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"Molly"

By Mrs. Paul E. King

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Chapter 1

The air hung heavy with the delicious fragrance of apple blossom essence and rose perfume, and the sky was as clear blue as her mother's eyes were, Laurel Anders thought, as she stepped lightly down the three steps of Foster's General Store and started homeward.

The store, like the two hundred or more other buildings in the small town, was built for longevity and durability, and though other towns had opted for larger, more modern super markets, Fernville's residents had remained loyal to their store, preferring the quiet country charm of the old-fashioned store with its wide, rough-hewn benches for sitting and exchanging a bit of news to the hustle-bustle, sterile looking, ultra-modern markets in the cities.



"Hurry," Mrs. Anders said.

Laurel shifted the sack of groceries to a more comfortable position in her arm then started down the sidewalk to her home at the extreme end of Fernville.

"Hi Laurel," Andy Waverly called from his porch. "Mind if I carry those for you?" he asked, jumping over the porch railing and taking the bag.

"Oh, thanks!" Laurel said. "That's so gallant of you," she teased. "What have you been doing since we graduated? Anything exciting?"

Andy laughed. "I guess, to a mechanic-minded man, working in a greasy garage, with equally greasy, grimy cars, is exciting. But for me it's merely a 'keeping busy' job until college this fall, Lord willing. And you?"

"Helping Molly around the house."

"Exciting?" Andy asked with a grin on his suntanned face.

"You won't need three guesses to know my answer," Laurel said. "If only Mother could be home

"I'm afraid I don't know how to sympathize with you on that score because Mom's always home." "You're lucky."

"I guess I am, but I must confess that I honestly never thought of it that way. You do have Molly, Laurel. She's . . ."

"She's not Mother!" Laurel retorted quickly. "Hey, don't snap my ears off with that tongue of yours. I merely stated a fact and meant no harm of any kind by what I said. I still think you should be thankful that Molly's there. At least you have someone to talk to and someone to welcome you at the door when your mother works nights."

"Which is almost always anymore. They've made her night supervisor in pediatrics."

"That's great. Congratulate her for me. I hear she's quite a Florence Nightingale."

"She's a good nurse, Andy, and a wonderful mother. I wish I was more like she is."

Andy cast a long sideways glance at Laurel. Then he said, "She's a wonderful person because Christ is the center of her thinking and of her life. This sets her apart from the mere professor of religion and from the worldly-wise. By the way, when do you begin nurse's training? You still sure that's what you should do?"

Laurel's face flushed scarlet. "Of course I'm sure. Why the question?"

"I was just wondering. Well, here we are; I'll deliver these to Molly then be on my way. Work begins for me in a few minutes."

"Thanks, Andy. You sure took a load off my arms. ' '

"Now you can mix up one of your delicious chocolate cakes," Molly said when Andy left. "And then I'll need potatoes from the cellar."

Standing with her hands pressed firmly on her slender hips, Laurel said quickly and firmly, "Not today, Molly. Not today! I'm sick and tired of being pushed around -- being told what to do."

"Why Laurel child!"

"Look, Molly, don't call me 'Laurel child.' Not ever again! I'm grown now and I've graduated. What's more important even, I'm not your child; you're not my mo..."

The look of pain and grief in Molly's soft blue eyes cut Laurel's sentence short. She left it unfinished, but the wound was inflicted, the cut went deep.

With a little gasp and a clutching of her heart, Molly eased her slightly-bent, partially-crippled body into the rocking chair. Sudden bright tears shimmered in her eyes as she said through lips that trembled, "I love you, Laurel."

Feeling wretched and miserable, Laurel hurried outside.

The orchard, ever a haven for her childish hurts, was the best place to go, she decided quickly, all but running now.

Bees buzzed and hummed and droned as she became one with the trees, and the ground, carpeted in pink and white apple blossoms, proved to be the perfect place for her to get her thoughts untangled.

What was happening to her, she wondered, feeling suddenly terrified by her sharp, cutting tongue, her wrong attitudes and actions, and the thing within her that prompted the actions and the sharp-spoken words.

All around her the air smelled like a perfume factory. The bees, taking full advantage of God's gift to them, worked industriously and untiringly to fill the dozen or more hives with fresh, sweet honey before the cold weather set in. The robins, like every other year, were building nests and singing their same sweet, beautiful songs of gratitude and thanksgiving. Everything in the orchard was the same, she mused -- everything except herself; she had changed. And why? she asked. Simply because she was selfish and wanted her mother all to herself. Molly had suddenly become an outsider.

She stood to her feet and leaned her back against the trunk of the tree. She was acting like a very spoiled child, she soliloquized. For so long as she could remember, Molly had been a part of the household, her nurse-maid from infancy when her father's untimely death which had forced her mother to return to her nursing career to make ends meet.

Where had Molly come from, she wondered. And why had she come? What reason . . . or what fate . . . had brought the woman into her mother's and her life? Was

she married..., ever..., or was she single? And what about the young man who had come to town making inquiry for Mrs. William B. Bowery? Did they know such a woman? he had asked Jason Young and Tanna Herst. Was there anyone by that name living in the area? Did they know?

"The only Bowery we know," Jason told Laurel he replied, "is Aunt Molly, and there's certainly not any Mrs. title in front of her name."

The man had walked away with a sad look on his face, they declared. "And was he ever handsome!" Tanna added dreamy-eyed.

Who was the man? And was Molly ever Mrs.? And what about her old chest? Always, it was "off limits" -- the only thing of all Molly's earthly possessions which she had been forbidden to see inside.

The chest was made of rough pine plank and was put together with tenpenny nails. It's hinges were rusty and old, and one time, when she had mentioned to Molly that a good sanding and paint job would do wonders for the old chest, she was told kindly and gently but firmly to "never touch it with either. There's treasure inside," Molly had told her softly as she touched the big padlock that hung from the latch at the top, with loving fingers.

