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It Happens Every Spring

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FOR MY HUSBAND, TIM,
with whom I have shared all the seasons . . .
and how grateful I am for our summer love!

ALSO FOR CC McCLURE,
beautiful woman, friend, and bookseller.
Thank you for urging me to write about the lake.

C.P.

Years later, when they were grown up,
they were so used to quarrelling and making it up again that they
got married so as to go on doing it more conveniently.

C. S. LEWIS
The Horse and His Boy



NOTE TO READERS

There's nothing like a good story! I'm excited to be working with Catherine Palmer on a fiction series based on the concepts in my book *The Four Seasons of Marriage*. You hold in your hands the first book in this series.

My experience, both in my own marriage and in counseling couples for more than thirty years, suggests that marriages are always moving from one season to another. Sometimes we find ourselves in winter—discouraged, detached, and dissatisfied. Other times we experience springtime, with its openness, hope, and anticipation. On still other occasions we bask in the warmth of summer—comfortable, relaxed, enjoying life. And then comes fall with its uncertainty, negligence, and apprehension. The cycle repeats itself many times throughout the life of a marriage, just as the seasons repeat themselves in nature. These concepts are described in *The Four Seasons of Marriage*, along with seven proven strategies to help couples move away from the unsettledness of fall or the alienation and coldness of winter toward the hopefulness of spring or the warmth and closeness of summer.

Combining what I've learned in my counseling practice with Catherine's excellent writing skills has led to this series of four novels. In the lives of the characters you'll meet in these pages, you will see the choices I have observed people making over and over again through the years, the value of caring friends and neighbors, and the hope of marriages moving to a new and more pleasant season.

In *It Happens Every Spring* and the stories that will follow it, you will meet newlyweds, blended families, couples who are deep in the throes of empty-nest adjustment, and senior couples. Our hope is that you will see yourself or someone you know in these characters. If you are hurting, this book can give you hope—and some ideas for making things better. Be sure to check out the discussion questions at the end of the book for further ideas.

And whatever season you're in, I know you'll enjoy the people and the stories in Deepwater Cove.

Gary D. Chapman, PhD

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

One evening after a book-signing event, I was sitting at a restaurant with CC McClure, manager of Downtown Book and Toy in Jefferson City, Missouri. After I had related several stories about my life in a small community on the Lake of the Ozarks, she suddenly stopped me and asked, “Why aren’t you writing about the lake?” Well, because I hadn’t thought of it . . . and I probably never would have if CC hadn’t suggested the idea. In fact, I might have forgotten all about it, but a few weeks later, a note came from CC again urging me to write about the lake. So, dear friend, here’s your book. And thank you so very much!

Through the process of writing *It Happens Every Spring*, many people encouraged and supported me. On a summer afternoon in Denver, the Lord led Dr. Gary Chapman—a complete stranger to me at the time—right into my path on a crowded conference-room floor and cleared the way for us to discuss the idea of partnering on a writing project. Thank you, Gary, for embracing the vision that your God-given concept of *The Four Seasons of Marriage* and the seven strategies for healing broken marriages could come alive through fiction. What a joy it is to partner with you in this project!

Ron Beers and Karen Watson of Tyndale House Publishers first had the foresight to pair a nonfiction author with a novelist. I am so grateful for your hard work in taking this fiction series from concept to reality. Kathy Olson, my amazing editor, is a gift from God. I can write with confidence, knowing she will help shape my words into a story worth reading. My deep thanks to everyone at Tyndale: marketing, sales team, public relations, warehouse, and all who partner with me in this ministry.

My family provides the cocoon in which I feel safe to dream, plot, and write. Thank you, Tim, for nearly thirty years of marriage. How grateful I am that your careful pen edits each word of my manuscript before it goes into the mail. Bless you for taking on so many responsibilities at home so that I can be free to work. Geoffrey and Andrei, I am so proud of my two sons—heavenly miracles, both of you. I love you all so much.

