

"Kingsbury confronts hard issues with truth and sensitivity."

—FRANCINE RIVERS

WHEN JOY A NOVEL
CAME TO STAY

KAREN
KINGSBURY

Bestselling author of *Beyond Tuesday Morning*

A KINGSBURY COLLECTION

PUBLISHED BY MULTNOMAH BOOKS

12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200

Colorado Springs, CO 80921

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, New International Version © 1973, 1984 by International Bible Society, used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. The Holy Bible, New King James Version © 1984 by Thomas Nelson Inc.

Excerpts from the hymn “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” by Thomas O. Chisolm © 1923, Ren. 1951 Hope Publishing Company, Carol Stream, IL 60188. All rights reserved. International copyright secured. Used by permission.

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author’s imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

ISBN: 978-1-60142-427-3

Copyright © 2005 by Karen Kingsbury

Where Yesterday Lives © 1998 by Karen Kingsbury (ISBN: 978-1-57673-285-4)

When Joy Came to Stay © 2000 by Karen Kingsbury (ISBN: 978-1-57673-746-0)

On Every Side © 2001 by Karen Kingsbury (ISBN: 978-1-57673-850-4)

Cover design by Kelly L. Howard

Published in association with the literary agency of Alive Communications, Inc. 7680 Goddard St., Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80920, and in association with the literary agency of Arthur Pine Associates.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House Inc., New York.

MULTNOMAH and its mountain colophon are registered trademarks of Random House Inc.

Printed in the United States of America

2012—First Trade Paperback Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

DEDICATED TO...

Donald, who is and has been my very best friend regardless of the storms of life. Thank you for believing in me, loving me, and praying for me as if your life depended on it. Persecution is a promise in the kingdom of God, but with you by my side the lessons we have learned this past year are both vivid and welcomed. My greatest joy is knowing you are by my side, now and forever.

Kelsey, caught somewhere between the oh-so-cute little girl and the tenderly precious young woman whose image grows clearer with each passing season. Whether kicking a soccer ball, mastering a math test, or seeking God's heart on the daily dilemmas of growing up, you are proving yourself to be intensely committed, deeply devoted, sincere, genuine, and true. I am the most blessed mom in the world to have the privilege of calling you my daughter, my little Norm, my song.

Tyler, tall, strong, and handsome—in the days of becoming, it is clear the type of man you'll be. And yet now, for a short while, you're still a little boy, remembering to pick a dandelion for me on family walks. Kind and compassionate, always ready to share, thinking of others. When I look at you, so often I see your daddy. And on many wonderful moments I see your Father, too. If I could bottle your zest for life, your sincerity, and share them with others, the world would be a different place.

Keep your eyes on the goal, son; God has great plans for you. I love you always.

Austin, no longer making baby steps but running through our house and our hearts. It's marvelous to see the way God has made you focused—gifted with the ability to master an action regardless of the time and energy involved. Even more amazing are the glimpses of a tender heart beneath the toughness—"Daddy, I'm going to kiss your wife..."

Mingled with your three-year-old laughter are words that will ring through the decades. I remain always in awe of the miracle of your life.

And to my loving Lord and Savior, who has, for now, blessed me with these.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As with all my books, this one was written with the help of many friends and professionals who made it ring true literally and sing true spiritually. Writing about depression is not something I've done before; although I've wrestled with testing and persecutions, battling depression has never been one of my trials. For that reason I did extensive research on what I came to understand as an illness and drew heavily from the results God brought my way.

In this light I especially want to thank my dear friend, Sylvia Wallgren—a Christian counselor and licensed psychiatrist—for giving me understanding. In a way that was both miraculous and timely, the Lord ordained that Sylvia and I meet. She also is a prayer warrior and lifted me up to heaven's throne daily as I wrote this book. I strongly suspect Sylvia will be a treasured friend—part of my close, close circle—throughout our journey here and on into eternity. Sylvia, I can't tell you strongly enough how much your daily encouragement and e-mailed prayers meant to me, still mean to me. I thank God for you.

Again, thanks go to my amazing editor, Karen Ball, who takes my work and fine-tunes it so that the music you hear is truly a thing of beauty. Karen, you're a gifted editor, and I am blessed for knowing you, working with you.

