



Divine

A NOVEL

Karen
KINGSBURY

#1
BEST-SELLING
AUTHOR



KAREN KINGSBURY

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Divine

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Dedicated to . . .

The memory of Mary Magdalene, a woman who understood and believed in the divinity of Jesus Christ . .

.

The memory of my brother, David, who understood the importance of this project and helped make it possible . .

.

Also dedicated to:

*Donald, my prince charming
Kelsey, my precious daughter
Tyler, my beautiful song
Sean, my wonder boy
Josh, my tender tough guy
EJ, my chosen one
Austin, my miracle child.*

And to God Almighty, the Author of Life, who has—for now—blessed me with these.

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Author's Note

History and Scripture combined have given us very few facts about the real Mary Magdalene, the woman who so fascinates our generation, our culture. In fact, though it is widely held that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, there is no concrete evidence supporting this notion. The idea that Mary had more than a deep discipleship relationship with Jesus is absolutely unfounded. Worse is the popular thinking that Jesus may have been married to Mary Magdalene. This, of course, is absolutely false, heresy by the Bible's standards.

So who was Mary Magdalene?

Scripture tells us for certain that Jesus saved Mary from seven demons (Luke 8:2). What those demons were, we aren't told. But once she was free, we know that Mary and a few other women were so devoted to Christ that they helped support His ministry out of their own means (Luke 8:1-3). In other words, they were vital to His ministry and the furthering of His message.

We also know that Mary stayed with Jesus until the end and was one of the women at the foot of the cross, witnessing the horrifying death of their Savior (Matthew 27:56; Mark 15:40-41; John 19:25). In addition we are told that Mary Magdalene was one of the women who went to the tomb the brilliant Sunday morning to anoint Christ's body with oils (Mark 16:1-9).

But maybe most telling of all is the account we are given in John 20:1-18. On that resurrection Sunday, when Mary and a few women found the tomb of Jesus empty, the others returned to their homes.

Not Mary. Mary stayed outside the empty tomb by herself, weeping.

Because I write emotional fiction, this part of Mary's story touches me the most. At one time she belonged completely to the darkness. Jesus saved her, as only God can do, and she became devoted to Him for the rest of His days on earth. Devoted in time and financial resources, devoted with her whole heart. When Jesus was killed on a cross, when His body was—Mary assumed—stolen from the tomb, she felt as if her entire world had come undone.

She was devastated.

Jesus saw that, the way He sees us when we are crushed. He had compassion on her and sent two angels to comfort her. They asked her why she was crying. "Because," she said, "they have taken my Lord away. I don't know where they have put Him."

She must've heard something behind her, because she turned around and there stood Jesus. The sight was such a shock that at first she didn't recognize Him. But when she did, she must have run to Him and taken His hands, or maybe she tried to hug Him.

Even then—in what might've been their greatest act of friendship—Jesus was clear about who He is, what His purpose is. He said to Mary, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father, and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Basically He told her, "Don't hug me because this isn't about us. Instead, go tell the others that I'm doing what I said I would do." Don't get this wrong. Jesus wasn't angry with Mary. He cared enough for her to send the angels and to appear first to her, above all the powerful men He might've appeared

to.

But still, He was clear about His role in her life. He was her Lord, not her lover. Her Father, not merely her friend.

This is where many struggle today—understanding the relationship between Mary and Christ.

Divine is a modern-day parable of Mary Magdalene. I have taken liberties—as a novelist must do—in finding seven demons or horrors that a person like Mary Magdalene might've been rescued from. In *Divine*, Mary Madison suffers all types of abuse, among other horrors. There are sections of the book that—though not graphic—will be difficult to read, sections that will put knots in your stomach for what this modern-day Mary suffers.

You may not relate to a story about abuse or faithlessness or promiscuity. But as long as the enemy of our souls exists, all of us will suffer abuse in some form: fear, doubt, loneliness, addiction, lifestyle sin. We are all in need of rescue by the only one with the power to do so.

Jesus Christ, the divine one.

I bring you a story about a modern-day Mary Magdalene for one reason:

Mary's story is our story.

I see myself in Mary Magdalene, and I pray you see yourself there too. Floundering and falling prey to the demons and darkness of this world, trapped by our own frailty and futility—until we meet Jesus. Then, as He rescues us, we have the incredible chance of a lifetime: to follow Him for all our days, letting our life and our resources bring Him glory and honor.

The way Mary Magdalene did.



1

The speaker leaned toward the microphone. “And now—” his tone took on a timbre of importance—“it is my privilege to introduce to you Mary Madison.”

A hush fell over the storied room, and the packed crowd of senators and lawmakers turned their attention to her.

Mary stood and with a practiced grace made her way to the podium. She was thirty, though there were days she felt one hundred. She clutched her notes in her left hand and felt the familiar rush of otherworldly peace. How many times had she done this? The smell of centuries-old tomes and rich wood, the click of her heels on the marbled floor, the walk to the front of the grand place—all of it was familiar.