What was inside, she wondered now. And why all the mystery? she asked herself, recalling how frequently when she was a little girl she had searched for the key which would unlock the 'treasure' chest, probing every place she was sure Molly's sharp mind might think of hiding it. Endless hours were spent peeking through the tiny cracks between the chest's planks in hopes of getting at least one small sneak preview at the shiny treasure. But such was not her luck. The chest concealed and guarded its secrets as tightly and as securely as Molly did her past, Laurel decided, slowly heading back toward the house.

It was still inside the house when she entered through the same door by which she had exited only minutes earlier. The intense silence had an eerie, ill foreboding to her. Where was Molly, she wondered, looking first in the cozy, neat living room then heading up the stairs.

"Molly. Molly," she called softly. But the only sound she heard was the gentle swish, swish of the sheer curtains as the breeze brushed them off the window sill and sent them fluttering away toward the bed and dresser then carressed them gently back to the sill again, repeating the process over and over, again and again.

Feeling guilty, and exceeding vile and wicked over her shoddy treatment toward the woman who had been nothing but goodness and gentleness and meekness to her and to all she knew, Laurel hurried down the stairs in further search of Molly's whereabouts.

The cellar! she thought, quickly putting her hand on the door knob. Molly had needed potatoes.

Halfway down the steps she froze in her tracks. Then she screamed. "Molly! Molly!"

Lying in a little heap on the landing, one hand clutching her heart, the other holding something out toward Laurel, her breath coming out in quick, shallow gasps, was Molly.

On feet that seemed to fly, Laurel was soon beside the stricken woman. "Molly, Molly, can you hear me?" she cried brokenly. "I . . . I'm sorry for what I said. Sorry! Forgive me, dear Molly."

The eyes fluttered slightly then opened a tiny bit. Trying to manipulate her outstretched hand toward Laurel, Molly whispered in a feeble, gasping breath, "Quick, Laurel! Take... take... this; it's yours now... the chest key. All... yours, dear. Meet... me in... Heaven. Promise me... Laurel... child. Prom "

"Molly! Molly!" Her screams seemed to mock her.

For how long she knelt beside the holy woman, Laurel had no idea. She only knew that when she finally came to herself and was able to collect her thoughts, her eyes were swollen and puffy and hot from her many tears. Molly's hand lay limply-warm in her own. The soft, kind blue eyes were closed forever to earth's scenes and its sorrows. Molly was gone. Gone!

Like one in a trance, she released the small workworn hand and made her way up the steps to the telephone. When Doctor Horner arrived, in response to her call, she led the way down the steps to where Molly lay, feeling for all the world like she was some automated, mechanical robot more than a flesh and blood human.

"You called your mother?" the doctor asked, searching vainly for a heart beat. "A massive heart attack," he added quickly. "Molly had a shock, I fear. You did call your mother?" he asked again.

"I did," Laurel replied in a voice that sounded unnatural to even herself. "She couldn't be reached at the time, but Mrs. Schwartz said she'd deliver the message."

"Too bad we don't have more people like Molly and your mother," Doctor Horner declared, making a notation of his diagnosis and the time of death in a small note book. "I'll stay here with you until the body is moved, then..."

Rushing up the stairs on feet that seemed to have wings, Laurel fled to her room, the key clutched tightly in the moist palm of her hand and her eyes shedding (as it were)

a cloudburst of tears. She couldn't stay and watch them carry Molly out of the house. No, she couldn't!

Her mother's gentle voice, a short time later, brought her quickly to her senses. "Laurel," she said as she shook her daughter lightly, "I want you to come; we must pick out a casket for Molly, and a shroud."

Sitting rigidly erect and upright, Laurel begged, "Please, Mother, I can't. I just can't do it. No. No!"

"But you must, Laurel dear. It was Molly's wish. Her request."

"Molly's wish? Please! Please, no!" "Hurry, Laurel," Lois Anders urged. "Wash your face and get into a clean dress; you're going with me .. Molly wanted it this way." And with those words, the mother hurried from the room.

Getting to her feet, Laurel heard something drop to the floor. Looking down, she saw what it was. In a single scoop of her hand she retrieved it, the precious key. Then, like a mother tucking her infant in bed, she tenderly and lovingly lay the key on the bottom of one of her dresser drawers.

The exploring of the chest and the solving of its mysterious contents was now hers for the mere act of turning the key in the lock, and suddenly she had neither the desire nor the will to do so. The chest seemed almost sacred. She was not worthy of Molly's only earthly possession, crude though it was.

With heavy steps, and an even heavier heart, she started downstairs.

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Chapter 2

The ride to the mortician's was anything but pleasant for Laurel. Her mother's silent tears only added to her own sadness and grief and deep remorse. If only she had not uttered those unkind words, those stinging, cutting, razor-sharp words! Had Molly heard her when she had tried to apologize, when she told her she was sorry? Or was she so deep into and so far out in the river of death that her mind couldn't grasp the meaning of Laurel's words, of what she was saying?

A shower of fresh, hot tears stung Laurel's eyes and rolled unceremoniously down her soft, fair cheeks. Words! she thought ruefully, hating the inner Laurel that had prodded and prompted her lisp to "exert her rights." Oh, if only she were able to have recalled them . . . those hurtful words -- to have been able to pull them back and to have blotted them out forever from Molly's thoughts and her memory after she, Laurel, had exploded them so tempestuously and so rebelliously upon the godly little woman who had

mothered her and cared for her all her life. More so than her own beloved mother even, whose working hours prohibited the day-long intimacies, the 24-hour closenesses afforded most other children.