To the Multnomah family, from my dear friends in sales to those in publicity, marketing, editorial, management, cover design, endorsements, and everyone in between—you are the most amazing people to work for. Every now and then, in the quiet moments before dawn, I find myself in awe that this is my job and you are my coworkers. I believe God is taking our books someplace we've never imagined before! Thank you, a million times over.

Like last year, thanks to Kristy and Jeff Blake for taking care of my precious angel child during those hours when I absolutely needed a moment to write.

Also a special thanks to my niece Shannon Kane, to Jan Adams, and to Joan Westfall for always being the first in line to read my books and give me valuable feedback. Also to my other family and friends for your love, support, and encouragement

in every aspect of my writing. Especially my mom and dad, who have been there since my first stapled, colored-in book at age five.

With every book I write there are people who pray for me and lend an ear while I talk plots and character traits. These are my special, oh-so-close friends and sisters in Christ, the golden ones who will never change or leave regardless of the passing of days. You know who you are and how precious each of you are to me and my family. May God continue to richly bless our friendships.

There are nights in the midst of writing a book when leftovers are the best thing going at dinnertime and the laundry is piled to the ceiling. For those times and any others when I might have been just a tad preoccupied, I thank my incredible husband and sweethearted children—I couldn't do this without the combined efforts from each of you.

And thanks to the Skyview basketball team, for always giving me a reason to cheer, even on deadline.

THE DESCENT



*Weeping may endure for a night,
but joy comes in the morning.*

PSALM 30:5, NKJV

PROLOGUE



Six days had passed since Laura Thompson's job as a mother had officially ended.

The wedding had gone off without a hitch, and the last of Laura's four babies was out of the house, ready—like his siblings—to build a life of his own. She would always be their mom, of course, and in time she and Larry would welcome grandbabies and opportunities to visit with their grown children.

But for all intents and purposes, Laura was out of a job— and that was the primary reason for today's meeting.

She let her gaze fall on the circle of women gathered that Friday morning at Cleveland Community Church—women she'd known most of her life—and she was struck by the realization that they'd arrived at this place together. Houses quiet, children gone, grandchildren still years away...

Only their Friday morning Bible study remained the same.

The chattering among the women diminished and Emma Lou, women's president for the past year cast a tender smile their way. "Pastor gave me the names this morning."

A hush of expectancy settled over the group, and several of the women crossed their legs or tilted their heads, shifting their attention to the bowl in Emma Lou's hand. Inside were the names of younger women, women who felt the need for prayer, women who were diapering babies and solving multiplication problems over dinner dishes and wondering how to make laughter and love last even in a Christian marriage.

Laura swallowed hard, surprised to feel tears in her eyes. Women like she and her friends once had been.

"Before we open our Bibles, let's everyone draw a name. And remember, these are women who want your prayer and support, possibly even your mentoring. We may be finished raising our families, but these young gals are just starting out." Emma Lou's eyes shone with the memories of days gone by. "Draw a name, keep it confidential, and take the responsibility of praying for that one as seriously as you once took the job of mothering. I believe the Lord would find our work in this task every bit as important."

Laura dabbed at a tear and sucked in a quick breath. She wouldn't cry, not here, not now. She had a wonderful family and a million happy memories. There was nothing she could do to change the fact that her family was grown. But this—this role of praying for a young mother in their church fellowship—was something she could do today. Something that would give her life purpose, meaning, and direction.

Laura intended to carry out the assignment with all her heart.

The bowl was passed around the circle, and when it came to her she reached in, moving her fingers through the papers. *Who, Lord? Who would You have me pray for?*

She clasped a small slip and plucked it from the others. Would it be a mother overwrought with financial challenges? One burdened with the daily demands of mothering? Or perhaps a sweet daughter of the Lord whose husband didn't share her faith? Whoever she was, Laura knew the power of lifting a sister directly to the throne room of God. She could hardly imagine the results of praying for such a one over time.

