would be attending. It wasn't a Christian meeting, but she could definitely see a place for a discussion of Christian faith. Referring to her notebook, she typed in all the ideas she had had the night before.

In the meantime, she would have to read the other three books and see if they offered similar possibilities for discussion.

Noting that it was almost one o'clock, she quickly signed off and clicked "send."

She had work to do on the computer and was surprised when about twenty minutes later, the mail icon in the corner of her screen started flashing.

He had replied right away.

It was tempting to read the message right then, but she decided to save it for her dinner break rather than feel guilty for using work time to read personal messages.

Today she was going through the online records to determine how often books were being taken out. A book that hadn't been checked out for a ridiculously long period of time, say anywhere between five and ten years, would become a candidate for the discard cart. The only exception would be the large coffee-table style books that were often read by patrons in the library, but were rarely checked out. After she had a list of books that received little attention from patrons, she would have to go out to the shelves themselves and make a list of the books that were at the other end of scale, the ones that were coming apart at the spine because they got checked out so often. Both of these lists would be used to determine the best way to use their book budget, what new resources to purchase.

It was a time-consuming job and one that would last for several weeks.

It made the time go quickly and soon it was her dinner break.

The message supported her plans to find ways to share her faith with the book club. At the same time, her email friend warned her that some people were hostile to the gospel – Maggie thought of Douglas – and to keep the topics brought up in the discussion connected with the books.

She appreciated his frankness. It was good advice and she told him so in the reply. She asked him if he ever shared his faith and if so, what were some of his experiences? The question was really more to get to know him. That was the challenge – using this to really learn more about him. He seemed to want to take it slow and when she really thought about it, she didn't have a problem with that. Now was a good time to do it, before they met in person.

The advantage they had now was that they weren't distracted by each other's looks.

With Robbie, she had done very little evaluating of his thoughts and opinions. With his tendency to get emotional when

speaking, she was usually too busy taking in how he said something, than what he actually said. Everyone liked Robbie for his assurance, his confidence. But in the end, Maggie knew very little about his faith.

With Douglas, she knew he was charming and interesting and even, sensitive when it came to things like cats. But without a shared faith, she knew the relationship would hit a wall.

So she would concentrate her efforts on getting to know Christopher and finding out as much as she could about his faith and his plans for the future.

Before leaving that day, Brad came in with an exciting new challenge.

"How would you like to handle the book blog?" he asked.

The library's web page had a book blog about some of the newest additions to the library.

"I'd love to!" she said. "Any excuse to read!"

Brad nodded.

"I know what you mean," he said. "And I've been filling in to keep it up-to-date. But I have too much on my plate at the moment. I don't mind making the odd contribution. But I would appreciate it if you were the main person keeping it up."

He put a piece of paper on her desk that gave her all the information she needed to login to access the blog.

"Any guidelines?" she asked.

"Nope," he said, already heading for the door. "Just keep it current. It's OK to review an occasional classic, but what we really want to push are the latest additions, especially the ebooks."

She nodded.

"I'll get on that right away."

"Thanks," said Brad. "I really appreciate it."

When he had gone, Maggie looked down at the information sheet. This would definitely keep her mind too busy to think about Douglas. She went online, to the library's home page and clicked the blog icon. Brad had posted an entry today about a new biography about Prime Minister Stephen Harper. She browsed the earlier postings and noticed that for the most part, they were upbeat and presented the books in a positive light. Well, that made sense. Why be critical of a book that you wanted people to check out?

It made sense to blog about the ebooks. The people who went

to the website were probably also the people who took out ebooks for their electronic readers.

It was unfortunate that neither of the books about Lake Simcoe were available in ebook format yet.

Thinking of her discussion with Christopher, she selected a book about multiculturalism in Canada. It included a chapter about the increasing number of different faiths that were practised in Canada and how it was changing the landscape both literally with the new temples and mosques being erected, as well as the effect it had on politics and culture.

Maggie knew from personal experience that Toronto was more effected than Keswick by the issues brought up in the book, but that didn't mean that it wasn't worth knowing more about and understanding. Affordable housing continued to be the reason why people moved farther north and Keswick was one of the many growing communities that benefitted as a result.

Logging in, she checked out the ebook and was soon immersed in the familiar world that she and Robbie had shared. The church they had attended and the friends they had shared were as multicultural as the city they had lived in. But now she was reading about it with different eyes. When she was a part of it, she had only seen it through the perspective of her own life and relationship. Whether or not Robbie would make a commitment had been too much of a preoccupation for her to appreciate the other opportunities she had had. Opportunities to experience other cultures and even other faiths.

The book demonstrated that what had previously been minority religions were now rapidly outpacing Christianity in growth. Even without evangelism, other faiths seemed to be offering people the spiritual fulfillment they were looking for.

As Maggie continued to read the ebook, she was struck by a sense of her own responsibility in it all.

When newcomers had arrived at Toronto Community, she had welcomed them, but in a casual way. Her mind wasn't on their needs, but on where she and Robbie and their friends would be going for dinner that night. People who had come with genuine needs would not have found her much help. The whole gang she had hung out with had been as preoccupied with their own relationships and careers as anyone in the world. How could they pretend they had something better to offer to the world?

It was a sobering thought.

Maggie looked at her watch. It was closing time in ten minutes. She rubbed her eyes. She had been reading the whole time since Brad had left.

Of course, she had no computer at home, so reading ebooks and writing the blog would all have to be done on work time. But, at the moment, it felt personal, as if she had opened her Bible to a list of sins and found her own transgressions right there in black and white.

She pushed back her chair and stood up. It was time to go around the library and tell any lingering patrons that they would be closing in five minutes.

But the last few people were already in line to check out their books and there was nothing left for Maggie to do but straighten a few chairs and shelve the occasional book that had been left out on a table. Then she was saying goodnight to the two ladies who had been on the desk and locking up.

The drive home was quiet and she couldn't stop thinking about the events that had led to her leaving Toronto Community Church. At the time, it had seemed significant. An attractive girl showing up and stealing her boyfriend. At the emotional level, it had felt like life-and-death.

But at the spiritual level, what had it really mattered?

Nothing, she decided.

In hindsight, Robbie wasn't the man for her. He wasn't even the man for Sasha.

So while the three of them had been living out their little emotional drama, people had been coming – and going – from Toronto Community, not finding the fellowship that would have kept them there and kept them strong in their faith.

Other religions were providing that sense of community for people and the only way that Christians could offer more was by really living their faith, going beyond themselves and considering the needs of others to be equally as important as their own. At the time, Maggie had felt like the most injured person in the whole church. But how many other people had passed through there, nameless to Maggie, who were suffering far greater injustices in their lives? She would never know because she had always evaluated people according to their outward appearance. In fact, she would have done the same at Keswick Community if

Emily hadn't approached her and invited her to lunch.

And look at all she would have missed out on.

Maggie was shaking her head at her own stupidity as she pulled into her driveway.

Douglas's house was dark.

Good.

Let him be asleep.

Let him be *whatever*.

It didn't make a difference to her.

Getting to know Christopher online, with no idea about how he looked, was the best thing for her right now. It would help her to see a person's heart rather than to evaluate him for how he looked and how he laughed and what kind of cologne he wore – all the little distractions that kept a person from *really* knowing someone else. And she would be candid with Christopher. She would let him know what was on her mind and she wouldn't pretend to be someone else for the sake of the relationship.

If he could handle it, great. If not, well, there were plenty of other people to get to know. And she didn't mean eligible men.

As she walked up her pathway, she determined that she would meet more people at Keswick Community. People that needed a friend. People that were still hurting because of what their youth pastor and Sandy had done. People with needs. Church would no longer be a place where she went every week and sat for an hour and a half. It would be a place to go to serve God and his people.

With so much to do at work, the week passed by quickly. The blog appeared online Saturday afternoon. Then it was time to select another book and plan the next week's blog. In the meantime, books still had to be catalogued and the project of going through the least popular and the most popular books had to be finished in time for Brad to submit his annual report.

She managed to fire off a few quick emails to Christopher sharing some of her new thoughts with him. His replies were encouraging. He said he had been mulling over some of the same ideas himself, although he hadn't been able to put it into words the way she had.

Sunday morning was her first break from it all and on the drive over to church, she prayed that God would direct her to the people who really needed her.

He answered her right away. She pulled into a parking spot, beside a mother unloading her young family. Two children were still in their car seats as a third struggling one was being strapped into a stroller. When the children were released from their car seats, it was clear that the mother had no control over the two active boys.

Maggie managed to grab the hand of one, just as he was about to dash in front of a car.

The mother went white. Maggie didn't wait for permission. She held onto him with one hand while scooping up his equally active brother.

"Thank you, God," the woman breathed. She was just standing frozen, clutching the stroller.

"Here, let me help you guys inside," said Maggie. She kept a firm grip on the two children while the mother pulled a diaper bag out of the car to put in the basket below the stroller.

"My husband is away this weekend," said the woman. "He usually keeps the boys in line."

"I understand," said Maggie, smiling, as they all walked to the front door together. "Would you like me to sit with you during the service?"

"God bless you!" said the woman. "But my sister will be here. She's pretty tough. She handles sheep all week and knows how to handle these guys."

The woman thanked Maggie two times as they parted in the sanctuary.

Tim wasn't here this week, but Emily was talking to any older lady so Maggie took a seat in a nearby pew.

"Excellent blog," said Brad, passing by.

"Thanks," she said, pleased that he liked it. His posts had been insightful and she had been concerned that he would be a hard act to follow.

There was an older man sitting in the pew behind Maggie. With at least five more minutes until the service started, Maggie turned around and introduced herself.

The man looked surprised but he returned the handshake and replied in a soft voice that his name was Bemidii. Recalling what Douglas had told her, she said, "That's an interesting name. Is it Ojibwa?"

He looked pleased and nodded.

"It means, river by a lake."

"Makes sense," said Maggie, nodding and thinking about all the rivers that ran into Lake Simcoe. She strained for something to say and came up with, "The lake is beautiful." It sounded banal, but Bemidii appreciated the comment.

"The lake *is* beautiful," he agreed. They smiled at each other and as the praise-and-worship team started in on the first song, she turned around, considering the encounter a success.

Now that Maggie knew about the recent events at the church, the main message made more sense. The pastor talked about forgiveness, even when reconciliation wasn't possible. Forgiveness was part of the Christian faith and without it, we wouldn't be forgiven of our own sins. Forgiveness was required even if the guilty party did not request it.

Maggie had her own forgiving to do. As she listened to the sermon she realized she may have forgiven Robbie and Sasha, but she had to forgive her own mother and father for not being able to make their marriage work. It was easy to look at both of them and see that if only they had been accommodating to each other's needs, they would still be together. And if they had stayed together, Maggie wouldn't have been under so much pressure to make it on her own.

But God had been a parent to her, even when she had been on the edge of starvation. He had provided her with what she needed every day. And maybe that was the key to forgiveness. Whatever shortcomings people had, God could make up for it.

Because of having to be at work for 1:00, after the service, Maggie only had time for a quick smile to Bemidii and a passing kiss on the cheek for Emily. Lunch on Sundays was a coffee and a sandwich to go from Country Style in the same small plaza that had the Swiss Chalet that she and Douglas had eaten at. Life was too busy now to think much about it.

In her evenings, she had managed to make it through the second book about India. This one was a modern love story, between an Indian man and a Pakistani woman. Again, religion was a theme. The man was Hindu and the woman was Muslim. Was love enough to transcend religious differences? According to this story . . . it was. But even in the story itself, one could read between the lines that the two worldviews would come into conflict at some point. There was a lot of room for potential

discussion.

She was starting to see that the world was full of possibilities when it came to sharing her faith with people. She had just been too focused on herself to see it.

Everything she had been reading had brought her to see the issue of her faith as consisting of two levels.

The first level, and the foundational one, was that the church had to be strong. Maggie had to reach out to her fellow Christians. Incidents like what happened with Sandy and the youth pastor weakened people's faith only because they were not experiencing the fullness of the church's ability to strengthen one another.

The second level was sharing her faith with people outside the church. This wouldn't be effective unless she was willing to also continue to involve herself with them if they actually started coming to church.

And all that took time.

Time that in the past, Maggie would have devoted to her boyfriend.

With ten minutes before the library opened, Maggie hurriedly turned on her computer. Yes, Christopher had replied. He wished her a blessed Sunday and said that reading her emails was the highlight of his day.

That was flattering, but wait until she sent him this message.

She started typing rapidly.

She said she still wanted a relationship in her life, but that she was coming to see that her place in the church meant that she had to reach out to others, not only in the church itself, but in the community too. Since that all took time, she could only consider a relationship with a like-minded person, a man who wanted to serve the church and serve the community, rather than just focus on the relationship.

Hoping her message was coherent enough to make the point, she glanced at her watch - one o'clock, time to open - and clicked "send."

With the Sunday shift being short, only one other lady was with her on the front desk. A couple of high school students were also in to re-shelve books.

The patrons of the library didn't seem to need her help, so Maggie was hoping she could start on the third India novel while

she shared the front desk.

But the other lady, Phyllis, seemed to want to talk.

At first, Maggie nodded politely and then returned to her book. And then it occurred to her, this was unusual for Phyllis. Maybe today she needed someone to talk to. Maggie tucked the book under the counter and focused her attention on Phyllis.

The older woman rambled at first. She talked a bit about teenagers and their tastes and how different things were. Maggie nodded, only glancing away occasionally to ensure that all was well in the library. And then Phyllis got to the point.

It was her granddaughter.

She was eighteen – and pregnant. Phyllis's daughter hadn't been able to spend much time with her granddaughter since the divorce, she explained. Maggie nodded. Divorce was something she was familiar with.

But Phyllis was worried.

How could an 18-year-old, barely out of high school, look after a baby?

Maggie had no answer, but Phyllis didn't seem to expect that Maggie would. Just being able to talk was visibly reducing her load.

"I apologize for bringing my personal life to work . . ."

Maggie waved away the apology.

"We all have lives," she said. "There's no reason to come to work and pretend we don't."

Phyllis looked grateful.

"I shouldn't say this," she said. "But I could never have talked to Anne this way."

Maggie gathered that Anne was the previous Assistant Librarian.

A young father with one son in a stroller and one son clutching a large book about trucks came to the front desk to check out the book and some DVDs. Phyllis, now smiling, took the library card and checked out their items for them.

Maggie was even able to do some reading when Phyllis got up to help another older lady look for some books about craft projects.

The third book about India was nonfiction. It was a personal journey taken by a young man of Indian descent who had grown up in Toronto. He contrasted the expatriate culture in Canada

with the authentic culture he encountered in India. Religion played very little part in his upbringing in Canada and he was surprised at the importance it had in India. But mostly the book was a light-hearted comparison of the two countries. It was amusing reading and Maggie expected that a lot of the book club members would choose this one as their selection to read.

She had been saving the fourth book for the final read.

It was the longest one and promised to be the most intense. It had an epic quality to it, incorporating Hindu mythology with present day events in India, following the fortunes and misfortunes of a family from the days of the first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, to the current Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh.

The book club meeting was next Thursday evening, so she was looking at using her day off tomorrow to read, as well as every evening, if necessary. And that didn't include the ebook she would have to read at work and blog about.

Maggie smiled ruefully to herself. If she didn't keep it all straight, she'd be blogging about India and discussing multiculturalism at the book club meeting.

Before locking up the library, she checked her email one more time. No message from Christopher. Oh well. She wouldn't be back until Tuesday, so she'd just have to wait for his reaction to her message.

Chapter Thirteen

It was late afternoon, on Monday, and Maggie was sitting out on her deck, the kittens playing around her feet. After taking Emily grocery shopping, they had stopped off at Stretch, the thrift store, and Maggie had bought two plastic chairs for \$5. Then she had returned home to spend the rest of the day reading in one of them.

