"MerriLe, what is wrong with you? You look like you saw a ghost. MerriLe, answer me. Please!"

Jackie’s face paled as she looked at her friend who had, only a moment before" been laughing and talking excitedly about the upcoming youth
meeting at Brookville but who stood, now, like a statue, with set jaws and a look as cold and as hard as marble.

"Answer me, please!" Jackie pleaded again. "What's wrong? Are you all right? You do look like you've seen a ghost!" she exclaimed in a frightened voice as she began shaking MerriLe, trying to bring her out of the sudden stupor-like trance, or whatever it was.

"Stop it, Jackie!" MerriLe cried. "I only wish it were a ghost! Oh, how I wish...!"

"That's a silly thing to say, and to wish" Jackie countered sweetly.

"But it's not silly, and I mean it"

"But why? What's wrong with you? One minute you were as carefree and bubbly and light-hearted as a bird set free from its prison cage and then, wham-mo! like you turn off a light switch, you are as cold as ice and as strong as granite or marble. I must confess that I don't understand the why of this sudden change."

With effort, MerriLe said, "See that man going down the street?" She pointed toward The Eatery on the opposite side of the street.

"I see a lot of men going in there. It's a good place to eat, so I hear"

"The one in the dark gray suit..."

"He looks like a very nice man," Jackie replied. "If I'm any judge of human nature, I'd say he's a kind, loving, generous hearted, good family man. And, maybe, even a devout Christian. He looks like one; and he appears to be every nice adjective by which I've described him. Don't you agree? Now why are you so pale?"

Shivering slightly, MerriLe said, "You wouldn't understand. You couldn't."

"Hey, silly, I thought we were best friends. If so, that's no way to answer me. I asked for a reason as to your death-like pallor and all I get is an
unreasonably inane reply. How do you know I wouldn't, or couldn't, understand? Try me; I may surprise you"

    Exhaling a long, deep breath, MerriLe cried, "That . . . that's the man who . . . who. . . .

    "Out with it" Jackie probed gently and softly "Who what?"

    "Oh Jackie! He . . . he's been. . . . Oh, I can't bear to talk about it even. It hurts too badly and . . . and cuts too deeply."

    Jackie stood speechless for a while, not knowing what to think. Then, very kindly, she said, "Please tell me all about it, MerriLe. You'll feel so much better when you get it out in the open, whatever it is. And, many times, the things which we think are so frightening and so painful really aren't that way at all. When we view them in God's light and His perspective and will, especially."

    "Oh Jackie' that's Mr. Banks from over in the Valley Church, and . . . and he's been dating my . . . my mother! He saw her at the camp meeting two months ago. Someone introduced him to her. And . . . and I . . . I'm scared."

    "Scared? Why should you be? Your father's been dead five years. And I suppose this Mr. Banks is a widower?"

    MerriLe nodded. "I'm afraid he's going to marry Mother. He's in love with her; I can tell it by the way he looks at her."

    "Well that's wonderful! And your mother's in love with him, would you say?"

    "I . . . I'm sure she is." The reply came out in barely more than a painful whisper. MerriLe covered her face with her hands and wept. "I . . . I don't want him to love Mother. She belongs to Daddy,'

    "She did belong, MerriLe; not any more. I Corinthians 7:39 states, "The wife is bound by the law so long as her husband liveth; but if her husband is dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord: Your mother is now as free to marry as you and I are, if she so desires."
"But Jackie, you don't understand! I don't want a man--not any man--to take Daddy's place. It's not fair. There'll never be anybody who can take his place. Mother's not thinking straight or . . . or something."

Jackie touched her friend's arm lightly. "We're friends, right?" she asked, searching the other's pale face.

"Why, yes, of course."

"Best friends?"

MerriLe nodded and brushed tears from her eyes and her cheeks.

"Maybe it's my best friend who's not thinking straight," Jackie stated softly and kindly.

"How can you say such a thing?" MerriLe flared. "I can't stand the sight of John Banks. I get sick at my stomach every time he comes to the house; or when I see him. He has no right to put a wedge between Mother and me, and. . . ."

"Please, MerriLe!" Jackie exclaimed before the sentence was finished. "Pardon my interruption; but are you sure this Mr. Banks has put that wedge there? If there is a wedge? I'm afraid you have done this yourself. Knowing your mother so well as I do, I know there is no wedge of division on her part. Our attitudes and reactions drive the wedges, dear friend."