Laura waited until Emma Lou asked them to read the names they had drawn, then her eyes fell to her hands as she unfolded the piece of paper and saw the bold writing inside. For a moment, a sharp pang of disappointment stabbed at her. *What's this? I must have grabbed the wrong slip.*

Maggie Stovall?

Of all the women in the church, God wanted her to pray for Maggie Stovall? What special needs could an exemplary woman like Maggie possibly have? How could she require daily prayer? Surely there was someone who needed her support more than Maggie Stovall.

Laura settled back in her chair, surprised Maggie had even gone to the trouble of requesting prayer. The young woman was a regular at church. Each week without exception, she and her husband volunteered in the Sunday school wing to lead the children in song. As far as Laura knew, Maggie was a successful newspaper columnist, her husband an established attorney. For the past few years, they'd even opened their home to foster children.

In need of prayer? The Stovalls were part of the blessed crowd—popular, well-liked people who cast a favorable impression on the entire church body, people the pastor and elders were proud to have in their midst.

Never, not even once, had Laura seen Maggie Stovall look anything but radiantly happy and perfectly put together.

Maggie Stovall? Am I hearing you right, Lord?

The answer was clear and quick: *Pray, dear one. Maggie needs prayer.*

Immediately an image filled Laura's mind. The image of a woman wearing a mask.

Laura couldn't make out the woman's features, nor were the details of the mask clear. Still the image remained, and though Laura had no idea what to make of the mental picture she was instantly seized with remorse. *I'm sorry, Lord. Really. I'll pray... maybe there's something I don't know about Maggie.*

Laura ran her finger gently over the young woman's name, then folded the slip of paper and tucked it inside her Bible.

The vision of the masked woman came to mind again, and a sadness covered Laura's heart. Was it Maggie? Was there something she was hiding? *What is it, Lord? Tell me?*

Silence.

Laura sighed and her resolve grew. She might no longer be needed in the daily tasks of mothering, but clearly she was needed in this. God had spoken that much to her months ago when she had first suggested the idea of praying for the young women in their midst. And if this woman was the one she was to pray for, so be it.

She would pray for Maggie Stovall as though it were the most important job in the world.

And maybe one day God would let her understand.

I



The moments of lucidity were few and far between anymore. Thankfully, this was one of them. Aware of the fact, Maggie Stovall worked her fingers over the computer keyboard as though they might somehow propel her ahead of the darkness, keep her inches in front of whatever it was that hungered after her mind, her sanity.

Despite all that was uncertain that fall, Maggie was absolutely sure of one thing: She was losing it. And the little blond girl—whoever she might be—was only partly to blame.

Maggie's desk in the newsroom of the *Cleveland Gazette* was one of the remaining places where, most of the time, she still felt normal. The twenty or forty minutes a day she spent there were an oasis of peace and clarity bordered by a desert of hours, all dark, barren, and borderline crazy. The newsroom deadlines and demands left no room for fear and trembling, no time for worrying whether the darkness was about to consume her.

Maggie drew a steadying breath, glanced around the newsroom, and saw that the office was full of more reporters than usual for a Wednesday. *Slow news day. Great.* When news was slow her column got front-page billing, and the one she was writing for tomorrow's paper was bound to gain attention: "The Real Abuse of Abused Children." She let her eyes run down the page. This column would be clipped out of papers round the city, tacked to office walls, and mailed to the Social Services department by irate citizens. She would receive dozens of letters, and the paper would receive more, but none of that bothered Maggie.

She'd gotten the job at the *Gazette* more than two years earlier and she'd been churning out her column, "Maggie's Mind," five days a week since. She'd developed a reputation, a persona, that a segment of the public hated and a greater segment couldn't seem to get enough of. People said she put words to the thoughts and conversations that took place in a majority of homes in their area and around the country. The conservative homes. The people who voted against tax hikes and partial-birth abortions; people who wanted tougher prisons and longer sentences, and prayer in public schools. The segment of the population who wanted a return to family-friendly governing.

For those people, she was a welcome voice. The voice of morality in a time and place where few in the paper, or anywhere in the media for that matter, seemed committed to speaking on their behalf. Most *Gazette* readers loved Maggie. From the beginning they had applauded her, and a few months after starting at the paper the editorial staff had been forced to hire an assistant simply to weed through the mail generated by Maggie's efforts.