And the potatoes -- why didn't she bring them up from the cellar as asked? Had Molly, with her crippled leg, fallen when attempting to go down the stairs? Oh, she was so very wicked! She had rebelled against doing the many household tasks assigned her by her mother, taking her vengeance and fury out on innocent Molly.

Laurel groaned. Her heart burned with inner pain and shame and guilt. She had brought on Molly's sudden death, she was sure, and nothing she could do would every be able to rectify it or make it right.

A gloom so thick and so dense settled over her as to make her shiver and shake with fright. She never thought, when she laid the cross down some better than nine months ago and traded it for the frivolity and the pleasures of the world, that she'd go so far as to slay (literally) someone by her words and by her rebellion. But she did, and she had; and oddly enough, it had been one who was dearest to her heart.

Squeezing her body into a corner near the car door, Laurel felt impending doom and the judgments of God settling heavily down upon her. It was as though she were being hunted and there was no place to hide . . . no place of refuge.

There was no hope for her, she thought with sudden fear. None whatever. She had sinned away her day of grace, her time of opportunity. God had cast her away forever from His sight. There was nothing to look forward to -- nothing, but the ultimate penalty for her backsliding., the recompensing of her evil ways. Already it seemed she could hear the deep, sonorous tones of the Eternal Judge of the Ages pronouncing her fate, "Depart from me, ye that work iniquity . . . Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels."

"We're here, dear."

Laurel jumped with fright at hearing the words. Like the mechanical robot she felt she was, she walked beside her mother, not willingly, it was true, to help fulfill and carry out the wishes of one whom, according to Doctor Horner, the shock of Laurel's rebellion and her outspoken words had killed. Oh, he didn't say she had killed Molly in so many words, but he did say it had been caused by shock.

It was a taxing ordeal for Laurel, looking at caskets and shrouds, and she was glad . . . glad . . . when she heard her mother's soft voice say, "Put the pink one on Molly; it becomes her more."

"Too bad that she passed away so young. Shock, I believe the doctor said," the mortician remarked, shaking his head sadly. "Strange things are happening, Mrs. Anders. Yes, very strange things. How old was Molly? 53?"

"48. She had a birthday only last month."

"A good woman! Yes. Yes, very good!" Excusing herself, Laurel fled to the car. What would people be saying about her, she wondered solemnly, were she the deceased instead of Molly? That she had changed (radically and drastically so) the past nine months, there was no doubt; and Molly was the one who had been most aware of the change and who received the greater amount of her uncharitable barbs and verbal outbursts of anger and rebellion, she realized suddenly, now that it was too late to make amends.

The ride home was made in pensive silence. Laurel was thankful that she didn't need to answer a lot of questions; she didn't feel like talking. It was apparent that her mother was of the same disposition and frame of mind. Her deep grief, however, was reflected in her eyes and on her face. She looked tired, Laurel noticed, tired and drained of energy. A sudden glow of warm affection for her mother washed over her. Quickly she reached over and patted her mother's hand.

"Thanks, Laurel," Mrs. Anders said, giving her daughter a faint smile. "I... I'm in a state of shock; that pat was consoling."

Andy was waiting for them when they returned home. Unwinding his long legs from the porch swing where he had eased them out over the side, he came down the steps to greet them, his ordinarily smiling face looking sad and somber.

"I heard the news," he said softly. "I'm sorry, Laurel and Mrs. Anders. I wondered if there was anything I could do to help you . . ."

"I guess there's nothing anyone can do, Andy," Lois Anders replied in her kind way. "But thanks for your concern. Just pray for us. Laurel and I have suffered a great loss."

Tears slid down her cheeks then. Burying her face in her hands she wept unashamedly. "Molly's Home now," she said at last. "Earth's loss is Heaven's gain indeed. She's free from the almost continuous pain she always had, and now she's enjoying the fellowship and the nearness of the Christ who redeemed and sanctified her soul. Won't you come inside, Andy?"

Looking at Laurel and her ashen-white face, Andy said, "Thanks, Mrs. Anders, but I believe I'll stay out here with Laurel for a while."

"You may not enjoy my company, Andy," Laurel stated frankly, feeling numb from the whole ordeal. "I'm not in a talkative mood."

"That's OK by me; I understand. I just thought it may help you to have someone near by. I know how much Molly meant to you."

"After what I said to you about her a little while ago! O Andy, it doesn't seem possible that so much could have transpired in such a little time. It doesn't. It doesn't!" Laurel cried.

"Like I just said, I understand. Down deep in your heart, you loved Molly. I know you did! I was terribly rebellious and headstrong, too, when I backslid; and it seemed I was forever saying or doing something to cut and wound those I loved. I was a mess. And I wasn't one bit happy living like that either. Frankly, I was miserable. I almost hated myself for being so mean and hateful to my parents and my brothers and sisters. But that's all in the past. Since I got back to God, and then went on and got wholly sanctified, I've been having a perpetual feast . . . a spiritual feast. Jesus has fully satisfied my every need. And know what, Laurel? You're going to get back to God, too. I know you are; I'm bombarding Heaven for you. At any cost, Laurel. Any cost. God uses various means to get us still long enough to listen to His voice, to..."

"Please, Andy!" Laurel cried, breaking into his unfinished sentence. "I . . . I . . . like I said, I don't really feel like talking. I'm sorry I was so sharp-tongued to you when you carried the sack of groceries home for me. I . . . I want you to forgive me, please; then maybe you'd better leave."

Andy looked stunned. Then he brightened. She was humbling herself. Yes, Laurel was actually asking for forgiveness! That was step number 1. He felt encouraged. "You are forgiven," he said hoarsely. "Freely forgiven. And I shall go now. But promise you'll call if you need me -- you or your mother."

"I promise, and thanks for coming, Andy. You're a real friend and I appreciate it immensely."