Catherine Palmer



CHAPTER ONE

The night lightning struck a power pole on the west side of Lake of the Ozarks, Patsy Pringle knew right away there would be trouble in Deepwater Cove. The sizzling bolt of brilliant radiance brought a deafening clap of thunder and knocked out the electricity in all of the neighborhood's twenty-three houses. Lightbulbs blinked off, computers fried, televisions died, and dogs scooted on their bellies to hide under beds.

Up the road from the cove, at the Just As I Am beauty salon in the little town of Tranquility, Missouri, the blow-dryer in Patsy's hand whined down to nothing, bringing Esther Moore's weekly set-and-style appointment to a sudden end.

"Well, I'll be," Patsy said. "Good thing you were my last appointment of the day. I'm going to have to shut her down."

"Nuts," Esther muttered as she patted her damp hair. "I'd better head home and rescue Charlie. My husband couldn't find a candle with a search warrant."

Patsy fished a flashlight from the drawer at her styling station and snapped it on. As she helped the older woman locate her purse and keys, she worried about the widows in the neighborhood.

Deepwater Cove was home to seven of them, ranging in age from sixty-three to ninety-four. This early in March, many would have had their electric heaters on during the storm. She hoped they could find enough blankets to stay warm.

“I’ll bet Boofer is beside himself,” Esther said. “That mutt is too fat to get behind the sofa these days. He’ll be howling and Charlie will be bumping his bony old knees on the coffee table trying to find the dog. The power company probably won’t get the lights back on for hours. They never do. Well, bye, Patsy. Charlie will be itching to get out in his golf cart and check on the neighbors.”

“Tell him to be careful,” Patsy warned. “The rain is starting to freeze up.”

She frowned as she pictured the elderly man maneuvering icy, narrow roads in the lake community’s preferred mode of transportation. Deepwater Cove boasted fifteen golf carts, though the nearest eighteen-hole course was all the way over in Osage Beach. A reliable golf cart could carry a fishing pole, a tackle box, a minnow bucket, a stringer of crappie, and a dog. It could get a person to the lakeshore, the mailbox, a neighbor’s house, or clear around the cove and back again. The logic was simple, Patsy acknowledged. If a golf cart could take you somewhere, why walk?

As she raised an umbrella and led Esther Moore through the driving downpour toward her car, it occurred to Patsy that right away both women had worried about the neighbors. Plenty of other things could have come to mind—drainage ditches overflowing, roofs leaking, tree limbs snapping off in the wind. But, no, the people were first. Of course neighbors would check on each other. That’s just how it was in Deepwater Cove.

“A little storm won’t stop Charlie once he gets out in his cart,” Esther shouted over the howling wind. “Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds’—if I heard that once, I heard it a million times. Charlie wasn’t a mailman all those years for nothing.”



Brenda Hansen was in the basement painting a dining-room chair when lightning struck the electric pole right outside her house on Sunnyslope Lane in Deepwater Cove. Startled by the peal of thunder and the sparks shooting through the darkness, she dropped her paintbrush on the floor. The cat, who had been curled up with his tail over his nose in the cold room, yowled, leaped straight up, and landed with all four feet in the tray of pink paint. The instant his paws hit the chilly liquid, he squalled again, bounded out of the tray, and darted for cover.

“Oh, Ozzie, now what?” Still jumpy from the earsplitting thunder, Brenda looked toward the electric pole.

A man stood just outside the basement’s sliding glass door. Tall, thin, dark. Another burst of zigzag light brightened the sky, and she saw his beard and long hair and dripping pants. He was staring at her.

“Steve!” she cried out. Realizing instantly that of course her husband wasn’t home, she ran for the stairs and grabbed the rail. Falling, stumbling, scraping her shins, Brenda catapulted herself up to the main floor of the house. “Lord, help me. Lord, Lord, please help me,” she prayed out loud as she felt her way through the living room in the dark.

Had she locked the basement door earlier today? No, she had pushed back the glass and pulled the screen across to let in fresh air and ventilate the paint fumes. What if the man was inside already? What if he came after her? Was that him following her up the stairs?