"You know, Maggie girl, I think you've really got something with that column of yours," her editor had told her more than once. "It's disconcerting, really. Like the rest of us are writing for some small special interest group, but you...ah, Maggie, you're writing for them. The moral majority."

Maggie knew the paper's editorial board was glad to have her on staff, even if many of her peers disagreed with her political views. But no one was more proud than her husband, Ben, an assistant district attorney who was also president of the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce. After nearly seven years of marriage, Ben was still in love with her; she had no doubts. Even now, when they had to search awkwardly for things to talk about and her attitude toward him was vastly different than a year ago, he would still walk over burning coals to prove his love.

Because he doesn't know the truth.

No. Not now, Maggie thought. Not with a column to finish.

Among the silent voices that taunted her these days was her own, and at times like this she was her worst enemy. If Ben knew the truth about her past, if he knew the real person he'd married, he would do what Joseph set out to do to Mary two thousand years ago: divorce her quietly and leave town on the first passing donkey.

"How's it coming, Mag?" It was Ron Kendall, managing editor, and he shouted the question from twenty feet away where the editors' desks formed an imposing island in the middle of the newsroom.

"Fine. I'll file in ten minutes."

"I might need it for page one. Give me a liner." Ron leaned back in his chair for a clearer view of Maggie's face.

She glanced at her screen and summed up her column. "Woman's lawsuit demands changes in the way abused children are handled by Social Services."

"Good. Got it." Ron returned to the task at hand—planning the paper's front page.

There were those at the paper who disliked Ron, but Maggie wasn't among them. Built like a linebacker with a mass of unkempt white hair and a perpetual two-day beard, the man's voice rang through the newsroom whenever a deadline was missed or an untruth reported in print. But deep down, beneath his work face, Ron Kendall was the last of a dying breed of editors, a churchgoing conservative who cherished his role in shaping and reporting the news of Cleveland.

Once Maggie ran into Ron at a dinner raising money for the city's rescue mission. Near the end of the evening, he pulled her aside.

"Someday you're going to get offers to leave us." The flint was missing from his

eyes and in its place was a sparkle that couldn't be contrived. "Just remember this: Losing you would be like losing one of my arms." He patted her shoulder. "Don't ever leave us, Maggie. We need you."

That was a year ago, and Maggie was surprised to find Ron had been right. Offers had come from Los Angeles, Dallas, even New York. Editors might have enjoyed staffing their papers with liberal-minded news seekers, but nothing met the readers' appetite like a conservative columnist—and those who were well liked were in high demand.

Maggie had done what Ron asked and stayed. She liked Cleveland and their church friends at Cleveland Community. Besides, Ben's job was there.

If they knew the truth about me... Maggie closed her eyes. They'd fire me in a heartbeat. I'd have no marriage, no column...

Stop it! Stay focused! That was seven years ago, Maggie.

But Maggie knew it didn't matter how many years had slipped by. She would never get past the truth. And there would never be any way she could tell Ben.

Let no falsehood come from your mouth, but only that which is...

There it was again. The familiar calm, still voice...and with it a strange feeling of impending doom so great Maggie had to fight the urge to take cover. Her eyes flew open and she moved her hands into position at her keyboard. "Let's get this thing done," she hissed through clenched teeth. This was no time for strange, scriptural warnings about lie telling. She had a deadline to meet.

What was done was done.

Help me concentrate, God. Help me forget about what's behind; help me look ahead without this...whatever it is that wants to consume me.

Her head cleared, and she studied her computer screen once more.

Her column that day was based on a lawsuit filed against the city's Social Services department by a Cleveland woman contesting that the department was to blame for destroying her son. She'd adopted the boy when he was five years old. Over the next four years he'd been diagnosed with a host of disorders all attesting to the fact that he was unmanageable, unable to attach emotionally, and inappropriately aggressive toward her other children. Finally, the woman felt forced to turn the then nine-year-old back over to Social Services.