Turning, Andy waved good-bye then headed down the street, his heart throbbing with pain for Laurel. Time was when she was in good victory and had been a devout Christian, that she was his special girl. But when she backslid and turned her back on God, he told her he could no longer date her, that it was contrary to the Bible for a Christian to keep company with a non-Christian. In a prayerful mood he walked home.

Laurel watched until she could no longer see Andy then she hurried inside and up the stairs to her bedroom. She felt restless and afraid, like some impending doom was hanging over her head. Truly, the way of transgressors was hard.

"Laurel." It was her mother. She stood in the doorway. "Yes?"

"Molly wanted you to have the key to her chest immediately upon her death, but I can't find it where she usually kept it. You must open the chest..." Her voice trailed.

Laurel's face drained of blood. Standing to her feet, her arms hanging limply by her sides, she exclaimed quickly, pleadingly, "No! Please, Mother, no! I can't!"

"But you must, dear. This was another of Molly's requests."

"She . . . she never told me, Mother."

"But she did tell me, Laurel. So, somehow or other, we will open that lock, and then . . ."

"I . . . I have the key," Laurel said, weeping softly. "When I found Molly at the bottom of the stairs she . . ."

"The bottom of the stairs? What was Molly doing down there?" Mrs. Anders asked, interrupting her daughter, her face white.

Laurel felt weak and limp. Dropping into a nearby chair, she cried, "It . . . it's my fault that Molly's dead. I... I..."

"You mean, you . . . Oh, Laurel, Laurel! I think I understand." And Lois Anders wept.

Her sin was finding her out, Laurel thought with horror and fear. Yes, the Bible was true: "And be sure your sin will find you out."

"You . . . refused to obey Molly," Mrs. Anders said quite suddenly, her eyes looking like a wounded deer. "Oh, Laurel, how could you do it? How? Make Molly go down those stairs? After potatoes, no doubt. Her, with a crippled leg!"

"It was potatoes," Laurel confessed tearfully, feeling more wretched by the minute.

"Come," her mother said kindly but firmly. "You must unlock the chest now! Get the key, Laurel. Molly made me promise."

"Oh, Mother, I just can't do it! I can't! It hurts my heart too deeply."

"Come, Laurel. I promised Molly; her wishes shall be granted."

Opening the dresser drawer and getting the key, Laurel followed her mother into Molly's bedroom.

The key turned easily in the lock and the minute the lid on the chest was raised, Mrs. Anders excused herself and left the room.

"Don't go," Laurel implored, looking frightened.

"I must; it's part of my promise to Molly. I'll be in the kitchen when you're finished."

Dropping to her knees, Laurel lifted the first thing on top. Then she gasped.

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Chapter 3

Laurel turned the picture over and looked at it again. It couldn't be! she thought. But it was. Hadn't Molly written the words on back of it: "This is my darling Ted, 2 yrs., 3 mos., 4 days old," she had said.

Again Laurel gasped. If Molly had a son, then Molly was married. But what happened to the boy? and where was the boy's father, Molly's husband?

Thoroughly captivated now by Molly's first "treasure," Laurel picked up the next thing.

"A diary!" she whispered in awe. Molly had kept a diary of sorts. "For Laurel only," the inside first page declared. When was it all written? she wondered. Reverently she opened the ledger-like book and read.

"Today I felt I just had to talk to someone, so I went over to John and Lois Ander's home. They have been so very kind to me since Bert has turned so cruel and unkind. Better still, they are my 'spiritual father and mother,' having been God's instruments... His ambassadors..., in leading me from the paths of sin to God and holiness. Ted and tiny Laurel Anders entertained each other in grand style: Ted acting the perfect gentleman (almost 2) and Laurel being the perfect little lady (1 yr. old)."

Laurel, totally fascinated and mesmerized now, reread the entire part, her mind scarcely able to take in the fact that Molly was both a wife and a mother. Intrigued, she read on.

"Another good day for me spiritually: God was so very close and so real to me as I stole away to my 'secret closet' and communed with Him. Bert, on the other hand, becomes more cruel all the time, telling me he hates the ground upon which I walk. (All because I got saved and sanctified) But oh, I have such wonderful inner peace and joy and soul-rest. All thanks to God! This love for Christ has deepened my love for Bert. I pray he will soon turn to God. Today Ted cut another tooth. What an exciting discovery

for me again! (I say 'again' because I have never been able to contain my delight and joy over each previous 'find.' His little mouth is getting quite filled up with these pearly-white gems.) Lois Anders called to say John and she have really been praying for me. Bert also. (What an inspiration and encouragement they are! God bless them.) Yesterday, so Lois told me, her Laurel cut tooth number 5. What a precious child Laurel is! Almost as dear to me as Bert's and my darling Ted."

Hot tears stung Laurel's eyes. Molly had known her like her own Ted! It was an awesome thing. A beautiful thing really.

The next thing she read answered two of her questions.

"It's been weeks since I wrote in here," Molly had penned, "but today I must write. (Oh, where shall I begin? How can I say it?) My heart! My heart! It is crushed . . . to the depth. Today when I returned home from visiting my ailing, oldest sister, Bert was gone! So was Ted! (O my broken heart, whither shall I turn for refuge; where can I go for solace? I know what I will do: I will 'flee to Thee my God, to hide me; to cover me till these calamities be past.')

"Bert was unusually kind and nice to me when I prepared his breakfast this morning, even volunteering to stay with Ted while I drove the thirty-five miles into the city to see Carrie in the hospital. I was shocked beyond words upon returning home in mid-afternoon to find the house empty of my two loved ones and the note on the kitchen table, saying, 'Sorry to cause you pain; but my son shall never grow up to become a religious fanatic. I want him to amount to something big in life. This is my exodus; it's forever. Bert.'