Polite applause echoed through the room. Washington, DC’s most influential and powerful nodded their subtle greetings as she passed. A few even smiled. After five years of testifying at Senate hearings, the sea of faces was as familiar to her as she was to them. She was the voice of faith and reason, a woman whose beliefs and position were clear-cut and one-sided. But they asked her to come anyway. They sought after her and listened to her for one reason.

They knew her story.

Her horrific past, her public humiliation—the details were something they were all aware of. Every senator in the room knew the pain she’d suffered. Each was aware of her determination and drive, the way she held her head high now and had put herself through school, earning nothing less than a doctorate in family counseling.

She was an icon in DC, a pillar. She could’ve had her own talk show or made a fortune writing books and running a private practice. But Mary’s days were spent in the heart of the city at one of her five shelters for abused women. Social work, they called it. She was a survivor, a fighter. The DC elite knew that too, and they liked her for it. Liked her enough to listen to her when an issue was on the floor and moral input was needed.

The issue today was abstinence.

At the beginning of the current president’s term, a bill had been passed approving three years of federal funding for abstinence programs in public schools. Now time was up and money was running out. Mary’s goal was simple: convince the senators to approve another three years.

“Good morning.” Mary took hold of the sides of the podium and made eye contact with a group

senators ten feet from her. Her eyes shifted toward the back of the room. “More than two years ago I stood in this place and convinced you that it was time for change.” She paused and found another group near the left set of doors. “You agreed, and you gave our children a program that has altered the picture of teenage pregnancy across the nation.” Her voice rang with sincerity that flowed from deep within her soul. “Today I come because the battle has just begun, and we must—we *must*—continue to bring our kids the choice to say no.”

Though the first two speakers had bashed the program as being thinly veiled religious training, the faces before her were alert, ready for whatever she’d brought them.

She glanced at her notes. The statistics were daunting. For the next five minutes she rattled them off. Teen pregnancy down 40 percent. Eight out of ten students presented with abstinence training were making the decision to wait until marriage. There were 28 percent fewer known cases of sexually transmitted diseases.

Next Mary told her listeners about three teenagers, two girls and a boy, from different parts of the country. All of them ran in circles where sexual activity was a given, and each of them had made the decision to wait. The final story ended with Mary reading a quote from Susan, one of the teenage girls. “If someone hadn’t taught me it was okay to say no, I never would’ve said it. Today I’d be pregnant or sick or used. Maybe all three.”

Mary gripped the podium more tightly. “When a woman walks into one of my shelters looking for help, more than 90 percent of the time she was sexually active as a teenager. Women who practice abstinence are healthy women in every sense of the word. The same is true for young men. When they make a choice to wait, they tell the world they are worthwhile, valuable, special. Every other action they take toward their future will fall in line with those feelings.”

She paused and gave one more look at a few specific faces around the room. “Please understand, ladies and gentlemen of the Senate the power to help kids like Susan is entirely in your hands. We must—we absolutely must—continue funding this education.” She leaned into the microphone. “Thank you.”

A break was called, and for the next fifteen minutes Mary was surrounded by senators thanking her for coming and nodding their agreement. Even though a significant number in the room were clearly opposed to the program, seeing it as a violation of separation of church and state, Mary felt good about her talk.

She’d done her part. God would do the rest.

Members of the media converged around her next, and she told them all the same thing. “Abstinence is worth fighting for. It’s the only way we can look our kids in the eyes and tell them they’ll be safe. Safe in body, mind, and soul.”

Ten minutes after the last interview she was in her four-door Toyota headed for the S Street shelter, the one closest to the Capitol, the one where her next appointment would take place in just half an hour. She pulled out of the parking lot, drove past the manicured lawns and carefully kept landscaping and headed west past the impressive buildings and detailed architecture.

The transition happened in the next few blocks. Lush green grass became cracked sidewalks and dirty gutters; rose gardens gave way to littered alleys, stunning buildings to old brick and graffiti. Mary felt herself unwind. She had a voice in that world, but she was more comfortable in this one.

More fulfilled. Especially today. Her appointment was with a woman who wanted to end her life, a woman fleeing with her two young daughters, running from an abusive boyfriend and convinced twenty-three that life held nothing more for her.

Mary gripped the steering wheel. *God, give me the words . . . the way You always have.*

My grace is sufficient for you, daughter. The words breezed across her heart, full and rich, assuring her.

A group of guys in their late teens was gathered at the next stoplight. They looked rough, with the tight white T-shirts, metal chains, and tattoos. They spotted Mary, and two of them grinned and waved. She knew them. They were regulars at the youth center—another project she'd won funding for.

"Mary . . . hey, Mary!" one of them shouted.

The light was red, so she rolled down her window. "Good morning, guys. Staying out of trouble?"