The lawsuit shone a flashlight of concern on the Social Services department, which still held to the notion that children should be raised by their parents whenever possible, regardless of the situation in the home. The woman contended that if Social Services had removed the boy from his birth mother sooner, he wouldn't have been so badly scarred emotionally.

Maggie's heart ached with understanding.

She and Ben were foster parents, currently of seven-year-old twin boys. Their mother was an alcoholic, their father dangerously violent. Still, Maggie knew that one day, long after the boys had bonded with her and Ben, they would be returned to their birth mother. Stories like the one she was writing about were tragically com-

mon, and Maggie hoped her words might touch a nerve across the city. Perhaps if enough people demanded change...

She scanned what she'd just written.

The way the department operates today, a child may be kept hostage in closets while Mom sells herself for drugs; he can be beaten, mocked, and left to sleep in urine-soaked rags, yet that type of home life is deemed best for the child. The solution is obvious. We must fight to see the system changed and demand that such children be removed from the home the first time harmful circumstances come to light—while the child is still young enough to find an adoption placement.

The statistics tell the story. With each passing year, the odds of a troubled child finding an adoptive home diminish by 20 percent. In the first year, the chances of adoption are brilliantly high. Even at age two most children will find permanent, loving homes. But many children removed from abusive homes are not released for adoption until age five, and often much later. What happens to these children?

Too often they are left to squander their baby years in abusive situations and temporary foster homes, moving every few months while Mom and Dad dry out or serve jail time. In the process, they become emotionally “damaged goods”: children too old and too jaded ever to fit into a loving, adoptive family. In cases like these, we have only one place to point the finger for the tragic consequences: The archaic rules of the Social Services department.

I thank God for people like Mrs. Werdemeir, whose lawsuit finally exposes the type of tragedy that has gone on far too long. The tragedy of thinking that no matter the situation, a child belongs with his mother.

Tonight when you kneel beside the bed of your little one, remember those babies out there sleeping in closets. And pray that God will change the minds of those who might make a difference.

Suddenly Maggie's mind drifted, and her eyes jumped back a sentence: *Your little ones... little ones... little ones... kneel beside the bed of your little ones...*

Her eyes grew wet and the words faded. *What about us, Lord? Where are the little ones we've prayed for? Haven't we tried? Haven't we?* She remembered the testing, the experimental procedures they'd participated in, the drug therapy and nutrition programs that were supposed to help her get pregnant. A single tear slid down her cheek into her mouth. It tasted bitter, like it had come from some place deep and forbidden in her soul, and she wiped at it in frustration.

Nothing had worked.

Even now her arms ached for the children they didn't have. Foster kids, yes...but no babies to pray over, no little ones to be thankful for. *Why, Lord? It's been seven years...*

You had your chance. You don't deserve a child of your own.

The truth hit hard, and her breath caught in her throat.

Maggie blinked twice, and the taunting voice faded. She quickly included a footnote at the bottom of her column advising readers that there would be more information in the coming weeks and months on the issue of abused and forgotten children in the Social Services system. She saved her changes and sent the file to Ron's computer.

"It's in." She spoke loudly, and when she saw her editor nod, she turned her attention back to the now blank computer screen. Seconds passed, and a face began taking shape. The newsroom noise faded as the picture on the screen grew clearer, and suddenly Maggie could make out the girl's features...her pretty, innocent face; her lovely, questioning eyes.

Do you know where my mama is? the girl seemed to ask.

Maggie wanted to shout at the image, but she blinked twice and before her mind could give her mouth permission to speak, the girl disappeared.

It was her of course—the same girl every time, every day. She saw the child everywhere, even in her dreams.

The girl's presence had been a constant for nearly a year, making it difficult for Maggie to think of anything else. As a result, the days were no longer consumed with her work as a columnist, her role as a foster mother, or her duties as the wife of an important lawyer and civic leader. No, each day had become consumed with the idea that one day—perhaps not too far off—the little girl would not fade into air.

One day, the girl would be real.

The visions of the blond child had pushed Maggie to the edge of insanity. And with them came something else that filled Maggie's mind even now, a darkness that threatened to destroy her, to leave her locked in a padded cell, wrapped in a straight jacket. Or worse.