MerriLe shrugged her shoulders and stated again, "I knew you wouldn't understand. You've no idea what it's like nor how painful it is. None at all!"

Jackie stared at her friend for a long while. Sadly, she said, "I'm only now seeing the real MerriLe, and I'm grieved over the revelation. But I see that the saying is true about trials and tests bringing out -- or exposing -- the real person: the inner man. Take this kindly, my dear, please; God has an experience of grace that can make you love Mr. Banks, not hate him or despise him. And you'll need it to get inside the City. No hatred passes through those beautiful gates."
"But Jackie, you just don't understand. I loved my father. Very much. I . . . I don't want another man to . . . to take his place in Mother's heart, nor in our home."

"Jealousy will have no entrance through those pearly gates," Jackie replied. "Mr. Banks will not try to take your father's place: no one can ever do that. But it's extremely selfish of you to deprive your mother of the love and security and the companionship of a good Christian man. She's still quite young, MerriLe, and she's very attractive. Life hasn't been easy for her since your dad's Homegoing. And I honestly believe you'd have a wonderful stepfather in this fine-looking and respectable-appearing Mr. Banks. He's the Sunday school superintendent of the Valley Church, if he's the same Banks man I've heard such good reports about while listening to occasional conversations around the supper table regarding the many new converts over at that church. You should feel honored that he's dating your mother."

"Stop it, Jackie! You've never been through this and you can't feel what it's like."

"Maybe I have been, MerriLe. And maybe I do know what it's like to have lost a father who was beloved and loved beyond any describing. And maybe I recall those long, lonely nights of weeping and sobbing until I fell asleep, thinking I'd die unless I could feel his dear hand upon my head in a sort of blessing benedictory way as he and Mother and I prayed around the family altar. I know, MerriLe. I know well. And had it not been for the comfort of the indwelling Holy Spirit I believe I'd have died of grief."

"But . . . but you never . . . I . . . I mean, isn't . . .? "Isn't this kind and wonderful man who loves both Mother and me dearly my biological father? Is this what you're wondering?"

"Ye . . . yes. I . . . I thought he was your real father, Jackie."

"He is my real step-father and I love him very deeply."

"But . . . your name; did he adopt you?"

"Jackie laughed softly. "Not actually. In his heart, yes. But strange as it may seem, he had the same last name as my beloved, late father. So my last
name is the same as his. And he and Daddy were no relation whatever. He never knew my father."

MerriLe looked at Jackie with awe and admiration "Didn't it . . . bother you that . . . that your mother loved someone beside your father?" she asked honestly.

"Oh no. I was too happy that the Lord had sent a good Christian man to mother and me again. Mother was a widow for six years; and just to see her happy and young looking and excited again was full pay for me. I believe I saw the 'green light' before she did even. She has to be super, super sure about everything, as you well know, before she goes ahead. But when she was certain it was God's will for her to marry, she gave my stepfather the answer to his question of a marriage proposal and they were married shortly afterward. They are ever so happy together. And honestly, MerriLe, I don't believe I could be any happier nor more thankful than I am with my wonderful stepfather. Daddy would be so pleased, and so thankful, how God arranged and worked things out for mother and me."

MerriLe inhaled a slightly stifled gasp. "You . . . you . . . you can't mean that!" she exclaimed in astonishment.

"But I do mean it. My stepfather is a wonderful Christian, MerriLe. He lives a holy life, and he is always kind and good and considerate of Mother and me. Daddy will always be my beloved earthly father; but my stepfather trails a very close second father behind him. In fact, so close that he's right on Daddy's heels, figuratively speaking."

MerriLe's head drooped. Tears slid from beneath her long eyelashes. "You . . . will pray . . . for me, Jackie? I'd give ever so much to feel about John Banks the way you feel toward your step-father. I'm the most unhappy and miserable person in our church, I do believe."

"Get rid of your jealousy, MerriLe. In other words, pray. Pray! Until the Lord has forgiven you and your soul is at one with God. He specializes in spiritual heart cases."

"I know. And . . . and Jackie, let's take another day to go to Brooks' outlet store; I'm going to the church to pray. I want a heart change. I need it. Really need it: 'Mind if I come along?' "Will you, please?"
For answer, Jackie linked her arm in MerriLe's and began walking in the direction of the church.