"Anything for you, Mary." One of the others saluted her, and she smiled. A week ago he'd told her the good news. He was coming to the youth center for regular Bible studies. Another life saved from the streets.

The light changed and she waved good-bye. "Come see me sometime."

"We will!"

She turned her attention back to the road. The women's shelter was three blocks up on the left, an old five-story brick building with apartments on all but the first two floors. A living room, library, and kitchen, along with a day-care facility and several private offices and meeting rooms, made up the first level, and the second held a workout room, classrooms, and an oversized meeting area for church services.

Mary found her regular parking place in the back lot and headed for the side door. She loved every inch of this place. This was her life's purpose, the reason Christ had rescued her. She squinted against the bright midmorning sun. *Use me in this woman's life, Lord. Give her a reason to stay, a reason to come back. A reason to live.*

Inside she stopped at the front desk.

Leah Hamilton was working at the computer. She looked up, curious. "How did it go?"

"Very well." Mary picked up a stack of mail with her name on it. "They don't take their vote for a while. I think they'll fund it again." She peered around the corner. "Is she here yet?"

"Signing her kids into day care." Leah was nineteen, a lovely girl, inside and out, from the wealthy enclaves across the river. Three days a week she took college courses in theater and music, but the other two she was here volunteering her time and energy to work alongside the team at the shelter. She had an uncanny way of connecting with the women, helping them feel safe and cared for from the moment they entered the building.

And that was always the hardest part—getting abused women to step out of a harmful situation into the safe haven of the shelter.

"What's her name?"

"Emma Johnson. She's twenty-three with two little girls." Leah frowned. "I'm worried about her."

"Me too." Mary took the file marked *Emma* from the corner of the desk. In their initial phone discussion, the shelter's staff counselor had written in the file that Emma had gotten into drugs as

teenager, and now she was bruised and battered because of her boyfriend.

In addition, the counselor had noted that Emma was suicidal. "I feel trapped, like I'm in a prison and I can't get out," Emma had told the counselor.

It was that part that had caught Mary's attention. *Trapped in a prison*. The words could've been her own once, a lifetime ago. Mary sighed. Dozens of abused women filed through the doors of the DC shelters every day. She couldn't meet with all of them, so for the most part she left counseling to her very able staff.

But this one . . .

Mary tucked the file under her arm and nodded at the door down the hallway. "I'll be waiting." She smiled at Leah. "Bring Emma to my office when she's ready."

Inside the small room, Mary shut the door and studied Emma's file again. Once in a while God brought someone who needed to hear her story. Her entire story. Her story of gut-wrenching heartache and sorrow and finally her story of victory.

Her love story.

Without ever meeting her, Mary was convinced that Emma was one of those women.

She stood and went to the window facing S Street. The sun was passing behind a cloud, and an anxious feeling plagued her. Days like this it all came back, the horrors that had trapped her and threatened to consume her. Fear and deceit, pain and addiction. Faithlessness and promiscuity and desire to end her own life.

In Bible times people would have called her possessed of those horrors. Demons, they would've said. People today were reluctant to use that word, but whatever the wording, the effect was the same. Bondage and helplessness, with no way out.

Until she met Jesus.

She was no longer a slave to her own seven demons but a willing servant, dedicated and indebted to the Master, determined to make every breath count for His purposes alone. Her devotion was that strong.

Mary looked up and found a place beyond the passing cloud. What horrors did Emma Johnson face? In what ways did she need to be rescued?

A long shaky breath left Mary's lips. Her job was easier when she stayed busy, stayed in the present day, making rounds between Senate committee hearings and ministry on the streets of DC. But sometimes when the situation warranted it, she allowed herself to go back to the sad, sorry beginning. Telling her story was one way of underlining the truth, one way of making sure that the pain she suffered hadn't been without reason.

She swallowed hard and leaned into the windowsill. What were people thinking these days? Jesus wasn't merely a good teacher, and He certainly wasn't only a man—the way the world saw men. There had been no marriage or family for Jesus Christ. He'd come to set people free. Period. And that's just what He'd done in her life. People didn't understand the power of Jesus—not the real power.

It was her job to tell them. Her job to tell Emma Johnson.

Jesus had rescued her, saved her from horrors that otherwise would've killed her. That wasn't something a normal man could've done. Her rescue hadn't come at the hands of a mere mortal—no way. It had come through the working of a mighty God.

Mary felt her anxiety ease. She would tell Emma every piece of her story so the woman might understand the real Jesus, the one people often didn't know about. Her story alone was proof that Jesus was who He claimed to be. Not just a good teacher or a kind leader, but God in the flesh. Because God would've taken God to redeem someone like Mary. Someone like Emma Johnson. God Almighty, Lord and Savior. Wholly man, yes. But more than that.

Wholly divine.



2

Emma Johnson's hand shook as she signed the names and ages of her two daughters on the day-care form—Kami, four; and Kaitlyn, two. Both had Emma's pretty brown skin and delicate features. She lowered herself to their level and kissed them each on the forehead.