The problem wasn't so much that she was misplacing her car keys more often than usual or forgetting dentist appointments or leaving cold milk in the pantry by mistake or seeing imaginary little girls every time she turned around. It was all of that, yes, but it was something more that made her truly question her sanity. It was the certain feeling that something hideously dark and possibly deadly—something that now seemed closely linked to her secret—was closing in on her.

Something from which she couldn't escape.

A chill ran down Maggie's spine; the secret was no longer something she could ignore, something she might pretend had never happened. It didn't matter whether she acknowledged it or opened it and laid it on the floor for everyone to look at.

It simply was.

Indeed, its presence had become a living, breathing entity. It was the embodiment of darkness that lay beside her at night and followed her through the making of beds and breakfast and daily appointments in the morning. It sat next to her in the car, breathing threats of destruction should anyone find out the truth—

Stop this! You're making yourself crazy!

Maggie pushed away from her desk and gathered her things. Fresh air, that's what she needed. Maybe a walk through the park. She glanced at a stack of magazines on her desk and did a double take. There she was again! Gracing the cover, looking directly at Maggie...the same little girl.

Then in an instant, she was gone.

Air released from Maggie's lungs like a withering party balloon.

Yes, she was losing it—free-falling over the canyon's edge—and there was nothing she could do to prevent the coming crash. She wanted help, truly she did, but there wasn't anywhere she could turn, no one to talk to.

No one who would believe that Maggie Stovall was having a problem she couldn't handle by herself.

Finally, desperate, she'd placed her name in the offering bucket when the pastor had asked which women would like prayer from an older, senior Christian. Maggie didn't know if it would help, but it couldn't hurt. And it was better than facing someone with the truth.

She headed for her car.

How had things gotten so bad? Years ago she would have had two or three days a month like this and called it depression. Not that she told anyone how she was feeling, even back then. She was a Christian after all, and Christians—good Christians like her and Ben—did not suffer from depression. At least not as far as Maggie could tell. But this...this *thing* that haunted her now was beyond depression.

Far beyond it.

This was the kind of thing that sent people packing to psychiatric wards.



Amanda Joy sat huddled on a narrow bed, leaning against the chilly wall of the third house she'd lived in that month. The silence was scary, like in the movies before something bad happened...but then she was only seven, and lots of things seemed scary. Especially since coming to the Graystone house.

Footsteps echoed in the distance, and Amanda gulped. Mrs. Graystone was awake, and that meant she'd be coming to check on her. Pushing herself off the bed, Amanda yanked on the covers and straightened the sheets. Beds had to be neat or...

Amanda didn't want to think about it.

Maybe there was another place she could go, some other foster family who wanted a little girl for a while. She tugged on the bedspread as she remembered the house she'd stayed at just after summer. Her social worker had called it a mistake, a bad placement. Five days later Amanda was packed and sent to a home five miles south, a working farm with three teenage boys.

She shuddered at the memory.

The boys' parents wanted a foster girl to give the missus a hand with laundry and indoor chores. But while she did up dishes or folded laundry the boys teased her until she was afraid to get dressed or take a shower. Two weeks later the mister found her in the barn, hands tied behind her back with baling twine. Her shirt lay in a rumpled heap on the ground, and the boys were taking turns poking at her, threatening to do terrible things to her if she screamed.

The boys received a whipping from their pa, and she escaped with her social worker before dinnertime.

She didn't know what she would have done without her social worker. For a moment, Amanda forgot about the chores and sat slowly on the corner of her bed. Kathy Garrett.

In some ways Kathy was more like a mother than anyone she'd ever known. Anyone except the Brownells.

The Brownells had been Amanda's only real parents. They adopted her as a baby and gave her a wonderful life for five short years.

The house was quiet again, and Amanda wondered if Mrs. Graystone had fallen

back asleep. There had been an empty liquor bottle on the table when Amanda got home from school. Alcohol made Mrs. Graystone very tired, so maybe she would sleep for a long time.