"I am numb with shock, dumb with grief, and blind with tears. My heart feels like it will burst with sorrow and from the aching pain in its hidden recesses.

"Mrs. Anders just called. (Bless her! She doesn't know what a God-sent call it was.) I am to spend the night at their house. Oh, my empty arms! My son, my darling son, where are you? What will your father teach you? Will you grow up to be anti-God, like he is? (God forbid this, in Jesus' name!)"

By now, Laurel was sobbing brokenly. "That brute of a man!" she exclaimed aloud. "Kidnapping an innocent child . . . a mere baby! . . . and doing a hasty disappearing act. What a beastly man!"

"The first night is past," Laurel read again between falling tears. "What a haven for one so torn has the Anders' home been -- the compassion and understanding, too! Lois laid Laurel in bed with me, and though I slept little, that dear little girl never woke once. I think I learned something from that . . . God will comfort me like I comforted, watched over and cared for little Laurel if I will but trust Him and allow Him to. (And, God helping me, I will allow Him!)"

"Tragedies, tragedies -- will they never cease! Today, (just one month and four days after Bert disappeared taking Ted with him) John Anders was killed suddenly in an automobile accident! (A drunken driver cut over into his lane, killing him instantly.) I'm with Lois and Laurel at this writing. (What would we do without our precious, ever-present and constantly-abiding Friend!) Quite naturally, Lois is in a state of shock. (So am I; John always knew the right words to say for any given situation.) Laurel is most content and happy in my company. Little does this precious child know the void she's helping to fill, the aching heart she's soothing, and the once-empty arms which she's filling."

"What a busy week! Moving can be quite an experience. Lois, out of necessity, must vacate the house where John and she set up housekeeping . . . and in which Laurel spent her first year and a half . . . and return to her original profession of nursing. Already she has work in a distant city. I will be moving with her and Laurel; my employment will be that of nursemaid and housekeeper, and for the first time in years, I will receive a weekly salary. 'A little something you can call your own,' Lois said compassionately. She is so good to me -- so like our Saviour."

"At last, we're settled. (What a lovely old house! Such solid and beautiful woodwork.) I doubt now that I'll ever hear from Bert, but I'll never cease praying for him and for our son. They are in God's hands. My faith in God is strong. Bert may have taken Ted out of my life, but he can never tear him from my heart. (I wonder how tall he is! Does he ever cry for me? He was such a 'mother's boy!') Laurel (bless her) grows dearer to my heart with every passing day. She's such a meek little thing -- and God's gift to me!

"Lois is doing well in her work and the church we go to is a spiritual church. (More so than the one back in Ridgecrest even. Thanks be to God!) Lois won a soul to Christ today! Laurel sang a solo for her mother and me after supper tonight -- her first: Jesus Loves Me. What a beautiful voice that child has! I believe she'll be a gospel worker someday if Jesus tarries. Perhaps a missionary even. Who knows?"

Weeks later: "Six weeks ago I almost made Heaven's landing. But God sent me back (there must be more for me to do.) Laurel's so fast on her feet, and that on-coming, speeding truck would have killed her had I not rushed out and pulled her out of the way. I'll be partially crippled for the rest of my life, but that's better than having a child a corpse! Thanks be to God for sparing Laurel. She must never know this till I am gone."

"Molly! Molly!" Laurel cried out. "Oh-h, Molly!"

For a long while she sat and wept, like one in a daze, recounting all she had read. How like Molly, she mused silently, wanting no sympathy for her suffering, no fanfare nor accolades for her heroic deed. A life had been spared and saved; that was pay enough for the quietly modest, unpretentious woman. She had been a woman of much suffering, many sorrows and deep heartaches, and the world had never surmised even because,

through it all, Molly's ever-present Friend had kept her constantly victorious and joyous and thankful. Yes, Laurel realized now, this and this alone was the reason for Molly's "constant spirit" of meekness and endurance.

Brushing her tears aside, she turned the page. "My, how time has flown!" Molly had written. "I've been neglectful in keeping a year by year, day by day account anymore. But today I felt I must write (and relieve my heart a bit by doing so.) Laurel is not like my dear Laurel any more. She's headstrong, self-willed and even rebellious to a point. My heart has received another blow; she sassed me back today when I told her to come immediately after school-her mother's orders. She'll never know the pain and grief she caused me, but I love her so! God turn her back! Please, turn her back!"

"Another one of 'those' days. I can't imagine what I'm doing that has made Laurel seem to hate me so. (O dear Lord, please give me wisdom to lead her back to Thee. She's strayed so far. Give Lois and me back the sweet, gentle, wonderful Laurel of yesteryear -- the God-fearing girl. Get her back, Lord, at any cost!) I love her so!"

The book dropped from Laurel's hands; tears flowed like hot lava down her cheeks; her heart became soft like clay or putty. There was hope for her, she thought. Hope! Hope! If Molly could love her so intensely and so deeply and sincerely in spite of her hatefulness and unkindness to her, then surely . . . surely . . . God would forgive her, too, and take her back. This, in spite of the devil's argument that she had sinned away her day of grace and there was no hope for her.

Dropping her head on to the contents in the chest, Laurel prayed. Sobbing unashamedly, she poured her soul out to God in humble confession and bitterest agony of true repentance. Time was of no essence to her; her one concern was to once again know the forgiveness of an all righteous God and to feel the presence of the merciful Saviour.

It was a wonderful moment when her soul found its rest in Christ and she knew she was forgiven. Molly's unchanging, undying love for her, even through her hatred and rebellion, had been the blessed changing factor in opening her blinded eyes to the greater mercies and tender compassions of Christ. And now that sin's binding fetters were loosed and its shackles broken, she was free indeed and so very, very happy.