"Be good for Mama." Emma stood just inside the day-care door and watched them stand shyly together a few feet away and eye a pile of dolls and building blocks. "It's okay. You can go play, girls. Go on."

But they only moved closer to each other. Emma wanted to cry. What had they ever done to deserve the life she'd given them? They shouldn't be here at the day care of a battered-women's shelter. It was a weekday morning. They should be watching *Barney* or *Sesame Street*, safe and secure at home while she thought about what to fix for lunch.

But life had never been that way for them—not a day of it.

"Mama—" Kami looked up at her—"is Daddy here?"

Emma's heart sank. "No, baby. Daddy's far away. You're safe now."

Relief eased her little girl's features. Kami took her sister's hand and made four tentative steps toward the toys. Emma could read her mind. If Daddy wasn't here, then maybe it was okay to relax long enough to pick up a dolly or build a tower with her sister. Emma felt tears in her eyes. How could she have let things get to this point? She shivered and crossed her arms in front of her. "It's all right, girls."

Kami gave her one more look, and for a moment their eyes held. Then with fearful little steps she led Kaitlyn the rest of the way to the toys. Slowly they dropped to their knees, and Kami picked up one of the dolls. She hugged and rocked it and patted its plastic head. "It's okay," she said to the doll, her voice a precious singsong. "You're safe here."

One tear spilled onto Emma's cheek. Her girls were in a safe place now. She looked over her shoulder at the hallway and beyond it to the front door. So what did her children need her for? She could walk out, couldn't she? What was stopping her? She could leave the girls with the day-care lady and disappear into the streets. She could buy enough crack to take her from the nightmare of living and that would be that. Charlie would live the rest of his life knowing he had caused her death. And her daughters . . . well, someone would take them, give them a home.

"Emma?"

She jerked her head back around and raised her eyebrows. “Yes?”

The woman behind the counter had gray hair and soft wrinkled skin. Her eyes held a kindness Emma had forgotten existed. “I need you to sign one more form.”

Run, Emma . . . sign the form and run. She held out her hand. Her fingers shook harder than before. “Okay.”

Across the room, Kami passed the baby to Kaitlyn. As Emma signed the form, the gray-haired lady walked over to the girls and squatted so she was eye level with them. She took another baby doll from the pile and handed it to Kami. “There. Now you each have one.” The woman’s voice was gentle. She motioned toward a box across the room and nodded for the girls to follow her. “Come on; come take a look at the doll clothes over here.”

The girls looked at Emma, their expressions as familiar as they were fearful. “Mommy?” Kami pointed toward the box. “Please?”

“Yes.” Emma nodded and gave the girls a small wave. “Go . . . Mama’ll see you later.”

She watched them take the hands of the older woman. Yes, someone would see that they found a good home. She could leave and never look back. It was the right thing to do. She would return to Charlie one last time and tell him it was over. At least he couldn’t threaten the girls then. And if he beat her up, so be it. If he didn’t kill her she’d find the drugs to do it. Or maybe she’d skip seeing Charlie, get the drugs, and be lost to the world in an hour.

Emma took a step back. “Bye.” The word was quiet, empty.

The gray-haired woman looked over her shoulder, and their eyes met. “They’ll be just fine. Come ahead to your appointment.”

Emma didn’t want an appointment. She wanted a fix—and fast. Why was she here, anyway? She took another step back and nodded. “Thank you. I . . . I won’t be long.”

“Take your time. Leah phoned up from the front desk.” The woman smiled. “Mary’s waiting for you.”

Mary Madison.

That was the reason she’d come, wasn’t it? Several days ago when Charlie had exploded at her she’d been desperate for help, desperate for something that would take her and the girls out of the apartment and away from his rage. When he was finished with her, Charlie did what he often did. He sped away and left her moaning on the floor, the girls screaming from their bedroom.

Then she’d taken the girls and gone to stay with a friend, but it was hardly a healthy atmosphere. Her friend sold crack, and Emma had spent most of the next four days as high as a kite. She knew that if she stayed there, she’d overdose for sure, and if she went back to Charlie he’d kill her. So the morning she’d grabbed the yellow pages. She found the heading *Abuse Shelter* and dialed the number before she had time to think.

After an initial discussion with a staff counselor, she had an appointment with Mary. *The Mary Madison.*

Emma turned and headed down the hallway. Mary was the reason she’d come. Everyone in the country knew Mary Madison’s story—at least the public details. The woman was always in the news, gaining ground for the city’s downtrodden. She was powerful and beautiful, a survivor. No question something had turned life around for Mary, and Emma was curious. But now . . . with her girls safe

the other possibility—getting enough drugs to end it all—loomed even more tempting than meeting Mary Madison.