Brenda couldn’t see a thing as she lurched across the tiled foyer. Just as she reached for the dead bolt, someone pounded on the large, double-paned window set into the insulated-steel front door.

It was him.

She could just make out his shape—towering and unkempt—

on the porch. She slammed the bolt and fell back against the wall, sure she was going to be sick.

Where was the cell phone? How soon could the sheriff get to Deepwater Cove? Eight minutes, someone had told her once. Just long enough for a person to die.

“Knock, knock, who’s there?” The voice outside the front door was deep, male, and eerily loud. Though the thermal window in the door kept out the weather, it certainly didn’t buffer the sound of the man’s words as he called to her, “It’s me, Cody!”

Brenda shut her eyes and swallowed. She didn’t know anyone named Cody. Especially not a tall, bearded, serial strangler who roamed quiet lakeside neighborhoods on rainy nights. She should run down to the basement again, pull the sliding glass door shut, and try to lock it.

“I can see you right there,” the man called over another roll of thunder. “Hi, I’m Cody!”

Brenda pressed her back against the foyer wall and began to slide away from the door. Where was Steve when she needed him? Off showing a house to someone in the middle of a spring thunderstorm. He would come home with a big sale under his belt and find his wife lying in the foyer, murdered.

“Do you have any chocolate cake?” the man outside asked, tapping more softly on the window. “I’m hungry, and I like chocolate cake. A lot. Triangles are okay, but I like squares better. Because you get more icing thataway.”

Brenda thought her cell phone was probably in her purse. She couldn’t remember the last time she had called anyone. Or gone shopping, for that matter. Life had been so empty lately. She hadn’t had a reason to pick up her purse in days, but she always kept it on a low table in the foyer. She took a sideways step along the wall.

“Can you hear me, because I’m asking about chocolate cake.” The man tapped on the window again. “Because I’m wet and hungry. My daddy told me that anyone might give you food, but only a Christian would give you chocolate cake, too.”

Her heart thumping half out of her chest, Brenda glanced at the window in the front door. The man had cupped both hands against the glass and was peering at her through them.

“No!” She shook her head furtively, unwilling to look at him but unable to stop herself. “Go away!”

“Are you a Christian?” he asked. The question held a plaintive note. Another flash of lightning made his long, tangled hair glow. He had blue eyes and filthy teeth. “I’m hungry.”

She shook her head again. “Go! Shoo! Get away from my door!”

“Okay.” He drawled out the word in a Missouri backwoods accent. *Oh-kye*.

As the man’s shoulders sagged and he turned away, Brenda lunged for the corner of the foyer. In the darkness, she knocked over the hall table, discovered her purse wasn’t there, and curled up in a ball on the frigid tile floor.

This was just like Steve, she fumed. Leaving her alone so he could show off one of his listings. They rarely ate dinner together anymore. He never seemed to have time for her. And when he was home, all Steve could talk about was closing costs and termite inspections and septic tanks.

Brenda hugged her bent legs and rested her forehead on her knees. For what seemed like the hundredth time, she wondered what had gone wrong. She had eagerly awaited her “empty nest” life and had looked forward to all kinds of activities—redecorating the house, volunteering at church, joining the local garden club, and sewing to her heart’s content. Maybe she could fulfill her dream of one day starting a little interior-design business.

Even better, she and Steve would have unlimited time together once the kids were on their own. They could travel, dine out together, go to movies, entertain guests, and take regular sunset boat rides.

But it hadn’t turned out like that at all. Steve was never at home, and without someone to share her plans with, they began to seem pointless, far-fetched, even boring.

Christmas had come and the kids arrived home from school, but they left again quickly—bright eyed and eager to get back to their friends and classes. Nowadays, Brenda had trouble getting out of bed and finding things to do. It was so quiet and lonely in the house. If the kids had still been around, she never would have fallen apart over a simple Missouri thunderstorm or a stranger at the door. You couldn't collapse if someone needed you.

Now she was all alone in the big, empty house with some crazy man on the front porch. He would probably cut her into pieces and throw her in the lake, and who would even care?