Amanda slipped off the mattress and lifted the plain, gray bedskirt, poking her head under the bed. There it was. Gently she pulled out a brown paper bag, opened it, and sat cross-legged on the floor, staring at the contents inside. A photograph of her with the Brownells, three folded-up awards she'd won in school, a bracelet she'd found in the lunchroom the year before. She plucked out the picture and stared hard at it. The checkered dress she'd worn that year was a hand-me-down from the neighbors. All the girls in kindergarten had laughed at it, but Amanda figured out how to make them stop. She prayed for them.

She'd knelt beside her bed at the Brownells and prayed. "Dear Jesus, help those girls in my class be nice. Because they don't have happy hearts, at least I don't think so."

Neither did Mrs. Graystone. Which was why Amanda had been praying for her, too. She sighed and set the photograph back in the sack. As she peered inside, her eyes fell on the yellowish newspaper article.

Amanda pulled it out and opened it carefully.

She couldn't read very well, but she'd read the article often enough to know what it said. It was a news report of the accident that killed the Brownells.

"Icy tree limb lands on car, kills Woodland couple," the big words on top yelled out.

Amanda felt tears stinging her eyes. The smaller letters said how the Brownells had a five-year-old daughter. But they didn't say there was no one for her to live with once the Brownells were gone.

She remembered meeting Kathy Garrett for the first time at school that afternoon—the day of the accident. Kathy told Amanda that she had known her as a little baby and that she had helped the Brownells with the adoption. At first it had been nice, sitting in the office talking with the pretty lady. But then Kathy told her about the accident and after that her tummy had felt sick inside.

Sick and scared.

"You can stay with us tonight, sweetheart," Kathy said. "But after that we'll find you a foster home. A place where you can stay until another family adopts you."

They'd found a home. A foster home, like Kathy had talked about. And then another one. And another one. But the best times of all were when Amanda was between foster parents and got to spend a night or two with Kathy and her family.

Amanda closed her eyes and pictured Kathy Garrett's home. Warm, with lots of light and laughter and good smells from the kitchen. Someone was always talking or telling a story or singing or dancing. When Amanda was there she didn't feel like her name was Brownell at all. She felt like it was Garrett. Like she belonged there. Like she was one of them. She even had her own chair at the kitchen table.

At times like this she wondered if they left her empty chair at the table when she wasn't there, if the Garretts missed her as much as she missed them.

She opened her eyes again, folded the article, and slipped it back inside the bag. It was the same bag she'd had for two years, and she was careful not to rip it as she folded the top down and slid it back under the bed.

Kathy Garrett was married to a happy man named Bill. He would lay on the floor and wrestle with the kids until they were laughing so hard they couldn't breathe. He always laughed. But one time...

One time Bill didn't laugh. When he brought everyone together in a circle once to pray for Amanda. During the prayer, when he thought she wasn't looking, Amanda caught him crying. Not loud tears like kids cry, but quiet ones that rolled off his face and didn't make his nose sound stuffy.

Amanda stared at the barren walls in the chilly room, but in her mind she could see Bill and Kathy, laughing, playing with their children. Lots and lots of children. The Garretts had more kids than anyone Amanda knew. Seven altogether, all squeezed into three happy bedrooms. Kathy liked to say it wasn't the size of the house that mattered, it was what the house was made of. After living in a dozen different houses in two years Amanda was sure of one thing: Kathy wasn't talking about bricks and carpet and stuff.

She was talking about feelings. So as far as Amanda was concerned, the Garrett house was made of all love and sunshine.

There were footsteps again and Amanda's heart quickened. Mrs. Graystone had four other foster children living with her, all of them crammed into two small bedrooms. Her husband drove a truck for a living and was hardly ever home. The other kids liked to tell secrets about Mrs. Graystone, and the first day Amanda arrived they told her what they thought of their foster mother.

"Old Graystone uses all our money to buy her smelly cigarettes," one of the kids told her that first day.

Amanda frowned. "What money?"

An older girl laughed out loud. "The gov'ment money, goofball. She's supposed to use it to buy us food and clothes and stuff."

"Yeah, but she never does," the first boy poked Amanda on the shoulder. "You'll see soon enough. Two meals a day if you're lucky. And if you're hungry at night then too bad for you."

The kids had been right; Mrs. Graystone's house was made of scary sounds and hungry nights. Lots of hunger.