Keeping all the names straight in the fourth novel was going to be impossible. It wasn't just the abundance of names in the one family, or the political leaders associated with their time period, it was also all the names of the Hindu gods and goddesses.

Maggie suspected that if she had the time to research each name, she would discover that the author was tying in the various gods and goddesses with the personalities of his characters. But, alas, time was limited.

Maggie comforted herself that she was only a moderator. She wasn't expected to be the resident expert. She would be more than willing to defer to anyone else's opinion on this book, if others had read it. The fact that Brad had been able to read it just for recreation showed how much time a person who didn't have a

family had.

Her mind wandered back to the harried-looking mother with her three small children. Did Maggie want to end up like that?

To be sure, small children were a passing phase, but at the same time, making that commitment to a husband and a family drastically limited one's opportunities to serve the church.

It was something to think about now and not when she was in the middle of it.

"Hey neighbour!" a voice called out.

Douglas.

She returned the wave.

She wasn't out on her deck in the hope of seeing him. It was just that as the weather warmed up, it got stuffier in her small house. She was already thinking ahead to the hot days of summer, putting aside some money each week for an air-conditioning unit.

But then he was coming over, two glasses in his hand. He handed her one.

"Try my iced tea," he said grinning, taking the other plastic chair.

She tasted it.

"It's good!" she said. "Lemon? Right?"

He nodded.

"A quarter of a cup lemon juice. I've got the recipe memorized. Whatcha reading?"

She held up the book.

He whistled.

"Heavy reading, eh?"

She nodded.

"But I don't mind. In fact, I'm starting to see that the more we know about other cultures, the more effective we are in . . ."

She almost said, *reaching people for Christ*. But that was such a turn-off to unbelievers who didn't just want to be seen as potential converts.

". . . connecting with one another," she concluded.

Douglas nodded.

"It's good to find some common ground," he agreed.

They sipped their tea. The sun had dropped down behind the trees and the day had gotten a bit cooler. She thought how nice it would be to have someone to walk to the lake and watch the

sunset with, but she wasn't going to suggest it to Douglas.

"How's work going?" she asked, instead.

"*Comme ci, comme ça*," he said. "So-so. I've been brushing up on my French online. If I *ever* have a chance to take a real vacation . . ." He groaned slightly and took another swig of tea. "I'm thinking of checking out Quebec City."

"I take it you're busy?" she said.

He nodded.

"This is my first break all day. I even skipped lunch. We have a deadline on Friday."

"You sound as busy as me," she said.

"It comes and goes," he said. "It's a matter of making the deadlines. Once it passes, things ease up a bit."

She nodded.

"Sometimes it can be hard to balance it all," she said. "I don't know how people do it with work and family and all that . . ."

Her voice dwindled. She didn't want to make the conversation too personal.

"I know what you mean," said Douglas. "I've been thinking about that. Priorities. I mean, I wouldn't want to have a family unless I could spend time with them."

It was startling, but after a moment or two of thought, she said truthfully, "I agree."

In the past, the statement would have been disturbing. It would have suggested to her that Douglas was too selfish to commit to a family. But with the way she was thinking these days, it sounded more like wisdom than selfishness.

They sipped the tea and Douglas asked about the cats. After some intense play, they had all curled up in the shade of the cat home and fallen asleep.

"They're the ideal pets," said Maggie, smiling down at them. "They mostly take care of themselves."

Douglas agreed that that was the upside of feral cats.

When the tea was done, Douglas returned to his house, bemoaning the fact that he had at least two more hours of work before he could call it a day.

Grinning, Maggie returned to her book.

In the remaining light, Maggie finished a chapter before going inside to make herself a dinner. The house was warm despite all the windows being open. She didn't want to use the oven and add

to the heat, so she opened a bagged salad and added some croutons and some bacon bits.

She wondered if Douglas was finding the time to try out some of his four-ingredient recipes. Probably not.

She wouldn't even bother to ask for it back. She would just automatically renew it for him.

Brad stopped by her office when she arrived at work the next day.

"Ready for the book club meeting this week?" he asked with a small smile.

"Almost," she said. "Just making it through the last one."

He nodded.

"That one is a doozy. I read it because a friend recommended it, but I might not have chosen it on my own."

"It *is* well-written," said Maggie. "But I think one would have to have an understanding of the Hindu religion to fully appreciate it."

Brad agreed.

"I doubt you'll find too many such experts up here. In fact, I predict there will only be one or two people who have chosen to read that particular book. Still, I like there to be a mix of books."

"Well, everyone will be able to bring something to the discussion, I'm sure," said Maggie.

Brad nodded and then seemed to evaporate.

In addition to all her other responsibilities, she would have to select an ebook to read. Maggie turned on her computer. At the same time, she could check her email.

There was a message from Christopher. She resisted the urge to read it right away. There would be time enough on her dinner break.

Her ebook choice for the book blog was easy. She selected a book that had just come in, *Heaven is for Real*, an account of the life-after-death experience of a four-year-old boy in Nebraska. Not only was there a long waiting list for the hardback copy of the book, it was on the *Globe and Mail's* bestseller's list. The *Globe and Mail* was a prominent Toronto newspaper.

She only intended to read the first few pages, but got so into the story that she ended up on page 50 before looking up from the screen.

No matter, she thought, looking at her watch. It had to be done on work time anyhow. The next two hours were spent out browsing the shelves for books that were falling apart.

Then it was back to her office for a coffee and a sandwich . . . and a chance to read Christopher's reply.

He was as frank as she had been.

He said that when he had signed up with the Christian dating service, he hadn't been thinking about much more than getting to know someone. But now he was rethinking everything – his commitment to his faith, his past relationships – and seeing it all in a different light. He agreed with her that the Christian life was a call to serve. Maybe that call to serve even precluded all the efforts people made to meet a partner. But that comment had come with a happy face icon at the end of it. But he agreed, if a person was going to commit his or her life to one of service to Christ and his church, the best thing to do would be to be upfront about it and only get together with someone of equal mind.

"I think that while there are plenty of areas that a person can serve God alone in, there are equally as many areas where a couple can serve God in, maybe even in ways that a single person couldn't. I dunno. I'm still working it all out. Thanks for opening my mind up to the possibilities." He signed off.

Maggie hit "reply" and then leaned back in her chair.

It was hard to know what to say. It was almost unclear as to whether he wanted to continue with the online relationship, but if the whole thing came to an end, she didn't want it to be on her end.

She took a sip of coffee and strained her brain for inspiration. Giving up, she decided to pray instead.

"Oh Father, you know Christopher. You know what he needs in his life. You know what I need. If we need to stay connected, help us to know what to say to each other and even if we're not meant to be together, direct our steps in ways that we can serve you."

She took a deep breath. Now she felt better. It was no use talking to Christopher *about* God if she didn't talk *to* God.

Quickly she started typing.

"Thanks for taking my thoughts seriously. To be quite honest, it's easier to share ideas this way than it would be to talk in

person. I thought I took my faith seriously, but in the last few months, I've come to see that not only does God provide for my physical needs, he's actually more concerned about my spiritual needs and the needs of his people.

I go to a church with a lot of young families, and as much as part of me wants to have that, another part of me thinks that maybe there's something different. Almost a higher way to serve Him. I hope that doesn't sound obnoxious, like I think myself better than the people sitting in the pews with children, because I don't. To be honest, I wouldn't have chosen this path for myself. I was planning to get married, have a house and someday, have children. Well, I have the house, but that's about it.

'And the amazing thing is, God's been meeting my needs through work and through his church. But I also want to take it to a higher level and stop thinking me!-me!-me! There are a lot of lonely people, not looking for love as much as they're looking for Christian fellowship. Not just the casual kind, but the sustaining kind. I know if I were a mother of three, say, I would be so focused on my family, I wouldn't be there for the people on the fringes, if you know what I mean.'

It was a bit of a ramble, but if he could handle it, then she was willing to carry on with this online relationship. Reading it over to make sure there weren't any obvious errors, she clicked "send."

There wasn't a reply from Christopher on Wednesday, or even on Thursday. But Maggie was too busy to think about it. She had the final few chapters of the India book to read and a blog post due for the weekend.

Late on Thursday, Brad had shown her the small room where they had their book club meetings, and told her it was expected that she would provide some tea or coffee.

"One of the ladies usually brings a plate of cookies," he said.

He handed her a sheet with the list of the four books for the next meeting, so that she could distribute copies to the group.

"All the best," he said, before leaving for the day.

At about 6:50, people started arriving.

Maggie wasn't expecting a large crowd so she wasn't disappointed to find that the meeting only attracted seven people. Better to have seven keen readers than to have a room full of indifferent ones.

Sure enough, four women had selected the light-hearted cultural comparison between Canada and India. A tall slim young man was carrying the thick epic novel with all its allusions to Hindu gods and goddesses. An older man had chosen the first book, the one about the captain and his wife who had stayed on in India after the British had departed. A woman about Maggie's age had selected the modern love story between the Indian man and the Pakistani woman.

As they all took chairs in the circle and some of the people helped themselves to tea, Maggie introduced herself. As the evening got going, she found that the meeting more-or-less ran itself.

The four women who selected the book written by the Canadian of Indian descent had the most to say. Among themselves, they discussed his most amusing observations.

In order to draw in the people who had read other books, Maggie asked each of the other people what they had enjoyed most about their selection.

The tall slim young man said that he appreciated the complexity of the novel he read. It highlighted for him the way the Indian culture could both preserve their past and go forward into the future. The older man spoke up and said that as he read his novel, he noticed that the Indians had been able to keep their culture alive despite the British rule.

The young man observed that the British usually didn't force their own culture on the natives the way the French did on their colonies. There was a digression as the young man said that in Algeria the French had attempted to exterminate the indigenous culture and replace it with their own.

Maggie turned to the young woman who had selected the romance novel and asked her what part the cultural differences played in the relationship of the main characters. The young man interrupted to point out that the Indian culture and the Pakistani culture were for the most part the same, since they had been one country before 1947. But when the British left, Pakistan had been formed as the Muslim state, while India remained predominantly Hindu. He then launched on a discussion of the "India for the Hindus" movement present today and how the novel he had selected reflected the ideals of that movement.

Maggie appreciated his contributions but wanted to get back

to the one person who hadn't commented yet. Again she asked her, what part had culture played in the relationship of the two lovers? The woman replied that she thought they had both decided to just rid themselves of their culture and create their own world.

Although the comment had been made with indifference - perhaps she didn't appreciate Maggie's efforts to solicit her thoughts - it struck Maggie as being an excellent point, and she said so out loud.

"But is it possible to sacrifice one's culture, or more importantly, one's faith, for another person?" she asked the group.

The older man spoke up first.

"No," he said. "In my book, the British remained British and the Indians remained Indian."

One of the older ladies said that the Indian Canadian had become a bridge between the two cultures, but in the end he had chosen Canadian values because that was what he was familiar with.

Everyone had something to offer to this discussion but it was the young man who seemed to get to the heart of what Maggie had been thinking.

"Anyone in the family who strays from the Hindu faith ends up in a kind of metaphorical darkness," he said. "It's their Hindu faith that directs their steps and their values. So anyone who marries into the family has to share that or else they are going to end up as a perpetual outsider."

"Good point," said Maggie. "Could the same be said for the British and their Christian faith?" Maggie turned to the older man who had read the book that touched on the colonial period.

He thought about it.

"The faith of the British was more of a way to assert their culture. In reality, it didn't resemble the principles of the Bible. The Christian religion was a comfort for the British, but they couldn't pass it onto the Indians."

"Is it possible that had they practised their faith according to the way, say, Jesus lived it, that the Indians would have responded?"

The man smiled.

"Probably. But then they wouldn't have been able to hold onto

the power they had.”

That was the closest they got to a discussion of faith, but it was enough, Maggie thought. In some ways, the conversation was more for her sake than for theirs. She needed to get used to being open about her faith and connecting with people on that level.

The rest of the evening was dominated by the four women who had a lot to say about their book. The woman who had selected the love story seemed to want to just listen. The young man was able to insert his opinion, even if nobody except Maggie was appreciating his insightfulness. The older man was working his way through the plate of oatmeal raisin cookies that one of the older women had brought.

And then it was nine o'clock. Maggie gave them all a copy of the list of books for next month and a few of the people thanked her before heading out. Maggie was left to rearrange the chairs, brush the crumbs off of the table and then head out to lock up the library for the evening.

She couldn't resist stopping by her office to check her email one more time.

No message.

Oh well. She powered down her computer, grabbed her purse and the key ring to lock the front door. If it wasn't meant to be, it wasn't meant to be.

Chapter Fourteen

The blog was easy to write now that her mind was off of the topic of India. *Heaven is for Real* was an easy and engaging book to read and offered countless possibilities for sharing her faith online. But mostly the blog was an outline of the basic events presented in the book. She hoped it was enough to entice people to check it out for themselves.

Saturday passed with no word from Christopher and when she went to church on Sunday, she focused on the people around her. Today, the young mother was doing fine. A tall sturdy-looking man was beside her, clearly keeping two active boys in line.

Bemidii was sitting beside and talking to the man who liked to kick his shoes off during the service.

Maggie joined Emily who was alone.

Immediately, she realized something was wrong.

“What is it?” she asked, taking her friend's hand.

Emily didn't speak for a moment and when she did, it was a whisper.

“It's Tim.”

“Is he OK?” asked Maggie, concerned. She could instantly imagine all sorts of scenarios. He and Emily had broken up. He

was really married. His children didn't approve of the match. He had just had a diagnosis of cancer.

"What is it?" asked Maggie, softly. The music at the front was starting. While others around them stood up to join in the praise-and-worship, they stayed seated.

"It's my whole life," said Emily.

Maggie was puzzled. She stayed quiet to let Emily elaborate.

Emily put her own hand on top of Maggie's.

"I *liked* being married," she said. "It broke my heart when Robert died. I never thought I would recover."

Maggie nodded sympathetically. Was Emily now comparing Tim to Robert?

"But, I had forgotten how time-consuming a relationship can be," continued Emily. "After Robert died, all I had was God. He saw me through every moment of pain. Every day, he was right by my side . . ."

Maggie nodded again. She could understand that.

"I didn't realize how much I cherished that relationship," said Emily. "I came to take it for granted."

Though the singing was in full swing, they continued to stay seated.

"Now I have Tim in my life and things are busy again," said Emily. "He phones me almost every night. And we have all sorts of plans . . ." Emily looked down at her lap. "But my head has been so in the clouds that I've been thinking less about God and spending less time with him."

Emily looked as if she might cry.

"I almost feel as if he's not talking to me anymore."

"Oh I'm sure that's not true!" said Maggie.

"I used to talk to God every day," Emily continued. "Like I'm talking to you. And I heard him, dear." Emily looked at Maggie. "Not out loud, but in my heart. I heard his voice. But lately, my heart has been so filled with Tim that I haven't heard from God."

Maggie was quiet. It was almost like her own struggle, but it sounded like Emily had gone even further in her walk with God than Maggie had.

"Sometimes it's just easier to love what's right in front of you," said Maggie.

"That's it exactly, dear," said Emily, looking relieved. "And I got swept up in that. But I don't want it anymore. I want to go

back to the way things were, when I could make a cup of tea and have a chat with my heavenly husband. You see, that's what God became to me after Robert died."

"Is it possible that Tim is a blessing from God?" Maggie asked. "A way of rewarding your faithfulness?"

Emily shook her head.

"No. It sounds nice. And I really enjoyed the feelings I had for him. It was like being young and in love again."

Maggie nodded, understanding.