The door was ten feet away. She had twenty bucks in her pocket. She could buy some cheap crack, take it in an alley somewhere, and be dead in an hour. Her breathing came quicker, shallower, and somewhere deep in her chest her heart skittered into a rhythm too fast to feel.

Do it, Emma . . . end it all. You're worthless. No one needs you.

She put her hands over her ears. The voices had left her alone all morning, but they were back. She gave a quick shake of her head. "Stop!" She hissed the word and waited.

Your girls are better off without you. . . . Leave and don't look back, Emma. Crack's as close as a cab ride away. . . .

Her hands were damp with sweat, and she wiped them across her jeans.

Don't waste time, Emma. Go! The voice was shouting at her, laughing at her.

Fine.

No one needed to tell her the obvious. She would go, and she would take three times the crack she'd ever taken before. No more terrifying nights, no more hiding in the closet with Kami and Kaitlyn, no more longing for a man who couldn't love her without hurting her. She could take the drugs, and an hour from now there would be no more missing her mother and Terrence and the life she'd left behind. No more nightmares or drugs or voices in her head. No more danger for her girls.

Never mind about Mary Madison. She walked to the door and gripped the steel bar.

"Emma?"

She turned and tried to grab a full breath. It was a young woman, a girl no older than twenty. "Yes?"

The girl smiled and held out her hand. "I'm Leah Hamilton. I work at the front desk."

"Oh." Her throat was so dry she barely squeaked the word out. What was the girl doing, stopping her? Emma ran her tongue along the inside of her lips. "Okay."

"You aren't . . . leaving, are you?" Leah looked down at Emma's hand still on the door. "Mary's expecting you." She smiled. "She's looking forward to meeting you."

Air, that's what she needed. She pushed the door open a crack and sucked in a partial breath. The whole time she kept her eyes on Leah's. "I . . . I'm not feeling well." She could get away from the girl. Slip out, grab a taxi, and be dead before lunchtime, right? No one would know the difference.

Go, Emma. Run and don't look back. You're worthless. . . . What good are you doing anyone but staying alive? Better dead than living your life. . . . Everyone you know will be better off without—

The voices were incessant. Emma pushed the door farther, but Leah stepped around her and opened it before she had a chance. "Let's stand out here together." She patted Emma's shoulder. "The first time's always the hardest."

"It is?"

"Yes." Leah was pretty, and something in her eyes spoke to the dark places in Emma's soul. "It's easy to convince yourself you shouldn't be here. You're not worth the time." Leah looked intently at her. "Know what I mean?"

The voices were silent. "Y-y-yes. I think so." Emma hugged herself and tried to stop shivering. It was summer after all. Eighty degrees and sunny. Did Leah know what she'd been thinking? Were the

voices in her head loud enough for even a stranger to hear? She watched an empty cab drive by, the cab that could've taken her to another part of the city, where the drugs would be a sure thing. But with Leah standing here . . . what would it hurt, meeting with Mary? Just this once. She could take a cab and get the drugs later.

"Emma?" Leah's voice was gentle. She leaned closer, searching her eyes, her heart. "Did you just leave the man who's been hurting you?"

"A little while ago. I . . . stayed at a friend's house until I came here."

Leah took a step in the direction of the door. "Emma, you ready?"

"Yes." Fear put its icy fingers around her throat.

You're nothing but trash, Emma.

"Come on." Leah held out her hand. "I'll take you to Mary."

Emma squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. "I can't . . ."

"You can." Leah took her hand and led her back inside.

The fight left as quickly as it had come. Tears flooded Emma's eyes, and she felt her body go limp. What was she thinking? She couldn't kill herself, could she? What would happen to Kami and Kaitlyn?

When they were inside, Leah let go of her hand but stayed next to her. "Mary's office is just down the hall."

Emma blinked so she could see. Leah was taking small steps, hardly making progress, and still took every bit of Emma's energy to move her feet. She looked up and met Leah's eyes. "Is it . . . always this hard?"

"Often." Leah stopped outside a plain door. "But I can tell you this: no matter how hard it feels, no matter what you've been through, Mary's been there." She offered the slightest sad smile. "You'll like her, Emma. Give this a chance, okay?"

Emma was shaking again, but at least the voices were quiet. She didn't have the strength to speak, not when fear was clamping its fingers on her throat, making words impossible. Instead she nodded and watched as Leah opened the door. It was too late now. She couldn't run even if she wanted to. She couldn't think about getting a cab and driving a few blocks away, going to the nearest alley and—

"Mary?" Leah leaned inside. "Emma's here."

From the other side of the door came a voice that was as kind as it was strong. "Thank you, Leah. Send her in."

Emma managed to get inside, and suddenly she was hit by a force that shook her to the core. She dropped to the chair closest to her, and only then did she look into the eyes of the woman with the face America knew so well. "Hi," Emma said weakly.

"Emma." Mary stood from the sofa opposite Emma's chair and held out her hand. "I'm glad you came."