"Because I saw Jesus downstairs in your basement." He was back at the door, knocking on the window again. "I did. I saw Him. He was looking at me."

"Jesus doesn't live in this house!" she shouted. "Go away! Just leave me alone!"

"Because I saw Him. That's why I asked about the chocolate cake."

"You can't have my chocolate cake, okay? I made it for . . . for . . ." Who *had* she made the cake for that afternoon? She was on a perpetual diet. Steve usually took clients or colleagues out to dinner at the country club.

"Are you a Christian?" the man asked. "Because my daddy said—"

"Listen, what is your problem, mister?" Suddenly angry, she leaped to her feet. "You can't just go knocking on people's doors in the middle of a rainstorm when the electricity's off! You can't just ask for chocolate cake! And for your information, Jesus does *not* live here!"

He brushed his finger under his nose. "Okay."

"So go away before I call the police!"

"Okay." He scratched his head. "I'm hungry. Do you have any kind of food? Because if Jesus doesn't live here, I could eat potatoes. Or bread."

“Are you even listening to me?” she asked him through the window.

His face lit up in the darkness. “Oh! I forgot the magic word: *please*. That’s what I did wrong. I knew I must have forgot something. Hi, I’m Cody. *Please* can I have some chocolate cake? *Please?*”

Curious in spite of herself, Brenda stopped shivering and studied the creepy figure on her porch. Freaky long hair. Big, bushy beard. Weird blue eyes. Why did he speak like that—like a little boy? Adults didn’t talk about “the magic word.” They didn’t come begging for chocolate cake in the middle of the night. They certainly didn’t claim to have seen Jesus in the basement. He must be schizophrenic or psychotic or something like that.

“Hi, I’m Cody,” he said again. “What’s your name?”

“Brenda.” She had no idea why she told him.

“How old are you?”

“You can’t ask that. It’s not polite.”

“Okay.” He turned away.

Brenda stepped toward the door. “Wait. Just hold on a second, all right?”

He turned around and pressed up against the window again. Making a tunnel with his hands, he looked at her.

Sure she was completely nuts, Brenda fumbled toward the kitchen. She found a box of matches, lit one of the many scented candles she kept around the house, and then cut a perfectly squared piece of cake. “*Triangles are okay, but I like squares better,*” the man had told her. Who talked like that?

She should be hunting for her cell phone and calling 911 instead of cutting cake for the murderer on the front porch, but so what? Sliding the portion onto a small plate, she added a fork and a napkin. Then she carried the candle in one hand and the cake in the other to the front door.

“I thought you went away,” he said. “I thought you pro’ly left me.”

“I brought you some chocolate cake. Now, go sit on the porch swing over there.”

He smiled. “Chocolate cake! I love chocolate cake!”

“Sit on the porch swing. I mean it. Sit down and don’t move.”

“Okay.” His shoulders slumped and his muddy shoes crossed the wooden deck to the swing.

Brenda could hear the rain pouring outside as she unlocked the door, quickly set the plate and candle on the welcome mat, and then shut the door again. When she turned the lock, the electricity in the house suddenly came back on.

“Hey!” Cody said, gazing up at the porch fan with its central light fixture. He focused on Brenda. “Hey! Look!”

She nodded. “You can get the cake now. It’s by the door.”

“I’m not allowed to touch candles,” he told her. “Because fire is hot. Because it can hurt you.”

“Then don’t touch the candle. Just get your cake.”

He stood, looking tall, bushy, and frightening again. Wearing only a yellow T-shirt, a faded blue zippered jacket, a pair of ragged jeans, and grubby sneakers with holes in the toes, he looked as wet, bedraggled, and forlorn as a stray dog. *He must be about to freeze*, Brenda thought.

Bending over, he lifted the cake from the plate. In two bites, it was gone. “Chocolate cake!” he said, beaming at her. Dark crumbs coated his crooked teeth. “I knew you were a Christian.”

“You’re right,” Brenda said through the locked door. “I am a Christian.”

“Because I saw Jesus in your basement.”

“No, you didn’t. He’s not here, Cody.”