"But now I feel the weight of the relationship," said Emily. "It takes a lot of work to make a relationship work, dear."

Again, Maggie nodded, though, Emily, with more than fifty years of marriage experience, was really the expert.

"If I decide to marry Tim," Emily said. "I'll be choosing to spend my last few years focusing my attention on him. And he's just a man."

Maggie didn't know what to say. It didn't sound too bad. But the way Emily said it, there was something better.

"It sounds as though you have a lot of thinking to do," said Maggie.

"I think I've done all my thinking," said Emily, patting her hand. "Talking to you has just made it all the more clear in my mind. Tim's a good man, but at my age, I don't need a good man."

And then Emily was quiet. She obviously still had concerns.

"Are you worried that this is going to be hard on him?" Maggie asked.

Emily nodded.

Now it was Maggie's turn to pat her on the hand.

"Don't worry, Emily. If this is from God, this whole situation will be for the best."

"I wish I hadn't been such a giddy thing and let myself be signed up for such a silly thing. Internet dating!" Emily shook her head, but at the same time, she almost smiled.

Maggie thought of her own experience, with Christopher, and wondered why she had bothered too. Didn't seem like anything would be coming out of that either. But good always came out of everything if you believed and trusted God.

Emily got to her feet and started singing. Maggie stood up and joined in. But her mind was still on the conversation. Emily had

found a man, like she said, a good man. He was attractive, he was Christian, and yet, Emily was choosing to stay unattached. Relationships were hard, but they came with all sorts of attractive perks – like companionship, connection and romance.

Maggie mused, her mind only half on the songs.

But maybe Emily had chosen to pursue the greatest romance of all.

Monday was being used to get a head start on next month's book club readings.

It was a completely different topic. The theme was Royalty. There was a historical novel set in the days of Henry V, leading up to the Battle of Agincourt. Maggie expected the older man to appreciate that. There was a contemporary work of nonfiction, all about the romance of Will and Kate. That would be for the four ladies. A love story based on real events about Victoria and Albert would probably appeal to the quiet woman her age. And finally, there was a book for the slim young man to sink his teeth into. It was about the divine nature of royalty, tracing various families back to the mythological gods and goddesses.

It was tempting to start with the light reading and spend the day with Will and Kate. But she decided to tackle the last one on the list. It turned out to be more engrossing than she had anticipated. The first part was a basic survey of one type of royalty, the kind that claimed to have the divine right to rule. The second part was a study of the genealogies of prominent Indo-European families. The author had spent years going through obscure records in monasteries and temples, looking for common ancestors among the various people groups. He had come to the conclusion that if one believed the Biblical account, the Indo-European people could be traced back to Japheth, one of Noah's sons. Along the way, he explored various corruptions of this myth, such as the creation of the gods of Olympus. His conclusion was that semi-mythological characters had replaced reverence for an early ancestor and ultimately for God himself. Maggie could see why Brad had selected the book.

But it had taken her most of the day to read it.

She stood up from the deck chair and stretched. Her backside was sore from sitting all day. What she needed was a walk to the lake to loosen up a bit.

She went inside the house to get some milk to fill up the cats' bowl and then grabbed her house key.

As she was walking down the driveway, she heard her name being called.

Turning, she saw Douglas on his deck.

"Where're you off to?" he asked, coming down the steps. Today he was wearing an orange cotton shirt, blue striped shorts and some flip flops. He looked cute, like an overgrown boy.

"Just to the lake," she said. She glanced at the sky. "I might even make it for the sunset."

"Hey! Let me come too, OK?"

What could she say?

"Sure."

She noticed that he didn't bother locking his door. Either he didn't worry about anyone breaking in or else he was just that eager to join her. Probably the first, she decided. That was the advantage of living in these old cottages.

"Did you meet your deadline?" she asked, as they walked along the side of the road. Their street didn't have a sidewalk.

"Just barely," he said. "I'm glad that's behind me. I was working eighteen hours a day at the end."

After that, she left the conversation to him.

"It's getting hot, eh?"

"Yeah. I've almost saved up enough for an air-conditioner."

"You'd better get it before next weekend. They're calling for some serious heat at the end of the week."

"Maybe I'll pick one up this week then." She could always put it on the credit card. There would be enough money for it at the end of the month.

"If you need a hand putting it in, let me know."

"Thanks," she said. "I might take you up on that."

It had occurred to her that she had never installed an air-conditioner before. And she noticed that Douglas already had a unit going in his window. It made sense if he was working from home that he would want the temperature to be comfortable.

"So what are you reading these days?" he asked.

She told him about the book she had just read about the divine nature of royalty. That kept the conversation going right down to the lake.

At the lake, the sun was low on the horizon.

The large green park area only had one family with two small children playing on the jungle gym and slide. The kids were laughing and calling out to their parents, but the lakeshore itself was quiet. As they moved closer to the lake's edge, there was only the sound of the water against the rocks. Although there were some benches, Douglas chose a large rock for them to share to watch the sun go down.

She remembered her conversation with Emily and about how it was easier to love what was right in front of you. It was hard to ignore Douglas, solid and reassuring beside her. Although they didn't say much as the sun went down, it was a shared moment when it dropped below the horizon.

They lingered on during the twilight. The young family had returned to their minivan and driven away. A few motorboats were out on the lake, but mostly it was just the water and the waves and the cool breeze after a warm day. If they had been a couple, their hands would have been intertwined and it would have been a perfect evening.

But instead, it was almost agony. At least for Maggie. Douglas seemed relaxed enough as they stood up and headed back down the quiet street. Was it possible he had no romantic interest in her and that's why he had no problem just hanging out like this?

That was probably the explanation for their whole easygoing connection. He never planned to make it anything more than a neighbourly friendship.

Well, thought Maggie, as she took a deep breath. Then she really had nothing in common with Emily's situation. Romantic love wouldn't be hers either, but in her case it would not be by choice, but by default.

It was almost unbearable to read about Prince William and Kate Middleton. Yes, they had had an on-again-off-again relationship, but in the end, they had found that they could only have true love with one another, had a fairy-tale wedding and were now living happily ever after.

Well, not happily ever after. No one really had that. Like Emily said, relationships were work.

It was Tuesday morning and she had decided, rather than mope about Douglas, she would get going on the second book.

It was all so silly anyhow. She didn't want Douglas to be

thinking there was anything between them. But somehow it seemed less painful to have to make a choice than to have never had a choice at all.

All in all, she decided, putting the book in her purse, as she headed out to work, this book could be returned. If there wasn't going to be a wedding in her future, she didn't want to spend time reading about other people's romances. Maggie was sure she could count on the four ladies to fill in the conversation about Will and Kate.

The first part of her shift was spent finishing off the survey of the shelves. Maggie now had a list of 73 books that were in the final stages of their life and 134 more that would be nearing the end of their shelf life sometime in the next year. Now all that was left was to do a quick computer check of any books that hadn't been checked out in the last five years and then weed out all the ones on the list that were likely to be read, but only in the library, due to their size. It was also to be expected that some books were used in the library while one was doing research, but not necessarily checked out.

She ended up working right through her dinner break while she sorted through the list. When it was complete, she had 84 titles that hadn't been checked out in five years, most likely because of lack of interest. They could be sent to the discard cart after Brad had a chance to peruse the list.

As an afterthought, she checked her email. It was already 9:02 and the library was locked up. But Brad had told her to check it once a day since they could expect important messages about upcoming community events, local authors, and notices from the Ontario Library Association.

Still standing, she opened her email.

By coincidence, today there was a message from a man who made a living of selling discarded library books online. He connected people with hard-to-find titles. He requested that he have a chance to go through any discards before they made them available to the general public. She forwarded the message to Brad.

Quickly, her fingers deleted several spam messages.

And then she came to the final one.

It was from Christopher.

She sat down at her chair to read it. He apologized for the

time away from his email.

He went on to say that if her previous emails had made him think a bit more deeply about his faith, this one did, but even more so. He admitted that his faith had also been about “mel-mel-mel!” Her last email challenged him to think more about what it meant to be part of the body of Christ. It wasn't just about going to church, it was about really contributing to needs and building up the body. Her thanked her and said he was going to make an effort to put these new thoughts into practise, starting with something he had been thinking about recently. Child sponsorship. It was something that had come up in his church a few weeks ago. A woman had done a presentation on behalf of a Christian organization that was looking after the children of martyrs. In Nigeria, recent riots had left many children of Christians homeless and in some cases, parentless. But there was a home that had been established to take them in, feed, clothe and educate them.

“At the time, I thought it was a bit pricy. But I thought about what you said. If you were a mother, you'd be focused on your kids. I'm not a father, so I don't have kids to focus on. But I am part of the body of Christ and there are kids in need in the church. So I need to be helping them. Now I feel stupid for being stingy about \$50 a month. If I had my own child, I'd probably spend that much on him each month just for toys.”

Christopher included a photo of the child he was now sponsoring.

He thanked her for giving him the nudge he needed and then signed off.

Again, he didn't say anything about looking forward to her reply or “write back soon” but Maggie had already decided that if this was going to wrap up, it wouldn't be on her end. This connection seemed to be working for both of them.

After a moment of prayer, she hit “reply” and started typing.

The story of Emily came out. It just happened. She didn't name any names and she didn't even mention that Emily had met Tim online, but she said her closest friend had met a good man but was now rethinking what it meant to be in a relationship with someone.

“I think she's decided that it's not for her, no matter how successful it's been in the physical realm. She's thinking entirely in

the spiritual realm and doesn't want to turn away from God in order to be with someone.”

Maggie was candid that she didn't have that same level of depth that Emily had in her relationship with God. Her experience, thus far, had been of God working through circumstances to provide for her. So she was open to the possibility that she might still have a relationship with someone.

“But I do know that whatever happens, I want to serve Him and get away from that kind of lifestyle that makes it impossible to meet people at their point of need. I think there are probably a lot of people in the church who just need someone to spend time with. That's something a young family might not be able to do. My impression is that mothers are tired people!” She included a happy face after that one.

She felt like she was rambling again. But it hardly mattered. It was important that Christopher knew where her faith was taking her. They had made no commitment to one another, so he could either decide she wasn't for him and find someone else, or he could be a friend and share the walk with her.

She signed off, clicked “send” and glanced at her watch. It was 9:28.

Time to go home and start reading about Henry V and the Battle of Agincourt.

Chapter Fifteen

She was so engrossed in her book that she didn't hear Douglas approach her deck.
“What are you reading?”

He grinned as she jumped.

Thankfully, the mug she was holding was empty, Maggie having long since finished her morning coffee.

She held up the book.

“Looks good,” he said, taking it out of her hands as he sat down in the other plastic chair. “I have to admit, my knowledge of the subject is limited to the movie. Have you seen it?”

She shook her head as he handed the book back.

“*Henry V*,” he said. “Shakespeare, as performed and directed by Kenneth Branagh.”

“I missed that one,” she said.

“I've got it on DVD,” he said. “Want to come over tonight and watch it on the computer?”

She hesitated. But it wouldn't hurt to familiarize herself with a movie that other people in the group might have seen.

“Sure,” she said.

He leaned back in the chair, seeming to enjoy the sunshine on

his face.

"Aren't you supposed to be working?" she asked, grinning.

"I'm back to being lazy," he said, stretching his legs out in front of him. "Deadline is met and all that."

"Learn anything new on the internet?"

"More French," he said. "Though I may switch to Chinese. The Chinese are the most rapidly growing immigrant group in Canada. If money is tight, I could just take a vacation to Chinatown in Toronto."

She laughed and glanced at her watch. It was already 12:15.

"Speaking of money, I need to start getting ready to go and make some."

"Well," he said, as they both stood up. "Why don't you come straight from work to here? I'll dazzle you with one of my four ingredient recipes!"

It was a wonderful offer. Too wonderful.

"Dinner *and* a movie," she said. "Won't I be keeping you up past your bedtime?" She was only half-teasing.

"Maybe I'll take an afternoon nap," he said, smiling. "I haven't done that in years."

"You people who work from home," she said, shaking her head, turning to open her screen door.

"I'll see you tonight," he called back over his shoulder.

"See you then," she agreed.

It was a good thing she got another email from Christopher. Something to keep her level-headed with an evening of Douglas ahead of her.

He agreed with her on every point. Although, he admitted, he wouldn't be able to go in the same direction as Emily. But he did want to go all the way with his faith in whatever direction God was taking him.

He knew he wasn't cut out to be a monk, but he still wanted to live a life of service. He hoped it would include a wife. If it also included children, he wanted them to share in that life of service. But he knew that children were practically a ministry unto themselves, at least from what he'd seen.

He signed off, "Your friend in musing, Christopher."

Your friend in musing. That was a good way to put it, she thought, leaning back in her chair. Hadn't Douglas said that the

word amusement meant “no musing” or no thought? To have a friend to think with was what she needed right now.

But there were other things that needed her attention at the moment. Brad had redirected the email from the bookseller wanting to check their discards back to her. He had also approved the removal of most of the books on her list. So those two tasks could be combined.

One of the high school students was moving on to higher things so they would need a replacement. It would be Maggie's job to interview the applicants.

A local author had recently published a book about sailing the Great Lakes. Brad recommended she contact him and see if he were interested in an evening of promoting his book at the library.

And then there were all the routine tasks . . .

By the end of the day, Maggie had pulled about 75 books off the shelves. They were sitting in a box by her desk waiting for the man to come and look them over. The author was willing to promote his book, but he would have to contact his publisher first. The guidance counsellor of the local high school had been contacted and the opening had been posted on their job board.

As she drove home in the twilight, she said a prayer.

“Oh God, you know my feelings for Douglas. Let me see him with your eyes. I want to look at things the way you do.”

She was tired, tired of having feelings for a man who she could never be with. Yet clearly, he was going to be a part of her life as long as they were neighbours.

She stopped in at a convenience store and bought a bottle of sparkling lemonade as her contribution to the dinner. Pulling into her driveway, she got out and went straight across to Douglas's deck. It took him only seconds to answer the door.

She had to laugh.

He was holding a cookie tray and wearing a floral apron.

“Good timing,” he grinned. “The appetizer has just come out of the oven.”

“It smells good, whatever it is,” she said, stepping inside and quickly shutting the door behind her. It was mosquito season and you had to move quickly to keep them from coming in with you. She put her bottle on the counter.

“Some kind of southern flatbread,” he said, absently, putting

the cookie tray down on the counter. "Now, what was I doing?" He looked around the small kitchen. "Ah, yes . . ." From the fridge, he got a bowl that had some kind of dip in it and placed it on a tray.

"This will work," he said, picking up her bottle of lemonade and adding it to the tray, along with two glasses from one of the cupboards. "We have a sort of southern picnic theme happening here."

"Do I have time to feed my cats?" she asked.

"Oh, I already did that for you," said Douglas, taking a dish out of the fridge. It was filled with breaded drumsticks. He opened the oven door and put it in.

"You are just too thoughtful," she said.

"Well, I had to experiment on someone and your cats are willing to eat pretty much anything I attempt to make."

They both laughed.

Douglas sliced the flat bread and put it on a plate. It was the final thing to go on the tray.

"C'mon," he said, picking it up and carrying it into the living room. "We can eat this while we wait for the chicken."

"I love your apron," she said, as they both sat down.

"Oh this," he said, looking down. "It's Mom's. You probably figured that out. She left it here last time she was here. She brought all the ingredients for Cornish pasties and made them from scratch."

Douglas poured the lemonade and they clinked their glasses before drinking.

Maggie reached for a piece of the flat bread and spooned some dip on top.

"This is delicious," she said.

"I never did it before," he said, trying some. "It's not bad, is it? To be honest, the only tested recipe tonight is for the drumsticks. I've already had them a few times. Tonight I also tried a potato salad recipe that I thought would go nicely."