There was a sharp knock at the bedroom door, and Mrs. Graystone burst inside. She was a big woman with an angry mouth and rolls of stomach pushing against her flowered dress. Amanda jumped to her feet and backed up against the farthest wall as Mrs. Graystone waddled toward her.

"Why aren't you cleaning your room?"

Amanda looked about and saw nothing out of place. "I made the bed and picked up the clothes like you said."

"Anyone could do that." She came closer and shook a finger at her. "Do you think

I brought you here so you could live like a princess?” The woman’s voice rattled like windows in an old house when the wind blew hard outside.

“What else do you want me—”

“Don’t be impertinent with me, young lady.” Mrs. Graystone’s face was red, and Amanda was scared. The woman had never hit her, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t. Other foster parents had done it. Not all of them, of course. Some of Amanda’s foster placements had been wonderful homes like Kathy’s. But her stay at those homes was never permanent. They were something called short-term or crisis-care stays. Something like that. After a little while in those places, Amanda always got packed up and sent to the next foster home.

Since she was not sure what *impertinent* meant she squirmed toward the corner of her bed and remained silent.

Mrs. Graystone lowered herself over Amanda and glared at her. “I don’t need no insolent brat living with me. I can make the same money with someone who’ll do as I say. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The woman raised her hand, and before Amanda could take cover it came crashing down across her cheek. The blow made her fall to her knees, and she gasped for breath. *I’m scared, God, help me!*

Amanda covered her face with her hands and felt her body shaking with fear. *Don’t let her hit me again, please...*

“Don’t you ‘yes, ma’am,’ me, missy. Now get up and get to work.”

Amanda separated her fingers so she could see Mrs. Graystone again.

“Move your hands from your face!”

Amanda’s cheek felt hot and sore but she did as she was told. The woman pointed to a broom that stood in the corner of the room. “I want that hardwood floor swept and polished. And when you’re finished you can take a rag to those awful walls. I swear the last brat who had this room didn’t do any better than you.”

She was still on her knees, afraid to move. *Kathy’s coming today. It won’t be long. Just a few more hours and I can leave. Kathy won’t let me—*

“Move it!” Mrs. Graystone grabbed Amanda’s arm and yanked her to her feet. Then she pulled a rag and a bottle of floor polish from her apron and tossed it on the floor. “I want this place clean in an hour or you can forget dinner.”

The woman took slow steps toward the hallway, then slammed the door shut as she left.

Why does she hate me? Are You there, God? Don’t You hear me? All I want is a mom and a dad. I’ll clean my room perfect every day, I promise. But please, God, please give me a mom and dad. Someone like Bill and Kathy.

Tears stung at the girl’s eyes as she took the broom and worked it across the floor in long strokes. She would be eight in six months and though she was small for her age, she’d been sweeping floors for as long as she could remember, so she had the task finished in a few minutes. Her mind began to drift back to when she was little, before

her adoptive parents were killed. As she took the rag and began working polish into the floor, she started to cry harder.

Even if she were going to see Kathy later, it wouldn't solve anything. She'd still be a ward of the court, a foster child looking for a family. She wandered tentatively over to the brown sack and the photograph of her with her adoptive parents, the Brownells. They had been wonderful people, but they hadn't been like real family.

She closed her eyes and she could hear herself asking the familiar question:

"If you adopted me, how come I can't call you Momma and Daddy?"

Mrs. Brownell's answer was as clear now as it had been that spring day all those years ago. "Child, we will always think of you as our daughter, but Mr. Brownell and I never planned to have children and we don't think it proper for a child to call us by so familiar a term. Mr. and Mrs. Brownell suits us better. But it doesn't mean we love you any less."

Even back when she was five the answer had felt uncomfortable, like a shrunken sweater. She studied the picture once more and as she went back to work on the floor she thought of her mother. Her real mother.

The Brownells had told her about a young woman who had been unable to care for her new baby and so, out of love, had given her to them to raise. But ever since God had taken the Brownells home, Amanda had kept a secret wish that somewhere out in the big world her real Momma was missing her.

And that one day God would bring them back together again.