Hugging Molly's book to her heart then leafing through it to read more, Laurel discovered the pages were bare. Molly had written only so much and no more. But the written pages had accomplished their purpose; Molly's prayers were answered; Laurel, was back in God's fold.

Now, with a lighter heart and a holy and reverential awe, she explored the deceased woman's other earthly treasures: a worn out, dog-eared, much-marked Bible; teething rings, three pacifiers, a teddy bear with frayed ears and a missing eye; dried

corsages and six dried carnations, the latter "from John Anders funeral," a slip of paper tied around them had revealed.

Laurel lifted the flowers carefully from the chest and kissed the dry, brown petals, whispering, "Oh, Father, someday I shall meet you!" Then, just as carefully and gently, she replaced them in the chest again.

The young woman's next find was a revelation to her. In the photograph held in her hand was Molly, Bert and Ted. Bert was downright good looking, she noticed, and Molly was straight and tall and beautiful. The tiny Ted looked much like his smiling mother, having inherited her dark hair and laughing blue eyes, it seemed.

For a long while, she looked at the picture, studying it, reading its brief inscription -- W. Bert, Marguerite and Ted. Marguerite. Marguerite! So Molly's name wasn't actually Molly at all, but Marguerite. What a pretty name, Laurel thought. And Bert had been her husband's middle name.

Suddenly Laurel was excited. Clutching the picture to her heart, she rushed down the stair steps to her mother. It was like a puzzle, she thought, a puzzle where not a piece was missing but where each and every piece fit together and interlocked. When had the name Marguerite been changed to Molly? she wondered. And might she not have been the first to call her by that name when, in her infant years, her small lips had not been able to frame and utter the much longer, more difficult name? And could not the 'W.' Bert have been 'William Bert? If so, the young man who had spoken to Jason and Tanna was not far from where Molly lived, and could have been Ted!

She burst into the kitchen in a flurry of excitement with her changed heart and her treasured find. "Mother!" she exclaimed between falling tears and waves of glory, "I'm saved. Saved/ And look what I found! Molly was married. She has a son. He was a beautiful little boy. And her name wasn't Molly at all; it was Marguerite. Such a lovely name! Oh, we must do something to locate Ted. He'd want to see his mother before she's buried, I'm sure..."

"Your wish is granted," a deep voice said, shaking with emotion. And standing in the dining room doorway, Laurel saw a tall, muscular man.

She gasped and stepped back in utter disbelief. It was an apparition, she decided, quickly brushing a hand across her eyes which, she was sure, were deceiving her.

Dropping into the nearest chair, she closed her eyes.

"I'm real enough," the young man said in that same calm collected way that was always Molly's. "Here, touch my hand," he added, stepping toward Laurel and extending his hand.

Opening her eyes, her face the color of white chalk, Laurel said in a whispered tone, "I can't believe it! You . . . you're Ted, Molly's long-lost little boy!" Then, overwhelmed by the reality of his presence, she asked in quick succession, "Where did you come from, Ted? How did you locate your mother? I mean, who told you? Is your father with you? Oh, why didn't you come before now?"

Ted swallowed. Then, facing the lovely young woman before him, he said, "Laurel... I believe your mother called you by this name . . . I have tried; believe me, I have tried to find my mother. I... well, let me tell you everything then you will understand. On my father's death-bed . . . for he died two days after he got saved . . . he handed me a slip of paper with mother's old address on it. Immediately after the burial I flew to the city in which my father and mother had lived and where I was born. But the residents, living in what was once our house, knew no one by the name of William Bowery. I went from door to door, up and down the street, inquiring, inquiring, ever inquiring. In a small cottage two blocks away lived an aged woman and her equally aged husband. Mershammer, I believe the name was . . ."

Lois could hardly believe her ears. "They're still living then!" she said suddenly. "They were some of our dearest friends."

"Yes, they're living. Quite a wonderful couple, too! I was greatly impressed by their devotion to God and to each other. They gave me your name, Mrs. Anders. Said you had moved away and that my mother had gone with you. But they couldn't remember the name of the town to which you had moved. The only clue to your whereabouts was that they remembered you had been hired as a nurse in one of the hospitals in your neighboring city here.

"Renting a car, I headed this direction immediately, never stopping my inquiries until God, in His goodness and kindness, finally led me to your door."

"I . . . I wish it could have been a day earlier," Laurel said sadly.

With eyes downcast, Ted answered, "I do, too. But God must have wanted it this way. I'm a stickler for Romans 8:28."

"You're a Christian, Ted?" Lois asked happily. "How did this come about, and what was Bert's reaction?"

"Bert? Yes, I'm a Christian. But who is Bert?"

"Your father. His name was Bert. That's all he was ever called years ago . . . Bert Bowery."

"That's the reason, then, why no one knew 'William' Bowery; he went by Bert. Well, when Dad learned that I had gotten saved, and later sanctified wholly, he was furious with me and made me leave home. This proved to be the biggest blessing of his life; his loneliness drove him to near distraction and in that state of mind he begged me to return home, telling me he was sorry for his actions.

"My father, never unkind to me, became even more kind to me now; and one day when I asked him again to attend church with me, he surprised me by going. I noted God's Spirit was dealing with his heart but said nothing to him. For months after he refused to go with me to the services. Then one Sunday, a little less than a month ago, he said. 'Ted, I believe I'll go with you to church today.'

"That was Dad's 'day of salvation' . . . his last! He went to the altar. While there, he told me the truth about my mother -- how he had left her because she became a devout follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, how he had 'spirited' me away and what a wonderful woman my mother was. My father never married nor dated any women. For this I shall be eternally grateful. I grew up believing my mother had died when I was tiny; he intimated as much to me. But now that the truth was out, my heart was ecstatic with joy and a great yearning desire possessed me to meet my mother and tell her that her prayers had prevailed. Thus, in the Providence of God, I am here."