"I guess you he-men are used to eat a plate full of meat for dinner," she said, grinning.

"Exactly," he said nodding. "This is the first time I did more than one recipe. So really, when you add it all up, it's more of a sixteen-ingredient dinner. I cheated and just bought ice cream for dessert."

That he would make this effort for her almost set her back to romantic longing. She tried to keep her voice light.

"This is a fabulous meal," she said. "It's wonderful to come home from work and not just open up a can of something."

"Do you do that, too?" he said. "I kind of thought that was just men."

Maggie shook her head as she reached for another piece of bread.

"Nope. I've come home from work some nights and just had a can of ravioli. Or a bowl of cereal."

The conversation turned to work.

She told him about the man who wanted to go through the discarded books. He said that he had noticed that the second-hand book business was huge online. He often browsed through the sites that specialized in used or rare books and noticed that many of them were library discards.

"Some of them are selling for \$40 or \$50 dollars," he said. "Not bad considering the seller picked them up for \$1."

"I guess the seller provides the service of connecting the buyer with the hard-to-find books."

"Exactly."

Douglas got up and went over to his computer.

"I almost forget," he said, as he bit into some flatbread and turned on his monitor. "I invited you over to watch *Henry V*."

Still standing, he clicked a few times and the movie started up on the screen as he returned to the couch.

They were twenty minutes into it when the oven pinged.

Douglas got up to pause the movie.

"I've seen it twice," he said. "But I love it. I don't want to miss a scene."

Maggie nodded. The acting was excellent.

Douglas went into the kitchen and came back a few minutes later with a platter of drumsticks and a bowl of potato salad. After returning for plates and forks, he rejoined her on the couch.

"Yum," said Maggie, as she tried the potato salad. "Definitely a success."

Douglas looked pleased.

He resumed the movie. Douglas proved again that he wasn't the kind of person who minded talking while the television was

on.

"The first time I watched this," he said, "I looked up what was true and what wasn't. I was pleased to read that Shakespeare based his play on real historical records."

"That's good to know," she said, thinking of the book club meeting.

"There was another film version of *Henry V*," Douglas continued. "It starred Laurence Olivier and it was made in 1944, sort of a pro-war version to encourage the British to keep fighting."

"That's interesting," said Maggie. "To use Shakespeare and apply it to current events." That could be useful too. How history was understood in the context of its day, that sort of thing. There was some potential for discussion.

"This version doesn't glamorize war, though," said Douglas nodding toward the screen as he bit into a drumstick. "It's a very muddy, bloody ending."

They watched in silence for a bit.

"I'm a little lost," Maggie confessed.

"That's understandable," said Douglas. "This is actually the culmination of a story that Shakespeare started in his *Richard II*. Then he wrote *Henry IV*. And then this. Henry the Fifth and Falstaff appeared in *Henry IV*. Of course, Henry the Fifth wasn't Henry the Fifth then, he was Prince Hal . . ."

"OK, I think I get it," said Maggie. "We've come in at the end of the story."

After dinner, Douglas brought out two large bowls of black cherry chocolate ice cream.

They were at the climactic Battle of Agincourt. Henry had just given his famous St. Crispin's Day speech and the soldiers were going into battle. It was more stirring than Maggie had expected. She leaned forward to watch, almost forgetting the ice cream. Although the battle was bloody, the cinematography made it more like art than entertainment. There was nothing amusing about it, it was intended to be thought-provoking.

She glanced over at Douglas. He was equally engrossed. It was strange to be able to appreciate things like this together, yet at the same time, knowing that in other more important ways, they would never be able to connect.

And then it was the final scene, a far lighter and happier one,

as Henry the winner at Agincourt, made peace with the French king and then asked for one thing, "Yet leave our cousin Katharine here with us. She is our capital demand, comprised within the fore-rank of our articles."

Left alone with only Princess Katharine and her maid, Henry said, "Fair Katharine and most fair, will you vouchsafe to teach a soldier terms such as will enter at a lady's ear and plead his love-suit to her gentle heart?"

The scene was played with gentle humour as the French princess replied, "Your majesty shall mock at me. I cannot speak your England."

In an earlier scene she had been practising her English in case Henry was the victor.

Henry's reply to that was, "O fair Katharine, if you will love me soundly with your French heart, I will be glad to hear you confess it brokenly with your English tongue. Do you like me, Kate?"

Maggie sighed.

Shakespeare made it seem all so easy, even if the couple didn't have a common language.

Henry didn't mind that his French princess couldn't speak English. His thought on that was, "I am glad thou canst speak no better English, for, if thou couldest, thou wouldst find me such a plain king that thou wouldst think I had sold my farm to buy my crown. I know no ways to mince it in love, but directly to say, *I love you*, then if you urge me farther than to say, *do you in faith?* I wear out my suit. Give me you answer, i' faith, do, and so clap hands and a bargain, how say you, lady?"

Their bantered continued on for a scene of broken English and broken French. But when the scene filled up once again with people, Henry was able to declare before all that, "here I kiss her as my sovereign Queen."

Katherine's mother, Isabel, the Queen of France, replied:

God, the best maker of all marriages,
Combine your hearts in one, your realms in one!
As man and wife, being two, are one in love,
So be there 'twixt your kingdoms such a spousal,
That never may ill office, or fell jealousy,
Which troubles oft the bed of blessed marriage,

Thrust in between the paction of these kingdoms,
To make divorce of their incorporate league;
That English may as French, French Englishmen,
Receive each other. God speak this Amen!

As the credits rolled, Douglas stood up to shut down the program playing the movie.

"What did you think?" he asked, his back still to her.

"Definitely a happy ending," she said. *Too happy.*

Douglas grinned as he turned around.

"It has a chick flick ending, but it's got the battle scenes too. Shakespeare knew how to hold his audience's attention."

"That he did," agreed Maggie, standing up. Back to reality. It was almost 1:00. "I didn't mean to keep you up so late," she said.

"That's OK," said Douglas. "I think I can handle a late night, or two."

He walked her to his kitchen door and slipped on his flip-flops.

"You don't have to walk me home," she protested, thinking of the late hour.

"I don't mind," he said. "What would you do if you ran into a skunk?"

"I dunno," she said, as they stepped out into the cool night air. "Scream, I guess."

"Then I would end up running out of my house," he said. "You'd end up getting sprayed and after all that, you'd have wished that I escorted you home."

She laughed. She didn't ask what he would actually do if a skunk walked across their path.

"Well," she said, at her front door, as she pulled her keychain out of her purse. "Thanks for the lovely evening."

"I'm glad the dinner turned out," he said.

"It was perfect," she said.

For one moment, he hesitated. She had a horrible feeling that he was going to bend down and kiss her. But then he gave her one of his grins, a little wave and was back across the driveway.

Her hand was trembling.

She had to concentrate to unlock the door.

"Dear God," was all she could say when she was on the other side. "Dear God!"

Chapter Sixteen

Maggie realized that she'd been so busy yesterday she hadn't had a chance to reply to Christopher's message. But she couldn't get to her email right away because the man who wanted to go through the discarded books was waiting for her. Phyllis at the front desk pointed him out to her. He was a short, earnest-looking man, no more than 25-years-old.

She walked over to where he was going through the discarded books that were already out on the cart.

"Hi," she said, holding out her hand. "I'm Maggie."

"Hi Maggie," he said, shaking her hand. "I'm Michael."

"Find anything interesting?"

He shook his head. He had an iPad in his hand and he showed her the page he was on. It was a website that sold second-hand books.

"I check the titles here," he said. "Unless it's selling for more than \$10, it's almost not worth it. And the books here are in pretty bad shape so I wouldn't be able to list them as in good condition."

Maggie led the way to her office.

"Maybe you'll find something better in my office. Most of the

books are in excellent condition.”

The young man was visibly pleased at the sight of the boxes on her floor. With his iPad, he started going through them. He had brought his own box and was adding book after book to it. When he was done, he had about two-thirds of the books in his box. The hardcovers were a dollar each and the paperbacks were 25 cents. Maggie quickly calculated his purchases and told him, “That will be \$36.25.” Thinking of Douglas and his interest in all things online, she asked as Michael counted out his change, “How much do you think you’ll sell these for online?”

Michael smiled.

“If I’m lucky, \$1000. If not, maybe \$825, or so.”

“Whew!” she said. “That’s impressive.”

“This was the best find,” he said, as he handed her the money and reached for one of the books in the box. He held up a book entitled, *Life of Colonel Talbot*. “There were 2009 and 2010 reprints of this book. You can pick up a copy for \$15 online. But the original 1859 edition is selling for anywhere between \$300 and \$1000. This is actually a 1933 edition. It sells for about \$100.”

“Wow,” said Maggie. “So this has been a good day for you.”

“It has,” he agreed.

As Michael was leaving, Phyllis told her that the guidance counsellor had called and said she had several responses to the job posting. Maggie returned to her office to call the counsellor back and set up appointments for interviews.

Then she had to join Phyllis on the front desk. The woman who normally took the shift had called in sick.

Phyllis was more cheerful today. Her talk was about an upcoming book festival in Toronto she was going to attend with her son.

“When he was a student, he worked here,” she said. “Now he has a small second-hand bookstore in Elora.”

Maggie told her all about Michael and how he planned to turn \$37 worth of books into \$1000. Phyllis was impressed and said she’d pass that story onto her son.

“Of course, he works for it,” said Maggie, thinking of Michael having to go from library-to-library like that. She hadn’t even asked him where he was from. Who knows how far he had come?

Phyllis told her that as far as she knew, her son didn’t do any

selling online. He relied on the tourists that came to Elora to see the Gorge. They talked for a while about Phyllis's many visits to Elora and then a man came up needing help with a search. He was looking for books about careers.

Maggie went with him, leaving the desk to Phyllis. In the course of looking for suitable material for the man, she found out that he was 48 and had just been laid-off from the job he had been at since he left high-school. Now he needed to start over.

They found some books about career choices, but then Maggie took him to one of the computers lining the wall and showed him some of the sites online that might be helpful. He thanked her several times. Maggie returned to the front desk. It felt good to help.

But a thought occurred to her. She could do more to help. She could pray. Back at the desk, with Phyllis busy sorting through some books that had just been returned, Maggie said a quick prayer that the man's search for the right job would be successful.

Unexpectedly, the prayer changed *her*. She had tossed up a request to heaven, planning to leave it at that. But now she felt an even greater sense of responsibility toward the man. He had come into her life and he had a need. Books were a start, but what he really needed was a *job*.

Getting on her computer, she did a search for "jobs" and found two more books that were on the shelf. She had taken him to the adult collection; these books were in the young adult section and were geared for someone coming out of high school. Perhaps the man would find something more useful in them.

She went back out, found the books on the shelves and brought them over to the man who was still staring at his monitor.

"I thought these might be helpful," she said, adding them to the pile.

He looked up. She saw frustration on his face. Then she realized, he was still at the screen she had left him on.

Of course!

He probably knew next-to-nothing about computers. She pulled over a chair from the neighbouring station and sat down.

"Did anything look interesting here?" she asked.

"Well," he said, turning back to the screen. "I sure would like to try that aptitude test." He pointed with his finger.

“OK,” she said, taking the mouse and clicking the link. “It’s just a matter of clicking a finger on the left side here. It takes some getting used to . . .”

He looked at her with appreciation.

She nudged the mouse toward him and soon, with a little coaching, he was clicking his way through the aptitude test.

When that was done and it was determined that some good career choices included drywall installer, security guard, roofer, house-painter and janitor, Maggie printed off the page that listed all the possibilities. Zamboni driver was the one that interested him the most, so they went through a listing of some of the jobs available in the area. The man wrote down some phone numbers to call.

Over an hour had passed when the man stood up to go.

“I can’t thank you enough,” he said. “I’ve been really discouraged, but this has given me hope.” He held up the piece of paper.

“I was glad to help,” said Maggie genuinely. “Do you need any of these books?” She picked up the pile on the desk.

“No, not really,” said the man. “Reading’s not really my thing . . .”

“I understand,” she said quickly.

He thanked her again and then headed for the door.

Phyllis wanted to take her dinner break when she returned to the front desk and since the library was quiet, Maggie had a chance to browse the latest ebooks for her blog.

Selecting one wasn’t so easy this time.

She went through all the new ebooks that had come in, but they seemed to fall into one of two extremes – cheerful optimism over nothing in particular or bleak despair.

A new biography about Elizabeth Taylor was tempting. She had seen a few of her movies and everybody was fascinated by her marriages. But maybe there was a better choice. She wanted something thought-provoking.

A woman with three young girls came up and checked out a whole pile of Berenstain Bears. That gave Maggie an idea. Why not review a book for younger readers? Even adults enjoyed a well-written young adult novel.

Back to the search.

She had to sift through a lot of vampire romance novels. What

was with *that*?

She was just going to keep scrolling down when it struck her that in a bizarre way, the vampire romance novel combined two things essential to her faith – love and eternal life. Yet, in the vampire novels, eternal life was being achieved through an intense romance with a vampire. Should she blog about that?

She would, she decided. It seemed that people still wanted eternal life and it seemed natural to believe that it could come by loving a more powerful being. The vampire romance novels had just put a dark twist on the whole theme.

She logged in to access an ebook, selecting the one that looked the most friendly out of the bunch.

Then it was her turn to take a dinner break.

Finally. A chance to return Christopher's message.

Her mind was still on the man who had come into the library needing help to find a job so she shared with Christopher the idea that after praying for someone, God had shown her that it was her responsibility as a Christian to help him beyond the point of convenience and how it had all played out.

"I'm going to pray for more opportunities like that," she concluded. "I thought I had helped him when I walked away the first time. But I hadn't. It wasn't until I walked away the second time that I had really made a difference."

She clicked "send" and spent the rest of her dinner break eating a sandwich and starting on the ebook. It was well-written, at least.

Maggie returned to Phyllis and the front desk. Phyllis was red-eyed. Maybe she had been red-eyed when she came back from her dinner break. Maggie hadn't noticed.

"What's the matter?" she asked, softly. The patrons in the library were all busy reading magazines or doing research.

"It's my granddaughter," she said, pulling a handkerchief out of her sleeve and blowing into it.

"Is she OK?" said Maggie, thinking of the pregnant 18-year-old.

"I called my daughter on my dinner break," she said. "She wasn't home yet, but I talked to Amanda."

"Your granddaughter?"

Phyllis nodded. She was having a hard time speaking.

"How's she doing?" Maggie asked. It couldn't be easy to be

young and pregnant.

Phyllis shook her head. "Well, *she's* OK." There was a pause that Maggie thought would be best to leave unfilled.

"She just had an abortion."

Phyllis broke down. Taking a quick look around, Maggie could see that there were no immediate needs. She took Phyllis by the arm and led her into her office.

"Here," she said, giving her the seat. "You take all the time you need."

Phyllis nodded her thanks through tears.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said Phyllis. "I shouldn't be this way, but I just started to get used to the idea of being a grandmother. I was even thinking of giving up my job here to take care of the baby . . ."

Maggie plugged in the small kettle in her office. Soon Phyllis had a cup of tea in front of her. Maggie went back to the front desk to check out some books for someone and then returned.

"I think I'm OK, now," said Phyllis, giving her nose a final blow. "It was just a bit of a shock."

"I can imagine," said Maggie sympathetically. "It wasn't what you were expecting."

"Exactly," said Phyllis. "And I think what bothered me the most was how casual my granddaughter was about the whole thing."

Maggie nodded as Phyllis stood up and they both returned to the front desk.

Phyllis, with her red-rimmed eyes, was given the job of shelving some books. They were still missing a student. The interviews for a new helper wouldn't be until Saturday. When the library closed, Maggie felt like she'd put in a full day's work.