She studied the man as he licked his fingers. He must be some homeless person. She had read in the newspaper that many of them were mentally ill. Maybe he was harmless after all. Feeling less fearful with the brightly lit foyer and porch, she let out a breath. “Are you still hungry?” she asked.

He looked up in surprise. “Yes, I am! I could eat another piece of chocolate cake.”

“I’ll fix you some dinner. Wait there on the porch swing. Don’t move.”

At least she would have something to tell Steve when he came home tonight, Brenda thought as she returned to the kitchen. Her husband had zero interest in the chairs she was painting downstairs. Or anything else she did, for that matter.

Working day and night during the fall, she had sewn brand-new slipcovers for the sofa and two armchairs. He hadn’t noticed. She waited three days before calling her handiwork to his attention. Then he had said, “Brenda, if you wanted new furniture, why didn’t you just tell me? I’m making enough money now to buy you a whole new living-room set.”

As if that’s what she had wanted. Brenda took two pieces of baked chicken, some leftover green-bean casserole, and a dollop of mashed potatoes from the refrigerator. Setting the plate in the microwave, she felt her anger and hurt grow as she set the timer and punched the Start button.

When the kids were growing up, Steve had worked in sales at an auto-parts store, and he had eaten up all the details of what the family had done each day while he was away. He wanted to see every drawing and read the kids’ book reports. He roughhoused with Justin and piggybacked Jennifer and Jessica all through the house and yard. He laughed at the stories of their shenanigans, and in the evenings, he even listened to Brenda’s plans for the weekend or a coming school holiday.

But Steve didn’t care about the pink-and-yellow-plaid chairs she had been painting for the dining room. Plaid was very tricky—various-sized bands of glazed color going this way and that. He would have no idea how hard it was to paint. Who thought about the intricacies of plaid?

Steve wouldn’t notice how the dining chairs matched the napkins

and placemats she had sewn. Or how all of it coordinated with the new slipcovers in the living room.

“Pink?” he had said when he finally focused on the sofa with its beautiful print of roses, ivy, trellises, and butterflies. “Well . . . I guess I can learn to live with it.”

Learn to live with it? What kind of a comment was that?

“It wasn’t Jesus after all.”

The voice in the kitchen knocked the breath right out of Brenda’s chest. She turned to find the long-haired stranger standing less than five feet away. Streaks of mud trailed from his shoes back across the living room toward the stairs that led to the basement.

The sliding glass door. The unlocked screen.

Brenda grabbed the knife she had used to cut the cake. “I told you to wait on the porch swing!”

He took a step backward and held up his hands. “Whoops. Are you mad at me?”

“Go outside. Get out right now. I mean it!”

“Because I went around the house to check on Jesus, and He wasn’t there. It wasn’t Him after all, and you know how I figured it out?”

“Cody, you may not stay in this kitchen. Go out the front door over there. Do it now.”

“It wasn’t Jesus. It was me.” He smiled, chocolate-cake crumbs still filling the crevices of his teeth. “The door was like a mirror. When I looked in the basement, I thought it was Jesus, but it was me. Just me in the glass, like a mirror. Can you see how I got confused—with my beard and hair all long? It was me, not Jesus. That’s funny.”

“It’s not funny that you came into my house without asking. Now go outside this minute.”

“Okay.” He looked at the floor as he turned away. “I thought you might give me some more chocolate cake even though Jesus doesn’t live downstairs.”

“I’ll give you some dinner . . . and cake . . . if you’ll go outside.”

“It’s warmer in here.”

“But you can’t stay. You’re not invited.”

“Okay.” Cody shrugged, then dragged his muddy shoes back across the kitchen and through the foyer. “You are the nicest Christian I ever met. And you are the only lady I ever knew with a pink cat.”

“A pink cat?” Behind him, Brenda carried the plate of steaming food, unlocked the door, and gave him a gentle push back onto the porch. It *was* cold outside.

“For your information, my cat is gray. Here, take this,” she ordered, handing him the plate.