"Yes, ma'am." They were the only words she could manage. Even still, her next breath stopped at her throat. Mary was far more beautiful in person. As she sat back down Emma was struck by her appearance. The woman had delicate features framed by long golden curls and the most brilliant blue eyes she'd ever seen. But that wasn't what made it hard to catch her breath. It was something deep that came from inside the woman and filled the room. Whatever it was, Emma didn't recognize it.

Mary sat on the edge of the sofa, and their eyes met. “I read your file, Emma.” She reached for the folder, never breaking eye contact. “You need help. That’s why I’m here.”

Emma produced a slight nod. Mary was dressed in a navy jacket and pants with a white blouse. Clothes that could’ve belonged to someone uppity. But the woman across from her was as welcoming as a summer breeze.

“I’ve asked God to lead us today.” Mary set the folder on her lap. “You don’t want to talk, do you?”

“No.” Emma felt another chill. “How . . . did you know?”

Mary’s voice grew softer. “I’ve sat in your seat, Emma. You think there’s no way out of this nightmare.” She put her hand on Emma’s knee and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Every once in a while God asks me to give a battered woman space, time. So instead of telling me your story, why don’t you start with mine?”

“Yours?” There it was, the strange rush of emotions, the feeling she couldn’t identify. She had figured Mary would demand the details of her life the minute they got started. Details she wasn’t ready to share. She had never thought for a moment that they would start with Mary’s story. The muscles at the base of her neck relaxed some. “That . . . that would be good.”

Mary leaned back on the sofa. “See, Emma, I was just like you not that many years ago. Life wasn’t worth living. But then—” her eyes glowed from a place deep inside her—“I met the love of my life. And everything—absolutely everything—changed.”

Emma sat very still. Thoughts of taxicabs and drug overdoses faded from her mind. She nodded. “Tell me about that.”

“One condition.” Mary searched Emma’s eyes, her heart, and her soul. “It’ll take several sessions to tell you the whole story.” She hesitated. “You have to promise me that you and your girls will stay here at the shelter and you’ll keep coming until I finish the story.” She gave a sideways nod. “Along the way we might talk about you, but only as much as you’re ready for.”

Emma blinked. Could she do that? Could she stay here with strangers when Charlie must be desperate for her to come home? She looked out the window. And what about the voices? They were right, weren’t they? Several sessions? Days and nights at the shelter? She wasn’t worth the time. Mary must have a hundred more important things she needed to do. Why should she think she was worth anything when—?

“I want to make something clear to you.” Mary’s voice was pleasant, but it demanded her attention.

Emma lifted her eyes to the woman across from her once more.

Mary studied her. “Jesus saved me for one reason.”

The shaking was back. “One reason?”

“Yes.” Her tone softened. “To share my story with women like you.”

The chill passed from Emma’s shoulders straight down her spine. Had she known? Like Leah earlier, Mary seemed to sense the exact thoughts screaming at her. “You’re . . . busy.”

Mary folded her hands and smiled. Again the feeling that Emma couldn’t identify filled the room. “I work for God, but this is what I live for. I mean that.” Mary waited a few beats. “Do I have your promise?”

Emma gritted her teeth. She was curious, almost desperate to know about Mary, what she’d been freed from, what had led to her very public life now. If it meant keeping the voices at bay for a few

days, so be it. And if sharing her story was what Mary lived for, well, then . . . “Okay. You have my word.”

You’re a liar, Emma. You don’t mean it. You’re worth nothing. Tomorrow you can find a dealer and buy what you need and—

“All right then, let’s pray and then we can get started.” Mary’s voice fell a notch. “Every time I tell this story, God works a miracle. The same will be true for you, Emma.” She placed her hand over her heart. “I can feel it.”

Emma didn’t really hear the prayer, couldn’t focus on the words coming from Mary’s mouth. But as soon as she started praying, the voices stopped again. And once more the feeling filled the room, working its way through Emma’s fingertips and skin, easing its way to the center of her soul.

As the prayer ended, Mary looked up and took a deep breath. And in that instant, Emma suddenly knew what the feeling was—the sense she’d had from the moment she walked into the room. It was something she hadn’t felt in four years, since she walked out on her mother and everything good about life. It was a feeling she never expected to feel again, foreign and welcome all at the same time.

The feeling was hope.



3

There was no way to tell her story without starting at the beginning, back in the days before even Mary was aware that the story had started. From that vantage point, the pieces fit together and made a tapestry, a picture that belonged to the women God brought into her life. The first part had less to do with Mary and more to do with Grandma Peggy.

Peggy Madison, who was still closer to Mary than any other person, the only family she had.

Even so, Mary wouldn't spend a long time talking about Grandma Peggy. Emma was edgy, her eyes flitting around the room, checking the door every few minutes. Mary gripped the arm of the sofa. Urgency filled her soul and pushed her to tell the story—all the sad and unbelievable details—quickly as possible without losing Emma along the way. She stood and poured cups of water for both of them from the pitcher on her desk. She looked at Emma as she took her seat on the sofa. “Comfortable?”