Friday morning, she called Emily. The last time they had talked was on Monday when she had taken her for a quick excursion to the grocery store. Emily had said that she needed to get home and spend the day in prayer.

It was almost inconceivable to Maggie that anyone could spend a whole day in prayer, but of course, Jesus had done something similar when he had stayed up all night praying. Was it possible to talk to God for such a length of time? She had said a quick prayer about the man looking for a job and what a

difference that short prayer had made. Was it possible that mountains could truly be thrown into the sea if one talked to God the way that Emily seemed to?

Emily answered the phone on the third ring.

"Oh hello, dear!" Emily sounded like her usual cheerful self.

"I'm sorry I haven't called sooner," said Maggie, sitting down on one of her kitchen chairs.

"That's OK, dear," said Emily. "I think I needed time to myself anyway."

"How did Tim take it?"

"Well," said Emily slowly. "I think he was disappointed. I was actually surprised at how hard it was for him. I didn't think I was such a catch." Her laugh was merry.

"You are," Maggie assured her.

"In any case," said Emily. "God showed me that though it's hard for the moment, in the long run, the relationship may not have brought either of us the happiness that we expected from it. Only God knows Tim's heart and what he needs. I trust God to meet those needs. God and I have been talking all week and I think things are better with us than they've ever been."

"That sounds wise," said Maggie. But she had a feeling that Emily's relationship with God was on a far higher level than her own. The way Emily talked, it was as if she and God had been reunited after a brief separation and now they were delighting in the reunion. Maggie couldn't get a grip on how a relationship could transcend the physical and at the same time, be so real to Emily.

She got off the phone after a few minutes of light talk, still trying to think it through and understand Emily's relationship with God.

Would Christopher understand? She wasn't even sure she could put it into words. It was almost as if, well as if Emily talked to God the way she talked to Douglas. And it wasn't hard to imagine a whole day of talking with Douglas.

"Do you have your air-conditioner yet?" Douglas called out. Maggie was walking down her path as he was about to get into his car.

She slapped her head.

"I knew I forgot something," she groaned.

"It's going to be 34 degrees this weekend," said Douglas, unlocking his car and then standing by the open door. "And you get full sunlight in your living room." He didn't have to tell her what that meant. It was always ten degrees hotter in her living room than outside.

"I'm on my way down to Newmarket," he said. "I need to pick up some memory sticks. I could swing by the Canadian Tire there and pick up something for you."

"Oh, I couldn't ask you to do that . . ."

"Yes you could," he said grinning. "How do you think I'll feel knowing that you're baking in your house while I'm enjoying a moderate 21 degrees? The guilt would be unbearable."

"OK," she said, grinning back. "You've convinced me. But why buy one in Newmarket? We have a Canadian Tire here."

He shook his head.

"Not enough selection. I noticed you didn't have one yet so I picked out the best one for you online. It's top-of-the-line, but it's on sale. Keswick is all out, but Newmarket still has them in stock."

She shook her head as she unlocked her car door.

"You're amazing," she said.

"Aren't I, though? Can I come over tomorrow to install it?"

"Yeah, but I won't be home until around 5:30." On Saturdays, she worked from nine til five.

"That's OK. Just leave your key in my mailbox and I'll have it done by the time you're home. Believe me, you won't want to come home to a house that isn't air-conditioned."

"Did I mention that you're amazing?"

"Yeah, I think you did. But you're a librarian. You should be able to come up with some good synonyms. And if you can't, check out thesaurus.com." He waved as he climbed into his car.

What had she done to deserve a neighbour like him?

It was so hard not to fall in love with him.

Chapter Seventeen

Christopher's email was an encouragement to continue with serving beyond convenience. He said he'd be giving it a go himself, starting with something he should have done a while ago and that was to volunteer for an upcoming church fundraiser. It was just setting up tables, but the lazy side of him had said, "let someone else do it."

After that, Maggie spent a busy few hours showing a class of middle school students where to find material for their science fair projects. Then it was back to her office to work on the blog. The novel itself was easy reading, but the blog was a little more challenging. She wasn't sure if she could directly refer to the Bible in her blog.

She looked at her watch. It was 4:30. Brad should still be here. She could ask him.

Brad was in his office. He looked up from a catalogue.

She explained how she had selected the vampire romance novel for the blog because it contained the themes of love and eternal life.

"But what I need to know is, can I tie that in with the Bible?"

Brad thought about it.

"I don't see why not," he said. "I wouldn't come down hard on the preachy side, but the Bible is considered literature and love and eternal life are both central topics."

"OK," she said nodding. "I'll go at it that way."

She was about to turn and head back out but Brad cleared his throat and looked extremely uncomfortable.

"Er," he said. "Have you talked to Emily lately?"

"This morning, yes," she said, sitting down in the chair across from his desk.

"Uh, is there any reason for her breaking up with her man?"

Maggie smiled.

"She has her reason, yes."

"Her friend, Tim, phoned me last night. He was concerned and genuinely heartbroken, I think. I gather he was not the one to end the relationship."

"That's right," said Maggie. "She definitely ended it."

Brad shook his head.

"The old dear," he said. "I would have never taken her for a heartbreaker. I think I need to have a visit with her tonight."

"I'm sure she would enjoy that," said Maggie, grinning and standing up.

"There's a story there, isn't there?" said Brad. "Well, I might as well hear it from the horse's mouth."

Maggie nodded.

"Have a good evening, then," said Brad as she was on her way out.

She returned to her office. She wasn't needed on the desk tonight and Phyllis was off, so there was no need to follow up on that. The evening was spent finishing the blog. She expanded the ideas found in the romance novel with references to literature throughout history, including the Bible. Immortality was a huge topic. And when she was done her blog, no one could say that she didn't have a wide overview. But she did point out that the Christian view of how to achieve immortality was still the most viable one and that despite the rising interest in vampires, they were only found in fiction.

When she got home, Douglas's lights were all off.

Her house was already starting to feel hot. She opened a few windows to let the night breeze in and opened up a bagged salad for dinner.

It was refreshing to get away from vampires and back to some real history with her book about Henry V.

As she read, her mind wandered over the night before. It was hard not to read the book and tie it in to scenes from the movie, and she had the additional distraction of Douglas. She shook her head and tried to stay focused. Finally, she just put the book away and went to bed. If tomorrow was quiet at the library, she could get some reading in then.

Phyllis was on the front desk with her.

Again, she seemed to have recovered.

"It's all for the best, I think," she said. "I don't pretend I like it. But I imagine it will all work out. Everything does."

She glanced at the book beside Maggie.

"Oh," she said. "Shakespeare. Are you going to the Fairy Lake festival? They're doing *Hamlet* too. Oh wait, you're reading about Henry V."

"Fairy Lake festival?" said Maggie.

"You know, the annual Shakespeare in the park they have . . . oh, that's right. You're new to this area, aren't you?"

Maggie nodded.

"Every year, there's an amateur production of Shakespeare at Fairy Lake. It's in Newmarket. You'd probably enjoy it. I think it's coming up."

Phyllis turned to her computer screen and clicked out of the program that checked out books. She clicked through a menu to a listing of current events in the community.

"Ah, here it is," she said. "*Hamlet*. At Fairy Lake. Let's see, that would be next weekend. A week from today."

Maggie nodded. A thought was already forming.

Maybe that would be a good way to thank Douglas for installing her air-conditioner. She had left a key to her house in his mailbox on her way out to work.

"Do you have to get tickets?" she asked.

Phyllis shook her head.

"I think they accept donations. But there's no set price. It's a park, so you just sit anywhere."

That sounded good. Maybe a coffee or a dinner afterward. Douglas would take it in the right spirit. So far, he'd been good about not reading romance into things.

"It's a hot one out there," said a man to both of them as he returned his books.

Phyllis agreed.

"It's supposed to get hotter too," she said. "Thank God for air-conditioning."

The man agreed and left.

Thinking of Douglas in the heat installing her air-conditioner, Maggie asked, "Are there any good restaurants nearby? Fairy Lake, I mean?"

"Oh yes," said Phyllis. "It's a quaint part of town. It's the oldest part and there's a lovely Main Street you can stroll down. Let's see . . . restaurants . . ."

Phyllis was thinking out loud.

"There's a darling little café that my son took me to once . . .," Phyllis continued. "And, of course, you can always get pizza. There's a bar & grill close to the post office . . ."

Maggie nodded. It sounded perfect. Something with a bit of atmosphere.

"I love fish-and-chips myself," said Phyllis. "But I think the best fish-and-chips places are up here."

Maggie said she'd have to try some of them out.

Phyllis rambled and the day passed with very little work actually being accomplished, except for three job interviews. She hired the last candidate on the spot. He was tall and quiet and grasped the fundamentals of the job in a way that the first two students hadn't. His name was Kyle and he would be returning on Tuesday for his first shift.

Maggie measured the success of the day by the fact that Phyllis was doing better.

A blast of heat hit her as she exited the library. Regrettably, Emily's old car didn't have air-conditioning and even with the windows open, it just blew hot air on Maggie the whole ride home.

Hoping dearly that nothing had happened to prevent Douglas from buying and installing an air-conditioner, she just about wept with relief at the site of a humming unit in her front window.

Unlocking the door, a wave of cool air met her.

Cold air! Beautiful, crisp cold air! Maggie collapsed into her comfortable chair.

Douglas would definitely get an invitation to *Hamlet* in the

park. And a dinner afterward.

She'd have to ask for the day off, but Douglas was worth it.

As soon as she had a chance to recover and wasn't feeling like a stewed tomato anymore, she grabbed her chequebook and crossed over to Douglas's house.

"What do you think of your new air-conditioner?" he asked when he opened the door.

"I *love* it," she said.

"I thought you might," he said, stepping aside to let her into his own cool home.

"I totally owe you big time, and I don't just mean the money," she said. "Would you like to go to Fairy Lake next weekend and see *Hamlet* with me?"

"That sounds good," said Douglas. "I've always wanted to check that out. Last year they did *Romeo & Juliet* and I missed it."

Maggie was glad they would be missing that one too. The ending of *Henry V* was bad enough. At least at the end of *Hamlet*, everyone died.

"How much do I owe you for the air-conditioner?" Maggie asked.

Douglas said he'd show her the online flyer at Canadian Tire. She went into his living room and he switched on his monitor.

"Here it is," he said, after a quick internet search. "Oh, and here's the receipt."

She sat down at his desk and wrote the cheque.

"Any dinner plans?" Douglas asked.

She shook her head.

"Though at least I'm not afraid to turn on the oven now that I have a cool house."

"How about splitting a pizza with me?" he asked.

She hesitated. Was this what God wanted for her? To spend more time with a man who didn't share her faith? It was one thing to be out of the house and watching a play together, but here in his house, alone with him, it was just too hard.

"No, not tonight," she said, trying to sound casual. "I've got a ton of things to get done."

"I understand," he said. "You don't get much time to yourself, with all the hours you put in."

She nodded, trying not to cry.

She didn't want time to herself. She wanted to stay right here

and have the pizza with Douglas. Now, instead, she would be going home to . . . do laundry, or some other equally mundane task.

It was almost too much and she managed to hold herself together until she got back to her own house.

And then she was like Phyllis, sobbing, unable to stop. She fell into her chair. Is this how it was going to be? Continual conflict in her heart?

She envied Emily. Whatever struggle she had gone through had been resolved and Emily was back with her one true love. However she had managed it, God was the one for her and she would live happily ever after with him – now and in the life to come. But everything Maggie longed for at the moment was about twenty metres away from her, in the house across the driveway.

She couldn't have Douglas, but Christopher was still a possibility. It was her Sunday afternoon shift and she was composing a reply to his email.

Sunday service had been uneventful, except for the fact that the church had no air-conditioning. By the end of the service, everyone was starting to show sweat stains. Except for Emily, who looked cool and serene throughout the whole thing.

Now, alone in her office, she groaned.

What to say? What to say to this man who she had never seen?

But it was better this way, she reminded herself. It was better not knowing what someone looked like, not being face-to-face and the inescapable evaluation of a man based on his outward appearance.

If things worked out with Christopher, she could put the whole thing with Douglas behind her and move on. Literally. Out of her small house and to whatever future God had planned for her.

She said a prayer and started typing.

“Hope it went well with the church fundraiser. It's amazing how many unseen people make a difference behind the scenes.”

Maggie leaned back. It sounded banal and she didn't want to go all preachy.

How to open up her heart? That was the question. Not just to spill out clichés and other people's thoughts.

It wasn't the fear of opening up to a stranger. It was her heart itself that concerned her. How much was it like God's heart? Emily could open up her heart to God and sing for joy in a stifling hot church when everyone else was just going through the motions and waiting to go home to their air-conditioning.

Did she have the courage to throw aside all earthly distractions, i.e. men, and just try to have what Emily had? Is that what God wanted for her?

She sat for a long time, just thinking, staring at the wall, biting her lip.

She couldn't even install her own air-conditioning.

Men were useful.

They did all sorts of things women didn't do.

Whether God wanted a man in her life depended on what kind of life of service he had planned for her, she finally decided.

She looked at her watch. Her shift was starting. The front door needed unlocking. This email would have to wait. She right-clicked and sent her message to the draft folder. This shift was too short for a dinner break so she might not get back to it until Tuesday.

Oh well, she decided, standing up. It was all in God's hands anyhow.

Monday was her weekly shopping trip with Emily.

Emily, who had been so optimistic about Tim, was now even more contented to see the whole episode behind her. She and Maggie were sipping tea in her living room. Thankfully Emily had an air-conditioning unit in her window, installed by Brad. The heat spell hadn't broken.

"Poor Brad," Emily said. "He had to bear the worst of it, I think. I told Tim candidly how I felt but I don't think he believed me. He phoned Brad because he wanted to know what he had done wrong. But I think I was pretty clear in explaining to Tim that I was completely happy with him in every way, it's just that he couldn't compete with my relationship with God."

Maggie tried not to smile. But Emily caught her.

"It's true, dear," she said, smiling. "No man can compete with God."

"I can understand that," said Maggie. "But I guess what I really want to understand is how do you get to that place where

you're at? I mean, where you'd give up a good man for God?"

Emily nodded, now serious.

"I can imagine where you are now, dear, because I remember it myself. There's a time in one's life where a good man is a blessing from God."

Maggie nodded.

"Exactly."

"Now the interesting thing with that is," continued Emily, "according to the Bible, it's a good *wife* who is a blessing from God. We're not called to chase men. We're called to be men's helpers. They need help, dear."

Maggie's eyes widened. She would have laughed out loud except that Emily looked so solemn.

"Yet, somehow, perhaps it's because of our culture, we've come to see it in reverse. It's we women who are rushing around looking for a good man. Biblically speaking, men should be the ones rushing around looking for a good woman."

"Well, I wouldn't mind *that*," said Maggie. "But it's just, I mean, what do I do with all my . . . you know, feelings?"

Emily nodded, understanding.

"I know, dear. I turned all my feelings toward God and he met them. Every single one of them. In a way I didn't know was possible. It was almost like stepping out into thin air, at first. But now his presence is more real to me than Tim's was."

"But how can that be . . .?"

"Because God is right inside me, dear. You remember that Jesus said he and his father would make their home in us?"

It was a familiar scripture, but Emily seemed to be applying it in a far more literal way than anyone Maggie had ever met.

Maggie nodded.

"But how do you get there?" she asked. "I mean, how do I get where you are?"

Emily's face was grave.

"Suffering, dear."

They were both quiet for a moment.

Emily patted Maggie's hand.

"That's the only way I know, dear. Maybe there are other ways. Take it to him, dear."