"And it is one day too late!" Laurel lamented brokenly.

* * * * *

Chapter 4

The room smelled sweetly-fragrant of apple blossom perfume that was wafted in through the open windows by the warm, gentle spring breezes and Lois Anders, looking with loving admiration and tenderness at the fine specimen of young manhood standing before her, asked, "Then you have never seen a picture of your mother, Ted?"

"None whatever, Mrs. Anders. Frankly, I doubt that my father had any with him."

"You must go with Laurel and me to your mother's room upstairs; Molly had a box for you," Lois told the bereaved boy.

"For me? Are you sure? After all, my mother didn't know that she'd ever see me again. But tell me, please, why do you call her Molly? Father told me her name was Marguerite Anna Marie. A very beautiful name, I think, and far more lovely than Molly."

"It is a beautiful name, Ted; this I agree. But you see, when Laurel was tiny, Marguerite was a very hard name for her to pronounce; and so, in her futile attempts at mastering your mother's name, she came up with Molly. And she has been called by that name all these years.

"Then, to answer your first question about the box and your mother never seeing you again, she had great faith, Ted. Yes, great faith! 'Someday, Lois,' she told me with shining eyes one day while we were housecleaning the upstairs, 'Ted will look for me, and he will find me. And when he does, I want him to have this box.' And she pointed to the box on the shelf inside her closet. 'I'm saving things I think he'll appreciate and be thankful for,' she added brightly."

"God bless my dear mother!" Ted exclaimed, wiping tears from his eyes. "Just before he died, Dad told me that mother's physical beauty was most outstanding. 'Her hair was black as a raven's,' he said, 'and her eyes were as blue as the morning glory' s.

" 'Why did you leave her, Father?' I asked him impulsively, noting the look of pain and intense yearning and longing in his eyes. 'Why?' I asked again, feeling I had to know. 'She loved you deeply, I'm sure, if she was as good as you have just told me she was,' I added.

" 'Oh, she did, Ted; she did love me deeply!' came the emphatic exclamation. 'She was the most wonderful woman in all the world, and I have never stopped loving her. But pride, my son..., oh, pride is a dreadful thing. Dreadful and deadly. It robs a man of all the good common sense he ever possessed and it makes him do things he never thought he'd do. Yes, it was my carnal pride that caused me to steal you away from your tender-hearted, loving and God-fearing mother that day when she went to help her critically ill sister.

" 'I was proud of my prestige and my position, too! Too proud to humble myself at an altar of prayer and get right with God. Then I was jealous, Ted -- jealous of her for giving God first place in her heart. What a fool I've been! Jealousy and pride are a deadly team. I've made good in business,' Dad continued in a weak voice. 'You'll have nothing to worry about when I'm gone, money-wise, I mean. But I've been a miserable man without your mother. Worse still, my conscience has tortured me day and night; my sin has ever been before me. Suppose she is dead! O Ted, Ted my boy, I've played the fool!' he cried, gasping for breath. 'Were it not that I know my sins are forgiven and covered by the Blood, I would be a raving maniac, I do believe.'

" 'But they are forgiven, Father, and now you must rest in that knowledge,' I told him, trying to get his mind off the past and on things eternal.

" 'Yes. Yes, you are right, Son,' he said adding, 'I am so very tired, Ted. Tired...'

"Those were his last words. He expired within minutes. I think the strain and the weight of his error and wrongdoing were too much for his heart." Ted finished with a faraway look in his eyes.

Lois sighed, and Laurel, out of sympathy and empathy for Molly's only child, cried. Life could deal such cruel blows to one sometimes, she thought, watching Ted whose grief and great earthly human loss was mirrored deep in his eyes and on his face.

"Would a visit to your mother's room be too painful for you right now?" Lois asked, not wanting to add greater sorrow to Ted's already broken heart, yet feeling he had a perfect right to her few remaining earthly possessions. All except the chest, which, Molly had told her frequently, was to be Laurel's upon her decease.

"Would you rather wait till some other time?" she prodded gently, stricken with compassion. In her capacity as nurse she had come in contact with much trouble. There is so much suffering in the world, she mused silently as she studied the intelligent-looking young man; so much suffering borne by countless innocent and blameless people that it had often baffled her. It was John who had pointed out the one bright aspect to her -- the ability of the human spirit, strengthened by faith in God, to overcome and be victorious. The most joyous and happy people were often those who had the most to bear, she knew, thinking of Molly and her traumatic experience; and now, Ted.

From her girlhood on the farm when she helped much with the sick or ailing animals, Lois' impulses had always been not only to pity, but to help those in trouble. It was this quality that John Anders had sensed in the light-hearted girl who seemed always to be laughing yet took another's suffering and pain in the most serious vein and was constantly helping, her gentle hands displaying the greater gentleness of her heart.

"I would not add a greater wound to your grief," Lois added, bidding him to sit down.

"No," Ted said quietly, "it could not cause more pain, Mrs. Anders. I have proven God's grace to be sufficient for all my needs. I would feel honored to see my darling mother's room. I sense a spirit of holiness and righteousness in your home, and I'm sure my mother's God-like presence has contributed to this sacred atmosphere."

"You'll never know how much!" Laurel exclaimed suddenly. "Not until you stand in God's presence. I myself have never fully realized her true worth -- not until today. Oh, how I shall miss her!"

"I am ready to go, Mrs. Anders," Ted declared quickly, giving Laurel a sympathetic, wan smile. "Follow me," Lois told him.

The room -- a cheerful, sunny, south room -- was nothing of exceptional 'class' and dignity and yet it was both; for it bore unmistakable charm of the simplest, neatest kind. And, upon entering its four walls, one was struck immediately with the feeling that royalty inhabited the place -- Heaven's kind of royalty.