“Yes.” Emma crossed her legs. She was still shaking, but she looked less likely to jump up and flee the building.

“Okay.” She handed one of the waters to Emma. “You know what happened when I was fifteen.”

“Yes, ma'am.” Emma's cheeks got pink, and she looked at her feet for a moment. “I think everyone knows.”

Mary nodded and took a sip of water. As she did she felt a prayer drift through her soul. *Let her hear me, Lord, and give me the words.* “I want to tell you about my grandma Peggy.”

Emma settled back in her chair some. “Is she still alive?”

“Yes.” Mary felt a flicker of pain. Grandma Peggy was sicker these days. Her doctor had said it wouldn't be long—a year, maybe two. “She's in a nursing home a few miles from here. We're very close.”

Regret colored Emma's eyes, and she opened her mouth as if she might say something. But then her lips came together again. Mary let it go. Whatever Emma was feeling, it would come up later after the young woman learned to trust her.

“When I was a little girl, my grandma Peggy lived in New York City. I stayed with her until I was three. That's when my mother, Jayne, took me away from Grandma's home, to live with her on the streets.” Mary melted into the sofa and let the memories come. “One day when I was ten years old, my mother called Grandma Peggy from an alleyway. It had been months since she'd heard from us.” She

felt the past coming to life again. “We were behind some restaurant. I can still smell the fish rotting in the trash can near the pay phone.”

The story began to spill from her soul, and this time Mary didn't stop. . . .

Mary's mother had told Grandma Peggy that she'd stopped taking drugs and she wanted to get Mary enrolled in school. She was tired of living on the streets. Four hours later she and Mary walked through the door of Grandma Peggy's small flat in Queens.

Grandma Peggy studied them. Mary guessed she and her mother were pretty worn-out looking, dirty from the streets, thin, and hungry. Her grandmother fed them as much as they could eat. They made small talk, but her grandma seemed worried about her mother the entire time.

When they were finished eating, her grandma took her hand and led her to the pink bedroom, the only bedroom Mary had ever known as a child.

The bedroom was like a wonderland to Mary after so many years on the streets. She made her way around the bed, marveling at the toys and photos; then she pulled eight picture books from the shelf near the bed and brought them to Grandma Peggy.

Grandma Peggy framed her small face and stooped so their noses were close together. “I miss you so much, honey.” Her eyes shone with a love Mary hadn't understood then or for years afterward. Her voice was choked when she spoke again. “I thought about you every day.”

“Me too!” Mary gave her grandma a long hug. Then she grabbed three titles from the stack of books. “These are my favorite ones, Grandma. Can you read them, please?”

“Of course. Want me to start with Dr. Seuss?”

Mary clapped her hands. “Yes! *The Cat in the Hat*'s my favoritist of all. One of the ladies at the mission has a Cat in the Hat shirt, and I always remember you reading me that story.”

Grandma Peggy pulled Mary close to her. “I wish I could read to you every day, sweetie.” She took *The Cat in the Hat*, opened the front cover, and began to read.

Two hours later they were still working through the books, when Mary pointed to the picture of herself next to the bed, the one taken when she was three. “Is that me, Grandma?”

“Yes, honey. You're a very pretty girl; you know that, Mary?”

“That's what Mommy's friend says.” Mary had been too young to know it might be strange that one of her mother's many male friends would make a fuss over her.

Grandma Peggy picked up on it, though. “Mommy's friend? Which friend?”

“Mr. Paul.” That's when Mary had remembered. “I'm not supposed to talk about him.”

Her grandmother leaned in close and put her arm around Mary. “Did Mr. Paul hurt you?”

“No.” Mary's answer had been quick and adamant. She shook her head. “He never hurt me, Grandma. Never.” It was true; the man hadn't touched her. But the subject had been uncomfortable for Mary at such a young age. She squirmed away and scampered across the room. “Look, Grandma! My pink teddy bear!”

Grandma Peggy closed the book on her lap and faced Mary. “Sweetie, you know Grandma loves you, right?”

Mary felt her eyes grow big and sad. “Yes.” She swallowed and looked down at the floor. “I think about that sometimes when I'm scared at night.”

“Really?” Tears spilled onto Grandma Peggy’s cheeks.

Mary nodded and studied her grandma’s eyes. They were full of a light Mary never saw in anyone on the streets. “Mommy says we’ll be here for a while but not forever. But know what?”

“What?”

“I wish I *could* live with you forever, Grandma.” She felt something sad in her heart. “But Mommy says that’s a bad thing to say. She says I belong to her, and if I live with you she’ll never get a chance to be my mommy again.”

Anger colored Grandma Peggy’s expression. She went to Mary and brushed her knuckles against Mary’s cheek. “You know what I wish more than anything in the world?”