"I will," said Maggie, biting her lip. Obviously what she had gone through with Robbie wasn't enough to take her to this

higher level.

Emily got up to add some more hot water to the teapot.

Suffering. It wasn't the answer Maggie had expected. And yet, it wasn't a surprise either. On Sunday, when she had been barely thinking due to the heat, the service had concluded with a hymn. Her singing had been absent-minded at the time, but now she thought back to the words.

King of my life, I crown thee now, Thine shall the glory be;
Lest I forget thy thorn-crowned brow, lead me to Calvary.
Lest I forget Gethsemane; lest I forget thine agony;
Lest I forget thy love for me, lead me to Calvary.

Show me the tomb where thou wast laid, tenderly mourned
and wept;

Angels in robes of light arrayed, guarded thee whilst thou
slept.

Lest I forget Gethsemane; lest I forget thine agony;
Lest I forget thy love for me, lead me to Calvary.

Let me, like Mary, through the gloom, come with a gift to
thee;

Show to me now the empty tomb, lead me to Calvary.
Lest I forget Gethsemane; lest I forget thine agony;
Lest I forget thy love for me, lead me to Calvary.

May I be willing, Lord, to bear daily my cross for thee;
Even thy cup of grief to share, thou hast borne all for me.
Lest I forget Gethsemane; lest I forget thine agony;
Lest I forget thy love for me, lead me to Calvary.

Emily's answer made sense. Should a suffering saviour expect any less of his followers? And if Emily was a typical case, it sounded as if he truly lived in his people when they did.

It was heavy theology. The theme of suffering had certainly come up at Bible college, but that was all it was, a theme. Emily, with a full life behind her, understood it.

Maggie sighed. In some ways, it was just easier to mope about Douglas.

Chapter Eighteen

Christopher needed a reply, but one of the ladies on the front desk called in sick and Maggie spent most of the afternoon taking over her shift. Her dinner break was spent training Kyle. He was a quick learner and she encouraged him to familiarize himself with the location of the books since people would probably ask him where to find things. He nodded solemnly and said he was already familiar with the Dewey Decimal system and had a pretty good idea of where to find the science books, the history books and the biographies.

She still had to browse the ebooks and begin another blog, but that would have to be another day. Nine o'clock came quickly.

Wednesday was even worse. Despite the heat, a summer cold seemed to be going around. Phyllis was now at home with it and Maggie was on the desk all by herself for her entire shift. Kyle had a whole cart of books to shelve and in addition, proved himself valuable by helping several older. One was looking for a good mystery, another wanted the biography about Oprah, the other was looking for wedding planners. As Maggie watched from the desk, she smiled to herself. Kyle would be popular with

the female patrons. She wouldn't be surprised if he had many requests for assistance.

By Thursday, Maggie was starting to sniffle. With two full-time employees down with the cold, she was wondering what Brad would do if she called in sick too. She was the only one on the desk. Brad approached her to say that if this kept up, she'd have to cancel her plan to take Saturday off. She didn't tell him that if this kept up, she'd be in bed herself with it on Saturday. Not able to follow the adage to get plenty of rest, she could at least drink plenty of fluids. By the end of the day, Maggie had put away two pots of tea. At home again, she went straight to bed and didn't get up until it was time to get ready for work again. Thankfully, the cold seemed to be receding. Phyllis and the other lady were both back at work, sneezing, blowing their noses . . . and checking out everyone's library books. Maggie anticipated an epidemic of the summer cold in Sutton. The library closed early, at six, on Fridays, so when she went home, she made it another early night. As she drifted off to sleep, she decided that if she still felt run-down on Saturday, it would be a sign from God not to go see *Hamlet* in the park.

Maggie woke up feeling refreshed, health fully restored.

Although she and Douglas hadn't worked out the final details of the day, the play started at two, and she decided to just go knock on his door when she was ready to go. But at nine o'clock, while she was putting the kettle on for tea and scooping out some cat food from the large bag, she was surprised to see him pull out of the driveway.

Had he forgotten about their plans?

Of course, she hadn't set a time and she hadn't gotten back to him. Maybe he thought the whole thing was just a possibility rather than a set date.

A date. But it wasn't a date.

The whistling kettle got her back in the moment. She poured the boiling water over the teabag in the mug.

At one o'clock she would knock on his door and if he were there to join her, he could. Two slices of bread from the bag on the counter went into the toaster.

Why did it matter? He was free to come and go as he pleased.

They owed each other nothing and he was just her neighbour.

Maggie took the large dish of dry cat food out to the front deck, along with a jug of water to refresh the bowl that stayed out by their house.

At least the cats appreciated her. Tabby rubbed up against her leg. Impulsively, Maggie scooped up Tabby.

"God has taken care of us, hasn't he?" she said, giving her a pet before returning her to the ground.

She took a deep breath. It wasn't so hot anymore. The heat spell had broken sometime in the night and the air was breathable again. That would be good for the performance in the park.

Maggie went back into her house.

But if Douglas didn't join her, it would be a day off work for nothing, she thought. After all, she probably wouldn't have taken a day off to go to *Hamlet* by herself.

Her toast had popped up and she got the butter and the marmalade out of the refrigerator. Her small breakfast was then carried into the living room.

So Douglas had driven off this morning. So what? She would go to *Hamlet* with or without him.

It was more than that though.

She never had gotten around to answering Christopher's email. The beginning of her reply was still sitting in her draft folder. She had left him saying he was going to volunteer for a church fundraiser.

She reached for the local newspaper that got delivered to her place twice a week, but that she never had time to read during the week.

Biting into one of her triangles of toast, she scanned the front page.

A planned development project along the lake was on the rocks. A developer had bought some swampy lakefront property that he was going to turn into a New England-style village – including low-rise condominiums, a hotel, shops and cafés. It sounded lovely. Too bad it wasn't going to happen.

Maggie turned to the inside. Pet owners were being encouraged to get their dogs and cats spayed or neutered. She thought of the whole gang on her front deck. It was good to have them all booked for their procedures.

Lots of ads for local businesses.

Lots of ads for local businesses.

The next page had a story about a rescue on the lake. A boat had caught fire and the rescue people had managed to save all aboard even if the boat was a write-off. Police were still investigating the cause of the fire.

Then it was community events. The local high school would be the location for a blood drive on Friday. *That was yesterday*, Maggie thought. Not that she could have gone in her weakened state. The Baptist church was having a giant yard sale in their parking lot on Saturday. The Georgina Military Museum was having its annual open house the following Saturday.

She sipped her tea and turned the pages. None of it really held her interest though it was probably a good idea to try to keep up with it. Many of the patrons of the library expected her to know what was going on in the community. The front desk handled all sorts of questions, including where could you buy garbage bag tags? What was currently playing at the Stephen Leacock theatre? What would be the dates of the Sutton Fair this year? Maggie had always let the old-timers handle those questions, but as she had found out, she could end up on the front desk by herself.

After breakfast, she glanced out of her living-room window. Douglas's car wasn't in his driveway.

She should have been at work posting her blog, she thought, as she put her dishes in the sink. She hadn't even had a chance to select an ebook. Now she'd have to try to get it all done on her Sunday shift. Hopefully no one else would call in sick.

She went back into her bedroom and selected a bohemian peasant-style blouse and a pair of jeans to wear for the day.

Ten o'clock and Douglas still wasn't back.

Never mind. She had things to do. Putting away a load of laundry kept her busy for fifteen minutes. She was too restless to read.

There were a few boxes that she had brought with her when she moved that still needed putting away. Mostly kitchen stuff. Today would be a good day to do it.

That kept her busy until 11:00. Douglas still wasn't back.

Would she really go to see *Hamlet* all by herself? She wandered out onto her deck. The whole point of it had been to thank Douglas for installing the air-conditioner. What good would it do to go and sit in the park all by herself? Better to stay home and

make him a meal as a thank-you. Except that she didn't know when he'd be back. Unfortunately, they had never swapped phone numbers so even if he had a cell phone, he couldn't use it to call her. If he even remembered that they had plans.

Back into the house.

Eating lunch was out of the question. She was too nervous.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, she thought. A whole day wasted.

The television went on. It took thirty seconds for her to determine that nothing worth watching was on. Back out on the deck.

Her grass needed mowing. Fortunately, where she lived, it was actually an option to let it grow up to your knees. The property beside her was just going wild. Even Douglas didn't seem to bother with it. He had less grass than her, though. Old patio stones covered most of his front lawn. Grass was coming up between them. The tall grass along the side of his house just blended in with the perennials his mother had planted for him.

Still, if someone showed up and offered to mow her grass for \$20, she'd let him.

Turning, she went back into her house.

At twelve, Douglas still wasn't back. Twelve ten, still not there. Twelve fifteen, no sign of him. Twelve twenty-two, no Douglas. Twelve thirty-eight, driveway still empty.

What to do?

Nothing, she decided. If he didn't want to see *Hamlet*, he didn't want to see it. She settled down in her comfortable chair and did what she should have done hours earlier. She opened up her Bible.

She was five minutes into Isaiah, and hardly taking any of it in, when she heard a car engine, and a few seconds later, a car door shut.

Waiting a full five seconds, she got up from her chair and looked out her window.

It was him.

No sign of distress. Just going up his steps and into his house. He was wearing shorts and a t-shirt and looked as if he had gone jogging, or something equally as strenuous.

Maggie sighed.

She went into the bathroom and freshened up. At one o'clock, she went out her door, locked it and then crossed over the

driveway to Douglas's house.

It took a minute or two for him to answer and when he did, he had changed his clothes. He was now wearing a white shirt with khaki pants.

"Hey neighbour!" he said. "Ready to go?"

"Yep," she said, trying to sound casual.

"Your car or mine?"

Since she had invited him, she really should say, "Mine." But the thought of him being the passenger while she tried to drive and navigate in Emily's old car was too much for her nerves.

"Yours, if you don't mind," she said.

"Pleasure," he said. "Just let me grab my wallet and put on some shoes."

He came out a minute later with some sandals on and holding the keys to the car.

Douglas didn't need any help getting to Fairy Lake. Along the way, they talked about Shakespeare. Douglas said he didn't like the idea of having to read the plays in high school. Shakespeare was meant to be performed.

Maggie agreed.

Douglas asked if she had ever been to the Stratford Festival.

Alas no, she had to admit, she never had. But she had gone to a lot of live shows when she was in Toronto. That had gotten them onto the whole topic of theatre. Douglas had seen a few things at the Stephen Leacock theatre, just up the road from them. Discussing the various things they had seen over the years kept the conversation going right up until Douglas was pulling into one of the spots in the crowded parking lot of Fairy Lake. The beautiful day and the Shakespeare production had brought out a large number of people.

They followed the flow of people and came to an outdoor platform with a large tented area behind it for the production crew and actors. Everyone was taking up spots on the grass in anticipation of the show starting in twenty minutes.

The background and props on the platform were arranged to suggest a castle.

People around them were talking as they waited. Maggie resisted the urge to ask Douglas where he had gone that morning and Douglas didn't mention anything about his earlier activities.

Instead, he said that *Hamlet* was one of his favourite

Shakespeare plays. The top one was *Julius Caesar*, but *Hamlet* was in his top five.

"How prosaic, eh?" he said. "I wish I could be one of those people who likes one of the obscure ones. You know, like, *Cymbeline* or *Coriolanus*."

Maggie laughed.

"The fact that you know Shakespeare wrote a play called *Coriolanus* puts you ahead of everyone. I didn't even know that."

"OK," said Douglas grinning. "What's your favourite Shakespeare play for real and what's your favourite Shakespeare play that you haven't actually read but would be cool to say is your favourite?"

Maggie had to think.

"Well, I'll say *The Merchant of Venice* for my favourite play," she said.

Douglas nodded.

"That's in my top five."

"And for my obscure play that I haven't read . . . *Titus Andronicus*."

"Not bad," said Douglas nodding. "But the all-time winner for an obscure Shakespeare play would have to be *Timon of Athens*."

She looked at him.

"Shakespeare never wrote anything called *Timon of Athens*! You're making that up!"

"I'm not!" he insisted. "Check it out online. It's one of his least known works. A lot like *King Lear*, but not as polished, supposedly.

"I am *so* going to look that up," she said, shaking her head.

"You'll find I'm right," said Douglas confidently.

On the platform, there were signs of activity. The audience settled down and soon they were conveyed by imagination to Denmark and Elsinore, home of Prince Hamlet.

Although Maggie had seen the Mel Gibson version – and Douglas had probably seen both the Mel Gibson and the Kenneth Branagh version – there was something mesmerizing about live theatre. It lacked the polish of a movie, but it had the benefit of being performed in the way Shakespeare had intended it to be, in front of a live audience.

Afterward, as the crowd dispersed, they both agreed that it was worth doing this every year.

It came so easily to make plans like that, as if they would still be neighbours a year from now and would just make it an annual event to attend a Shakespeare play. But what if he had a girlfriend by next year? Would Maggie get an invitation to join them at Fairy Lake? Or what if she and Christopher managed to get their relationship off the ground? Would she still be doing things with Douglas on the side?

They left Douglas's car in the parking lot and strolled up the hill to Main Street where Phyllis had promised that they would be able to find a restaurant. They weren't the only ones. Many people from the Shakespeare crowd were also looking for a place to have dinner. The main restaurant, a bar and grill, was filling up fast but they still had a table for two left by the time Douglas and Maggie went in.

A live band was playing in the corner and the whole atmosphere was a direct contrast to the serenity of Fairy Lake.

Douglas and Maggie looked at one another.

"Somewhere else?" said Douglas.

Maggie nodded.

They got up and moved through the crowds. People were still lined up to get in.

"C'mon," said Douglas. For one moment, Maggie got the impression that he had been about to take her hand. But then he caught himself. "I'll take you to one of my favourite places."

This was supposed to be a thank-you for him installing her air-conditioner, Maggie thought ruefully. And he was having to do all the work. But at least she'd pay for wherever they went.

They drove away from the old town and through the newer parts of Newmarket. He drove to a small plaza that had several restaurants, including an Indian one.

"I love Indian food," said Douglas. "I always get take-out but it'll be nice to try the restaurant."

Douglas parked out front and they went inside, past potted plants and a giant clay elephant.

The smiling proprietor led them to a table for two.

"This is much better," said Maggie looking around. There was ambience and it was more peaceful. Plus, it smelled exotic just coming through the door.

They were both handed large menus.

"Since you know what's good, why don't you order?" she

suggested. "But remember, it's my treat."

Douglas nodded, his eyes quickly skimming the menu.

"We could have samosas for the appetizer. Butter chicken for the main course. The na'an bread is fantastic. We'll get an order of that. And how 'bout we share an order of vegetable biryani?"

"Sure," said Maggie, having no idea what biryani was.

"Chicken vindaloo for next time," Douglas decided. "It's a bit hot if this is your first time eating Indian food."

There he was again, bringing up the idea of future activities together. Didn't he have plans to meet someone else? Surely he had picked up from Sandy, wayward though she was, that Christians liked to date Christians?

A waiter came and took their order. To drink, Douglas asked for two Cokes and then said to Maggie, they would have the masala tea afterward.

While they waited for their food, they talked about *Hamlet*. As Maggie suspected, Douglas had seen both recent film versions of the play.

She mentioned that she had to do a blog about one of the library's ebooks.

"Now I'm thinking of doing something related to Shakespeare. I could tie it in with today's show, somehow," she said. "Since it was something local."

"Good idea," said Douglas, nodding. "If the library has the book, *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599*, you could do that. It's an interesting book because 1599 was the year Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar* and *As You Like It*. It has a lot of good history."

"Let me guess," said Maggie. "You read it online?"

Douglas shook his head, grinning.