"Would you like to be left alone, Ted?" Lois Anders was compassion and understanding combined.

"Would . . . do you mind?" he asked in little more than a hoarse whisper, his eyes resting upon his kind hostess.

"I think you should," Lois encouraged. "Pardon the things on the floor., by the chest, I mean., your mother desired and made me promise that Laurel must open the chest immediately after her passing, provided she hadn't gotten back to God before then."

"Oh-h, Mother! Then that was Molly's reason. God bless her. It accomplished the purpose for which she intended it, painful though it was for me at first, and grievous, too. Perhaps, after you are better able to tolerate all this," Laurel said, turning to Ted, "we may be able to finish going through the chest together. Even though Molly gave it to me, there are things inside which will be of great interest to you, Ted. The chest held your mother's treasures."

"Thank you, Laurel; that is most kind of you," he replied.

"Your box is on the shelf inside the closet, Ted," Lois said, taking her departure with her daughter.

Some time later a radiant Ted appeared in the kitchen archway with a Bible clutched to his heart. "A gift from my mother," he announced proudly. "It was the first thing in the box, and this is my very first gift ever from her. Oh, how I love her! We became very well acquainted this past hour and a half: her diary (to me) told me far more than either of you could ever have told me. My mother was a saint! Her love, so like my blessed Saviour's, was a forgiving, undying love. For my father especially! And now, unless you are too busy, I would feel greatly honored to explore the contents inside that quaint chest. Who made it? Do you know, Mrs. Anders?"

"From what Molly said, it's a treasure from her great-grandfather. They were poor she said, and pine being plentiful, her great grandfather made it one Christmas for his wife -- her great grandmother. She found it standing beside the tree when she got up Christmas morning, so her grandparents told her. Inside the chest was a small heart, also made out of pine and carved out by great-grandfather with the ever-new, never-old words, 'I love you,' cut into the hand-made gift. The chest has been an heirloom of sorts, and to your mother it was a treasured thing."

"That makes it treasured to me then," Ted replied quickly, following Lois Anders and her daughter up the stairs.

On their knees around the chest, Laurel tenderly lifted out a pair of tiny bib overalls and held them up for all to see.

"Yours, when you were crawling," Lois told the fascinated Ted. "Your father bought them for you; he said he thought they made you look like a working man -- a farmer."

"These pacifiers and teething rings were undoubtedly yours too," Laurel added, pointing to the small pile of baby things on the floor. "And from the looks of that ragged teddy-bear I gather that he was your dearest friend and your favorite toy."

"I can't remember that far back," Ted said, speaking softly and holding the teddy-bear before him.

"I can," Lois said, "and I do. That was your favorite toy, Ted," she added, filling the pair in with the long-ago puzzle pieces of what used to be, of what had been. "In fact, when your father left with you and didn't include your bed pal in the secret flight, your mother was much concerned for you and your health. You wouldn't go to sleep without Brownie, as you called the bear."

"Oh look!" Laurel cried suddenly, lifting a beautiful gown from the chest. "It's a wedding gown!" she exclaimed. "My own dear, sweet Molly's wedding gown, I do believe! And it's beautiful. What a tiny little waist she had!"

"And it was all hand made," Lois told the two young people. "Molly told me that every stitch in the gown was put there by her own fingers. She also designed it and made her own pattern -- another of her many, little-known talents. I always said I didn't think there was anything she couldn't do. She was a multi-talented woman, but she was completely unpretentious and unassuming; and she was my friend -- a very true and proven friend." Beneath the gown was a picture.

"Their wedding picture!" Ted exclaimed almost reverently, recognizing the handsome face of his father. "Mother was beautiful!" he added, holding the picture and gazing intently at it. "She looks almost like an angel."

"She doesn't just look like an angel," Laurel said, equally fascinated by the smiling, happy-looking faces inside the glass frame; "she was one: an angel in human form."

There were baby booties and bibs and a tiny pair of much-worn, scuffed shoes; Christmas cards, Easter greeting cards and birthday cards, some from relatives, others from friends; and in a corner, tied with a bit of ribbon, were cards from Bert to her. At the very bottom of the chest was a flat box. Its lid bore the simple notation, "For Laurel."

With trembling fingers, Laurel lifted it from its hiding place. "Must I open it now?" she asked her mother.

"Molly would be pleased," came the quick reply. Carefully lifting the lid and looking inside, Laurel gasped. "Money!" she exclaimed. "Money! For what?"

"You have your answer here," Ted said, handing her a slip of paper with Molly's neat hand writing on it.

"For... for Bible School, Molly says," Laurel reported. "Oh, poor, dear Molly! How long she must have been saving to... to have this much money. But Mother, she knew I wanted to be a nurse, like you."

"What if that isn't God's will for you, Laurel dear?"

The girl was silent for a while. "Then I don't want it," she answered softly. "I do want only His will. I do!"

"And God will certainly reveal His will to you if you stay 'open' before Him, Laurel."

Closing the box and placing it back into the chest, Laurel said lovingly, 'So these were Molly's treasures! What beautiful and precious keepsakes. Their value is beyond and above any price tag. Molly left a chest full of love! Ted, it seems to me that you should have some of these things. Pick out what you want and I'll keep the rest."

"Nothing doing, Laurel," he protested, lifting a restraining hand. "My mother wanted you to have the chest and all its contents, and that is the way it must be. I have my very own gifts from her inside the box. Today, however, I have discovered a gift of far greater worth than anything she could have left me or given me, and that is her gift of selfless love and devotion to God. She left me a priceless heritage -- and example to follow -- and now, with confidence and full assurance of heart that I will meet her again, I shall be able to look upon her lifeless form with joy and eager anticipation of the resurrection morning. My precious mother!"

"And my beloved Molly!" Laurel exclaimed reverently.

* * * * *

THE END