“What?” Mary blinked, her voice soft.

“The same thing you do. That you could live here forever. You and your mommy. Not just for a little while but for always.”

“But what if my mommy goes away again?” A hint of hope sounded in Mary’s voice. “Sometimes when she leaves me for a few days it’s lonely without her.”

Her grandmother looked surprised and worried. “Your mommy might go, but if I had it my way you would stay. I’d take care of you, and you’d never be cold or hungry or lonely again.”

Mary leaned forward and planted a wet kiss on Grandma Peggy’s forehead. “That would be my bestest dream in the whole world. Better than candy.”

“Yes, ’cause we’d be together always. Just the two of—”

Suddenly there was a sound outside the door, and her grandma jumped. “Jayne?”

Mary moved closer to her grandma. Outside the bedroom door no one said anything.

Grandma Peggy went to the door, and as she did, Mary heard footsteps heading down the hallway. “Jayne . . . are you there?”

Even as a little girl, Mary understood why her grandma looked scared. If her mother heard them talking, then she might take Mary away again and never come back.

Mary had ordered her heartbeat to slow down. *Calm*, she told herself. *Act calm*. She watched Grandma Peggy open the door in time to catch the back of her mother as she walked past. “Jayne, didn’t you hear me?”

“What?” Her mother looked over her shoulder. “Oh, sorry.” She smiled, but her eyes didn’t really look happy. “Just looking for something in the other room.”

“Oh. Okay.” Grandma Peggy pushed her hair out of her eyes. She motioned to the bedroom. “We’re still reading if you want to join us.”

Her mother shook her head. “No, that’s okay. I’ll put some pasta on for dinner.”

Mary watched her mother turn and continue into the kitchen. Then Grandma Peggy shut the door and looked at her.

Mary felt scared about what her mother would do next. “Is Mommy mad?”

Grandma Peggy crossed the room and sat beside her on the bed. “No, baby, Mommy’s not mad. Neither one is.” She took Mary’s hand and ran her thumb along the top of it. “It’s good that you told Grandma how you feel.”

Mary nodded, but she was distracted. She stood and wandered back to the bookcase. Then, from behind her, she heard her grandma take a loud breath. What happened next was something that had

stayed with Mary every day since then.

In a quiet, almost desperate voice, her grandmother began to pray. "Please, God, be with my Mary. I know Your grace is sufficient for me, for her, for all of us. But I believe with everything I am that You have good plans for my Mary. Keep her here so she can grow and learn and become everything You want for her. She's safe here, God. Please . . ."

When she was done praying, Grandma Peggy came to Mary and ran her fingers through her little girl hair. "I love you, Mary."

Mary still felt scared. But she looked away from the books to her grandma's eyes. "I love you too. She turned all the way around. "Were you talking to God?"

"Yes." Her grandma sighed. "Sometimes I can feel Him holding me, hugging me."

"Even when you can't see Him?" Mary was amazed.

"Yes. And something else." She smiled. "Sometimes I can hear Him talking back to me. Know what I heard Him say today?"

A warm happy feeling rose in Mary's heart. "What, Grandma?"

"I heard Him say that you, sweet child, are going to bring glory to Him. He has a plan for you, Mary. No matter what happens, He has a plan."

The words wrapped their arms around Mary and gave her a hope she'd never known. Hope and security. "Really?"

Her grandma nodded and looked deep into her eyes. "Even when I'm not there to tell you, Mary, never give up. God is with you. Don't forget that."

Mary had known in that moment that she never would forget it. She would remember her grandma's words if she lived to be one hundred.

Later that night, after they had a quiet dinner, after her mother and grandmother whispered some words that convinced Mary there was trouble, and after she was already in her pretty pink bed, her grandma came to her again. In her hand she had a small red-beaded purse. It wasn't any bigger than a deck of cards, but right away Mary knew. This purse was very, very special.

Grandma Peggy held it out to Mary. "My grandma gave this to me when I was a little girl." She pressed it into Mary's hands. "Now I'm giving it to you."

A feeling like the wonder of a rainbow filled Mary's heart. She ran her fingers over the beads, her mouth open. "Thank you, Grandma."

"Look inside." Grandma Peggy opened the little buttons at the top of the purse. Then she carefully pulled a slip of paper from inside. It was covered with words.

Mary felt a moment of embarrassment. She was ten and she couldn't read. She swallowed. "Could you please tell me what it says?"

"Of course." Grandma Peggy's voice was kind. She took the paper and opened it. "It's a Bible verse. 'I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you. My plans to give you hope and a future.'" She paused. "It's from the book of Jeremiah."

Mary wasn't sure what it was about those words, but they made her feel the way she'd felt earlier when Grandma had been praying for her. Every word felt sure and true. First her grandma had told her and now the Bible said it. In that slice of time Mary became convinced that God really did have a plan for her life.

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