"Nope. This one was for a history paper in high school. The book had just been published and it caught my eye because my paper was on *Julius Caesar*. But I really enjoyed it and it inspired me to watch as many Shakespeare plays as I could."

"Sounds like a worthy book to promote," said Maggie.

Their food came and the conversation turned to Indian cuisine. He had developed a love for it as a result of his mother who had often made Indian dishes for him and his father.

It was because his mother's father had been a British soldier in India before the English had left in 1947. Maggie's eyes widened.

She told him how she had recently read several books about India, including one set right after the Raj.

"That's right!" said Douglas. "I remember you were reading that thick book set in India. So you know all about it. When my grandfather returned home to England, he was young and restless, so he ended up moving to Canada. He loved Indian food and would make it for his family. So my mom grew up with it and learned a lot of the recipes from him."

They chatted about foods they had grown up with and agreed that their mothers had had more time to cook than they did.

The restaurant offered a small selection of desserts but they both agreed they were too full to try any of them. Instead, they had the masala tea.

"Oh, by the way, my mom said she can supply us with two carrying cases for the kittens."

"Wonderful!" said Maggie.

"When I went to Newmarket to get your air-conditioner," continued Douglas. "I checked out the second-hand places. One of them had a carrier, but the latch was broken. Another one had a carrier that looked more like it was for a German shepherd. So I didn't bother."

"Yeah, that would be too big," Maggie agreed.

"I checked out Walmart though," said Douglas. "They sell them for about \$20. So if we can't find anything else, we can pick up the other three there."

Maggie nodded.

Now that she had a steady pay cheque, money wasn't such a serious issue. Which was good, because when the bill came, it wasn't a cheap meal.

But it was worth it. Douglas seemed to appreciate it. The whole afternoon had worked out well, but at the same time, it had felt more like a date than a thank-you.

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Sunday gave her a chance to get focused again.

She went out of her way to say good morning to Bemidii who replied with warmth. Emily was sitting with an older lady and passing by them, Maggie stopped for a hug. Emily introduced her friend as Charlotte.

“Named for the book,” said the lady, holding out her hand. Maggie shook it.

“*Charlotte's Web?*”

The lady nodded.

“It came out the year I was born and my older sister had read it. When my mother asked her what we should name the new baby, she said, Charlotte.”

“I love that story!” said Maggie. She took a spot beside Charlotte as the choir, led by Brad, started singing a contemporary praise song and the congregation rose to their feet.

Afterward, she stayed for a quick coffee with Emily and Charlotte before heading to work.

There were two healthy women on the front desk. Which was good. Maggie had to do her blog.

As it turned out, the book Douglas recommended was not an

ebook, but the library did have a copy of it. It would be impossible to read the whole thing in her short shift, but she had enough time to skim and search for the high points. Combined with her experience of *Hamlet* in the park the day before, she was able to put together something that sounded light and literary at the same time.

She wasn't able to turn her attention to a reply for Christopher until after the library was closed and locked.

Opening her draft folder, she reread what she had written. It seemed out-dated now. Better to just start fresh.

Emily's answer to her question about how to get to the place where Emily was at was still on her mind.

Suffering.

But did she really want to launch on a discussion about suffering?

She sighed. In one way, it was good not to know what Christopher looked like and to just evaluate him on the basis of his thoughts, or at least, his ability to put his thoughts into words. But at the same time, it was hard to get to know someone this way. There was no meandering of conversation like she had had with Douglas the day before. Nothing they had discussed had been too heavy, but at least it had given her more of an idea of who he was.

She went for the mundane and told Christopher what a crazy week it had been with everyone getting sick.

"Not too much time for theological reflection, alas," she concluded. "Although I was talking to my friend and she said the reason she has such an amazing relationship with God is because of the suffering she's experienced. Though I kind of suspect, it wasn't the kind of suffering like catching a cold."

That was about all she could think to say.

She hit "send" and then decided, while she was on her computer, it might be a good idea to pick out a book to read for her next blog. If she chose a book that was on the shelf, she could read it tomorrow on her day off.

Switching over to the library database, she started browsing the recent acquisitions. There was a new book by a prominent Christian evangelist about living a life without limits, but it had a 17-day wait on it.

She scrolled down.

Lots of steamy romances. Pass. A few new memoirs, but none by anyone she was interested in. Some thrillers. Nothing to really blog about though. A hunter's cookbook. That could be interesting just because it was different. A book for young mothers about keeping their balance. She was no authority in that area.

Her email icon flashed. A message had just come in.

It was from Christopher. He must be on his computer.

"The topic of suffering is intriguing," she read. "C.S. Lewis wrote *The Problem of Pain* to look at the issue in a theological way. I read the book when I was younger and thought it was excellent. Recently though, I read *A Grief Observed*, also by C.S. Lewis. The difference between the books is that *A Grief Observed* was his personal story, about his wife dying. So obviously, the issue can be discussed at many different levels. Perhaps your friend couldn't give a theological justification for pain, but it sounds to me as if her life's experiences have been of more value than a treatise on the subject."

Maggie leaned back.

That was an excellent summary of what she had been trying to say. At Bible college, she had read most of the theological works of C.S. Lewis and considered them brilliant. But what was brilliance next to experience? Emily could talk to God like he was right in the room. No, that wasn't it. Anyone could pray out loud. It was even more than God being in the heart. Emily was in a place where the spiritual brought more pleasure than the physical.

It was like being a saint. Maggie sighed and went back to the library catalogue. Idly, she typed "saint" into the search box. Maybe a good biography about St. Francis of Assisi would get her closer to where she wanted to be.

The word "saint" appeared in 269 titles.

Narrowing her search to "Christianity" she found only four titles. Sure enough, two of them were about Francis. One was a DVD about Patrick. And the fourth title was a book that put forth the idea that Jesus wouldn't recognize his church today. A quick reading of the reviews told her that the author believed that the book of Acts was a work of fiction and that Paul, not Jesus, had invented Christianity.

She clicked back to her email and reread the message. She wasn't sure she wanted to reply right away. Glancing at her watch

and seeing it was now almost six o'clock, she decided to shut down the computer and just go out and pick up something off the display shelf that featured new books.

Browsing in the semi-darkness, a novel about a mid-western family looked interesting. But its epic length was a deterrent.

That left her with a couple of travel guides – one for Thailand and one for Jordan.

There was a biography about Michelle Obama and a guide to fashion for teenage girls.

Internet safety.

A book about breaking free from emotional eating.

Why was this hard? Last week, she had been inspired, eager to blog and eager to share her faith. Now she felt distracted.

She returned her attention to the book about emotional eating. Beside it was a book by the same author, but this one was entitled, *Women, Food and God*. That could work. She picked it up and read the back cover. The author suggested that your relationship with food was a mirror of your relationship with God.

If that was true, her relationship was sadly lacking. Tuna fish sandwiches. Cereal. Bagged salads. Her best meals since moving from Toronto had been with Douglas.

But still, it was a topic with a lot of potential. Maggie took the book over to the front desk and turned on the computer to check it out.

When she got home, she switched on the air-conditioner and went into the kitchen. Scrambled eggs and toast, she decided. She took her plate and the book into the living room.

The subtitle of the book was *An Unexpected Path to Almost Everything*.

That would be nice. Maybe she could find God through food rather than suffering. She opened the book while balancing her plate on her lap.

The front flap of the book told her to look down at her plate. Maggie did. The book assured her that the answers were there. Maggie looked again. Her toast looked like it could use a bit more margarine.

She ate and read.

The author had an engaging style and did an excellent job of finding links between food and spirituality. Maggie ended up

reading it in one sitting with only a break to make coffee. So much for saving it for Monday. The spiritual scope of the book would give her plenty to discuss in her blog.

She put the book down and rubbed her eyes. It was two in the morning. No longer among the community of women she had met in the book, she was once again alone.

"I don't know how you do it!" Maggie burst out. She had helped Emily put away her groceries and now they were in the living room with a pot of tea and a plate of cucumber sandwiches. The topic was general - church and the upcoming events - but all that Maggie could think about was suffering.

"What do you mean, dear?" asked Emily.

"I've been thinking about what you said about suffering," said Maggie. "I just don't get it. I pray and read my Bible and God takes care of me, but it's different with you. I wouldn't be able to do what you did, give up a good man for God."

"It may not be what God wants you to do, dear," said Emily.

"But I still want to get to that point where you are . . . I mean, you have a peace of mind that I don't."

"That just comes with experience," said Emily, looking down at her tea-cup. "But it might help if I told you about one of the experiences that brought me to this point."

Maggie nodded.

"When I was a young mother," said Emily, slowly. "My doctor diagnosed me as having cancer."

Maggie's eyes widened.

"I remember that moment so clearly. Everything just sank in me. I literally just sank to the ground and all I could think of was, *my children*."

Maggie nodded.

"I always worried about my children," said Emily. "Most of my prayers were taken up with requests to protect them from every danger I could think of. But now it was even worse. It was real. Up until then, I had imaginary disasters. Now I had something that really threatened them."

"It must have been awful."

"It was," said Emily. "I even remember the dress I was wearing the day the doctor told me. I hated that dress afterwards."

Emily was quiet for a moment.

"What I learned, dear, was that a good man couldn't save me. Robert offered to come with me to my next doctor's appointment, but I wanted to be alone. There was nothing he could do for me."

Maggie thought for a moment about what it would be like – a sentence of death. It was true. Douglas would have sympathy, but there was no salvation in sympathy.

"Robert took care of the children when I went to my next appointment. I sat in the waiting room of my doctor's office," said Emily. "I remember that there was another young mother there. She had two active boys and seemed to be there for just a routine check-up. I almost wept. Her life was so normal and mine was falling apart."

Maggie could imagine the scene.

"And while I was sitting there," Emily continued. "God came to me. I had always talked to him and thought I knew him. But I didn't really. He reminded me of something. At the time, I was doing some volunteer work through my church. It was helping the widows of soldiers who hadn't returned from the war. That would be World War II."

Maggie nodded.

"They had been left with young children and couldn't support themselves. I was part of a group of women who pooled our resources to help these women. We had fundraisers and did all we could. Thankfully, there were only three small families in this area we were helping. Our bake sales were successful but in a limited way."

Maggie nodded again.

"As I was sitting there, God showed me how he was working through me. He pointed out to me that I wouldn't be doing this if it weren't for him. He was working through *me*."

Maggie nodded.

"That was the beginning for me," said Emily. "I still had to face my fears. But what the doctor had failed to tell me was that the initial test was inconclusive. I retook the test six months later and found I didn't have cancer."

"Well, that's good," said Maggie.

"But the experience changed me," said Emily. "It made me realize how quickly something can happen and fear can just take

over. I didn't like the fear.”

Fear was being afraid to lose what you had. Maggie could imagine how fear would be a factor for a young mother with a husband and children. In fact, it wasn't too hard to imagine being in a relationship with Douglas and then being afraid to lose him.

“But as I said, that was only the beginning,” said Emily. “I hesitate to tell you more because your journey will be quite different. But what God had to do for me was to take away my fear and fill it with faith.”

“How did he do that?” Maggie asked.

Emily looked right at her.

“By putting me in fearful situations.”

Emily was quiet, perhaps to give Maggie time to think, perhaps lost in her own thoughts.

Unfortunately, it made sense. One couldn't learn how to live a fearless life without facing fear.

“He proved himself time and time again until I reached a point where nothing could frighten me,” said Emily. “The final time was when Robert died and I was left alone. But again, God was faithful. He met every need as it came up. When I met Tim, I almost went back to putting my trust in a man.”

Maggie nodded. It would be all too easy.

“But it wasn't a fair trade,” Emily shook her head. “Poor Tim. He's a good man but he's not God.”

For once, Maggie had something already written just waiting to be posted on the blog at the end of the week. The blog had been easy to write although she felt it might be a bit on the light side compared to the spiritual feast that Emily seemed to enjoy every day.

Christopher got a reply on her dinner break.

She mentioned the idea that faith was built up in fearful situations, though added, it wasn't a personal observation, but one that her friend had made. That was enough for one email. She hit “send.”

The rest of Tuesday's shift was routine work and though the day passed quickly, she was still feeling sluggish. But how to shake it?

On Wednesday, Christopher's reply surprised her. He asked if she wanted to get together. The Georgina Military Museum was

having their annual open house. Maggie had read about that in the paper. But Christopher's email went into way more detail.

"It's a small museum that has displays about every campaign from the Boer War to Afghanistan. It focuses on the local residents who have fought in the campaigns. When they have their open house, there's a lot of stuff outside too. They have some amazing displays, tables filled with weapons and artillery from different wars, including men in actual uniforms. A lot of World War II stuff. Some items from World War I. Even a display for the American attempts to take Canada. Last year they fired a cannon that was used in the War of 1812. It was awesome! I could imagine the sailors on the ships all firing their cannons at the same time . . ."

He sounded so enthused by it that Maggie had to laugh. For their first get-together, she would have expected something more like dinner and a movie.

In fact, he seemed to catch himself because he suggested they meet at the military museum and then go out to lunch afterward.

It sounded like a good plan, especially since the Georgina Military Museum was only a ten-minute drive from her place. She wrote back to say that would be fine and that she was looking forward to it.

There. That would give her something to think about other than Douglas. Like what to wear, for example. A visit to a military museum wasn't exactly a formal event, but first impressions had to be considered.

Again though, it would require asking for Saturday off. Saying a quick prayer, she went into Brad's office and explained the situation, how she had met Christopher online at the same site that Emily had met Tim. Brad groaned. Maggie nodded ruefully.

But he agreed to take her shift on Saturday.

"You've been so good about taking the Sunday afternoon shifts," he said. "I owe you for that."

"Thanks, Brad," she said gratefully.

"Just don't get me involved with your new man friend," said Brad, his eyes returning to the papers on his desk. "I don't want another Tim on my hands."

Maggie laughed.

But when she went back to her office, she thought it over. Christopher was a good man, no doubt about that. But was he

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the one for her? Maybe she'd end up doing to him what Emily had done to Tim.

Chapter Twenty

Where are you off to?” Maggie called out to Douglas. It was Saturday and he was leaving his house at the same time as her. Like her, he was dressed casually in jeans and a striped polo shirt. She had searched her closet this morning and come up with a pair of capri pants and a green cotton tunic.

She didn't mind being inquisitive about her neighbour's activities, now that she had a definite get-together with Christopher.

“The Georgina Military Museum is having their annual open house,” Douglas called out.

What a coincidence.

“It's really cool,” Douglas continued. “They have tanks, some of them from World War II. Last year, they even had a German one that someone had restored . . .”

Seeing the look on her face, he quickly added. “It's not all armoured personnel carriers. There's a small building just packed with history. You know, glass display cases about all the local boys who have fought in the different campaigns over the years. I think you'd like it.”

“Oh, I'm sure I would,” she said. “It's not that. It's just

that . . ." This was hard to say. "It's just that I've been getting to know someone online."

Douglas didn't say anything, but his eyebrows went up.

"I met him at the same place that Emily, my friend at church, met her guy. And we've been emailing and we're actually going to meet today."

Douglas was grinning. It was a little disconcerting that he didn't look crushed by this. In fact, going by his expression, he was thrilled for her.

"Say no more," he said, holding up his hand. "I understand . . ." He looked thoughtful.

"Actually, it's funny that you should be heading for the Georgina Military Museum," Maggie said. "My friend online suggested we meet there. It only has the tanks and the vehicles once a year."

"True," said Douglas, nodding. He still looked like he was working something out in his mind.

"He's into history, World War II, and all that. He's been there before, so he thought it would be fun to go together."

Again Douglas nodded. "Say! I have an idea . . ."

"Uh huh?" she was relieved to have said it all, even if Douglas seemed cheerful.

"I'm heading over to the museum anyhow. Why don't I give you lift?"

She didn't like the idea. She wanted to take her own car over to the museum, just in case Christopher wasn't right for her. She certainly didn't want Christopher driving her right to her house if she never wanted to see him again.

On the other hand, Douglas would certainly be at the museum long enough for her to form an impression of her internet friend. If Christopher didn't interest her or if something felt wrong, she could always return home with Douglas.

"OK," she said. "That'll work."

She got into the passenger seat. Why did this have to happen on the day she was meeting Christopher? And why did it have to feel so right to be getting into Douglas's car?

Maggie had to hope that the connection with Christopher would be immediate. After all, they shared their faith. If they could just click right away and go off and have an amazing time together then maybe she could get over this silly crush on

Douglas.

Douglas cut through a subdivision that took them out to Woodbine Avenue. From there, they drove north, past the Tim Hortons, the Canadian Tire, the Swiss Chalet, the Georgina Ice Palace that also housed the Keswick library. From there, it got a little more rural as they sped by the final subdivision and got into farm country.

There were still some commercial buildings out here, but now they were passing farmer's fields. It made Maggie wonder where she and Christopher would have lunch. Swiss Chalet was the nearest real restaurant and going back there would only make her think of Douglas. In the meantime, Douglas was chatting away.

He was telling her about previous years at the military museum. Last year was the first year they had a trailer set aside for sellers of authentic war pieces. He had picked up a World War II infantry soldier's field guide for \$25.

Of course, it was easy for him to talk. He wasn't nervous. He wasn't about to meet someone who could potentially change his life. He was just going to look at old tanks.

Maggie barely listened as she stared out the window at the passing fields. Cars and trucks were already parked along the side of the road as they approached the small museum.

The outside was full of activity. Tented sun shelters had been set up over tables lined with military paraphernalia. Families mingled with men walking around in various uniforms, ranging from recent camouflage to ones that looked as if they went back to the days when Canada was an outpost of Empire.

As they got out of the car, Maggie realized she had no way of knowing who Christopher was. He could have been one of the men walking around in a uniform for all she knew. And if she kept hanging out with Douglas, there was no way Christopher would think she was the one he was exchanging emails with.

"Well," she said. "I guess I'll just go from here."

She didn't want to outright ask him to stick around in case Christopher didn't turn out to be her cup of tea. Hopefully the museum would keep him interested long enough for her to make a decision.

But he was just standing there, still by his open car door.

She thought her nerves were going to snap. Why was he staring at her like that?

"Uh, Maggie?"

"Yes, Douglas? What is it?" She was getting impatient. The longer she stood there with him, the more likely Christopher would see her and think they were together.

"You came here today to meet a man named Christopher."

Now she was staring at him.

"Yes, I did," she said.

"Well . . ." He looked down at the grass they were parked on. "It's been me you've been emailing."

Her jaw dropped.

"But how . . ." she said.

He shrugged.

"There aren't too many Christian dating sites online. The one we're with is one of the biggest."

"You never mentioned anything about online dating!"

"Neither did you," he pointed out. "Besides, I signed up with it before I knew you. After Sandy, I wanted to meet someone new."

"But did you know it was me you were emailing?" This was bewildering. Why would Douglas sign up with a Christian dating service?

"It crossed my mind with your comment about cats. But I wasn't sure. And I knew you were a librarian. But I couldn't say anything in case it wasn't you. I was in a tough spot because I really wanted to get to know you *and* the online you, if you know what I mean."

They were still standing by his car, while all around them people were parking and walking past them.

"I don't get it," she said. "I mean, here we were, getting to know each other online and in the real world . . ."

"Well, it was kind of complicated," he said, looking uncomfortable. "I liked you and I liked the you online. I was hoping you were the girl I was talking to online, but part of me was afraid that that was just wishful thinking."

She nodded slowly. This was a lot to take in. Douglas and Christopher. Not two people. One.

"I only knew for sure you two were the same person when we were talking on the driveway there," continued Douglas. "I didn't know if I should spring it on you then, or wait til we got here."

"Wow," was all she could say. Her dreams were coming true all

at once, but there was still one very real problem.

"Did you ever suspect it was me?" Douglas asked.

"Of course not," she said. "I didn't even realize you were a Christian. All I knew about you was that you didn't go to church!"

"I go to church," said Douglas, surprised.

"No, you don't, she retorted. "You do your grocery shopping Sunday mornings!"

"I go to church Sunday afternoons!" he said.

Sunday afternoons. When she was at work. And here she had just assumed that he had given up on faith altogether.

"C'mon!" said Douglas grinning, as he shut his door. This time he did take her hand. "Let's check out the museum!"

"Let's check out the museum!" she repeated. "Let's check out the museum! How can you be so . . . *calm* about this?!"

He laughed.

"Well, I didn't know how it would work out, but I knew it would. Didn't you say that the first time we talked? All things work together for the good . . ."

Yes, she had. And right from the start, she had been making assumptions about Douglas.

Another thought occurred to her as they headed for the busy front lawn of the museum.

"But I don't understand," she said. "Do you go through the site everyday looking for the new people that have been added? I started getting emails from you right away."

"Your profile automatically got emailed me to me because we live in the same area."

"How did that happen?" she demanded. "I don't get emails with profiles."

He grinned.

"You haven't played around with it. They offer a lot of services, but you have to check off the features you want. You have to go to the membership page. Then you have a list of all the possible features . . ."

"OK, OK," she said, waving for him to stop. "I get it . . ."

After a lunch at Swiss Chalet, they returned home.

A car was parked in Douglas's driveway.

Douglas groaned.

"I wish she'd give me a heads up."

An older lady was examining the perennial bushes along the side of his house.

"Douglas Christopher!" she said, as soon as he had stepped out of his car. "You have not been trimming these bushes!"

"Mom!" he said, grinning, going over to give her a kiss on the cheek. "I'd like you to meet someone."

The lady turned and focused her attention on Maggie. Maggie got the impression there was nothing superficial about the examination she was undergoing.

"Mom, this is Maggie," said Douglas. "Maggie, I'd like you to meet my mom."

Maggie stepped forward to shake her hand.

"Maggie," said Douglas's mother. "Short for Margaret, I presume?"

"Yes, it was my grandmother's name."

"It's a good name," said Douglas's mother approvingly. "It has roots. Not like all the names people have today . . ." No doubt she was about to launch on a list of all the names she disapproved of, but Douglas was steering her up the steps to the deck.

"Don't forget the box, dear," his mother said. "Though everything's probably melted by now."

Douglas gave Maggie a *what-did-I-tell-you?* grin as he opened the door of the passenger seat and pulled out a large cardboard box filled to the brim with tea, biscuits, imported brown beans, mashed peas, English crisps and boxed custard.

"And the carriers!" his mother called back over her shoulder as she went inside.

Maggie went back down the steps to take the two pet carriers that Douglas had retrieved from the floor of the car. They joined Douglas's mother who was now looking over the kitchen with disapproval.

"Do you ever clean this, Douglas?" she asked, peering into his sink.

"Clean my sink?" said Douglas, joining her to look into his sink. "No, not really."

His mother grabbed a dish cloth and began scrubbing it.

"This is just a start. A sink can shine if you're determined enough."

"I'll look up how to keep my sink shiny on the internet," promised Douglas. "Would you like some tea?"

She nodded.

"Now where are those kittens you told me about?"

"They're on Maggie's deck. Or somewhere on her front lawn," said Douglas, filling his kettle up with water. He looked over at Maggie.

"I'd be happy to show you," said Maggie, turning to Douglas's mother. Maggie was trying not to laugh.

Maggie led Douglas's mother across the driveway to the cat home.

"Is this how you keep them dry?" said Douglas's mother, looking the box over. Maggie got the sense she was trying to find a weak point.

Maggie nodded.

"So far it's done an excellent job."

"Now, where did you get this . . ." Douglas's mother seemed to be searching for a word to describe the home.

"Douglas made it," she replied.

His mother looked at it with new interest. She circled it and even looked underneath.

"Are the cats in it right now?" she asked.

"It's possible," said Maggie, unlatching the lid and looking inside. "Nope. I guess they're roaming."

That didn't seem to be an acceptable conclusion of the matter. Douglas's mother expected to see the kittens.

They circled Maggie's house and found the kittens playing around the woodpile with Tabby sitting majestically on top supervising them.

Douglas's mother nodded her approval.

"She's a lovely cat," she said. Surprisingly, Tabby let Douglas's mother reach up and pet her.

"Ah, she's purring," said Douglas's mother with satisfaction. "She must have been a house cat at one time. Her kittens are a little wild." She glanced down and then back up at Tabby. "But you can tell she's a good mother."

With Tabby approved by Douglas's mother, they returned to his kitchen and a whistling teapot. His mother quickly took over making the tea.

"You have to steep a tea bag for exactly four minutes,"

Douglas explained to Maggie in a low voice as they went into the living room. "If I do it for four minutes and thirty seconds, she complains that it's too strong."

"I heard that!" his mother called from the kitchen.

"But why did you do it?"

Douglas's mom had left after a short but intense visit. Maggie and Douglas were now in his living room, with pot of Darjeeling tea (the teapot had been at the bottom of the cardboard box) and a plate of English biscuits between them.

"Well . . . after all I'd been through with Sandy, I wanted to take things slowly. Get to know you really well." Douglas looked genuinely sorry. "It wasn't you, Maggie. It was me. I just didn't want to go through something crazy like that again."

Maggie stayed quiet. She didn't want to leak it out that she already knew most of the story.

Douglas leaned back on the couch.

"When I moved here," he said. "Sandy was the realtor that showed me this house. We hit it off, especially since we were neighbours and I ended up going to her church."

Douglas looked down at his mug of tea.

"What I didn't realize was that the youth pastor was her old high school boyfriend. They both grew up here. She ended up back with him. That wouldn't have been so bad, except that he was married, so it caused quite a stir. Maybe you picked up on that at Keswick Community . . ."

"I knew something had happened," she said truthfully.

"It was hard on me," said Douglas. "But I really felt sorry for the youth pastor's family. He had a wife and a couple of young kids. Sandy ruined all that. Also, I think it disillusioned a lot of people. The youth program was going pretty strong before this happened and this just brought it to an end. Thankfully some of the other churches are picking up where Keswick Community left off."

Maggie nodded. A thought occurred to her. "You were one of the people who went to the Baptist church!"

He nodded.

"There were so many of us who started going there after it all. They ended up doing a Sunday afternoon service. I had actually made some new friends so it was a bit hard to start all over again,

but it worked out.”

“So . . . you're pretty happy over there?”

Douglas was quiet for a moment.

“Well, at the time that everything happened, I never wanted to see the inside of Keswick Community again. And then when you said you were going there, I knew we'd never be going to church together. Although, I guess I could rethink that. It would be a lot easier going back if we went together.”

Douglas was having an animated conversation with Bemidii. Despite his interest in the First Nations people in the area, he had never met Bemidii. Like Maggie, he had spent his church time more concerned about his own needs and his own relationship, than about the other people sitting in the pews. The way she had focused on Robbie, he had focused on Sandy.

Bemidii was enjoying talking to someone who was as passionate about the lake as he was, and Maggie knew Douglas - and his book - would benefit enormously from the new friendship.

Maggie still had her Sunday shift, but she left Douglas chatting with Emily in the fellowship hall and a promise that she would be at Douglas's for dinner after work. It was hard not to just fall into each other's arms after all they'd been through, but it was also a blessed relief not to have to stomp down on her feelings for Douglas anymore. Whatever the future held, Douglas would be sharing it.

Epilogue

The big day had arrived.

Tabby and her kittens had to be at their appointment by eight. It was 7:15 in the morning and both Douglas and Maggie were taking the day off work.

A reluctant Tabby and her clawing four kittens were being captured and inserted into their carriers. One of the rascals actually went up a tree to elude Douglas. Maggie had to control her mirth at the sight of him having to shimmy up the birch tree and take on the vicious ball of fluff.

"It's all for the best," she called out.

"Who are you talking to?" Douglas called back. "Me or him?"

Douglas was coming down the trunk of the tree with a firm grip on a scratching kitten.

"Both," she said, hurrying to unlatch the door. The kitten was quickly put inside his carrier where he protested with loud meows.

Then it was time to load them all into Douglas's car for the twenty-minute drive to Newmarket.

"What a cacophony," said Douglas, as they pulled out onto the Queensway. Tabby and her kittens were all loudly protesting.

“Dissonance, clamour, dim.”

“Let me guess, thesaurus.com,” said Maggie.

Douglas grinned.

“Yep,” he said. “Do you have the map?”

She pulled the map out of the folder with all the surgery information. Douglas had printed it off at Google Maps. He glanced at it, got his bearings and returned his eyes to the road ahead.

“You know, Maggie,” he said.

“Uh huh?”

Behind them, a chorus of violent meows were asserting their opposition to this whole outing.

But Douglas had paused in thought and Maggie felt the weight of the silence. Was he going to say something . . . something significant? She felt momentarily breathless.

“Uh . . . would you like a coffee?”

Her nervous energy came out as a laugh.

“Sure,” she said.

Douglas put on the flicker and turned right in to a Country Style. He managed to order two regular coffees in the drive thru, despite the howls behind him.

“Maybe some music will soothe the savage beasts,” said Douglas. “Is there anything in the glove compartment?”

She went through the CDs and selected one with contemporary renditions of classic hymns. Putting it in the player, it seemed to have a mildly soothing effect. Either that or Tabby and the kittens had just given up and chosen sleep over protest.

They sipped their coffee and listened to the music. Arriving at the OSPCA with ten minutes to spare, they both spent a busy few minutes bringing in all the carrying cases. Others were also in the waiting room with their pets, but no one had as many as Douglas and Maggie. The cats woke up to resume their protest.

“Whew,” said Douglas, as they took a seat. All the carriers were around their feet. He reached for her hand, but he only held it for a moment as they were called to bring in Tabby and her kittens. Each kitten had a name now, so a tag was affixed to each carrier. Time had revealed that Tabby had had three girls and one boy. The boy was Christopher. The girls were Emily, Margaret and Edwina, after Douglas's mother.

"Lovely names," said an OSPCA lady who was helping them carry their load into one of the inner rooms. "They're practically your children, eh?"

Maggie and Douglas smiled at each other. It was natural that she would think of them as a couple.

When they had put the carriers down, they were told they should return at 5:00.

"We do the surgery in the morning and then keep them for the day to make sure they're recovering nicely."

Maggie nodded. She knew this from the pdf document Douglas had printed off. What she didn't know was how she and Douglas would spend the time.

Douglas took her hand as they went back out down the hallway, through the glass doors and into the sunshine.

"Well," he said. "It feels good to get that done."

Maggie nodded.

"Want to go for a walk?" asked Douglas.

"Sure," she said, as they headed back to his car.

Douglas had a destination in mind. Fairy Lake as it turned out. Being a weekday, it was much quieter than when they had come to see *Hamlet*. There were a few mothers and children around the playground areas, but the walking paths only had the occasional cyclist or jogger.

"You know, Maggie," Douglas said. It was the same tone as in the car.

"Uh huh?" she said again.

He stopped walking and turned to face her.

"I kind of hate to think of you raising those cats all by yourself."

Maggie laughed. Douglas grinned too, but then he turned serious as he looked down at the ground and then back at her.

"Do you think, I mean, well do you think we know each other well enough to, you know, get-together . . . ?"

For a man who read an online thesaurus for fun and knew the titles of obscure Shakespeare plays, he was having a hard time.

She'd make it easy for him.

"I think so," she said, smiling.

"Yeah, me too," he said. He took her hand and they started walking again.

A Good Man

THE END

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