Then she picked up the candle from the welcome mat, retreated, and locked the door again. As Cody sat on the porch swing to eat his dinner, Brenda raced down the stairs and locked the sliding glass door.

When she turned around, she noticed what she had missed on her way down. Muddy footprints mingled with a pattern of pink paw marks that covered the basement floor. And on the coffee table, where her three children had propped their feet while watching television, sat one miserable—and very pink—cat.



Charlie Moore’s teeth were chattering as he drove his golf cart past the Hansen house. With the electricity back on in Deepwater Cove and all the neighbors safe and sound, he was eager to get home to Esther. Before he set out on his appointed rounds tonight, she had packed him a thermos of water—cold, of course, since the power was off and she couldn’t make coffee. And she had put some of her famous chocolate-chip cookies in a Baggie for him. Those were long gone now.

A mug of hot chocolate sure would taste good, Charlie thought. He knew Esther would have the stove on and the water heating

when he walked in the front door. He would ask for two marshmallows even though it was against the rules for his diabetes. Esther would give them to him too, because she'd realize he was about frozen to death. Besides, if a man couldn't have marshmallows in his hot chocolate, what was the point?

"Now, what in the dickens . . . ?" Charlie muttered as his golf cart crept to the top of Sunnyslope Lane. He pushed the brake pedal, put the cart in reverse, and looked over his shoulder as he backed down the hill. There was a *man* sitting on Steve Hansen's front porch. He was eating off a plate and rocking so hard in the wicker swing that it looked like the whole porch might come down.

Glad he had decided to leave his dog, Boofer, at home, Charlie parked beside a large lilac bush that was just beginning to leaf out and set the brake. He could see immediately that the swinger was *not* Steve Hansen. Steve kept his dark hair cropped short and his face neatly shaved. These days, he usually wore a suit and tie, because he was always driving around the lake to show houses listed with his real-estate agency. He had gotten a little thicker around the middle, but who didn't as the years went by?

The fellow on the porch was as skinny as some old alley cat. He wore a yellow T-shirt with the word *Cheerios* printed on the front in bold black letters. His brown beard and curly hair hung long and tangled. Charlie would have considered going home for his gun if the man hadn't looked so goofy sitting there swinging his legs back and forth like a little kid.

Flipping open the glove compartment in his golf cart, Charlie took out a can of Mace. A mail carrier knew to be careful at all times, no matter what. He slipped the can into his pocket and gingerly stepped down onto the wet road.

As Charlie walked toward the Hansen house, the swinging stranger looked up.

"Hi, I'm Cody!" the man called out. "Guess what. She's got chocolate cake inside! Squares, not triangles."

Wary, shoulders tensed the way they did when he was facing a

growling dog, Charlie stepped onto the porch. “Cold night to be without a coat,” he remarked, keeping his voice casual. When the stranger didn’t respond, Charlie asked, “So, is Steve Hansen home?”

“I’m Cody!” The bearded man stopped swinging and held out his empty plate. “Look. It was chicken and potatoes and green beans. And more chocolate cake. I ate two pieces, so you know what *that* means.”

Charlie gripped the Mace can in his pocket. “No. What does that mean?”

“It means she’s a Christian. Because my daddy told me that anyone might give you food, but only a Christian would give you chocolate cake, too.”

“I see.” This guy clearly wasn’t all there. Anyone could tell that from the get-go. But was he dangerous? “So, who gave you the cake?”

“Her.” He pointed toward the Hansens’ front door. “*She’s* a Christian even though Jesus isn’t in the basement.”

“How ’bout that. Well, I believe I’ll just check on her, then. Make sure she’s okay after the big storm.”

Charlie carefully crossed the porch. The man might look like a half-drowned alley cat, but he could turn out to be as mean as a junkyard dog. You never could tell. Charlie pressed the doorbell.

For a moment, the horrible thought crossed his mind that something might have happened to Brenda Hansen. She was without a doubt the prettiest female in Deepwater Cove—except for Esther, who would always be the most beautiful girl in the world to Charlie. But Brenda was young—probably still in her forties—and she had spunky, short blonde hair and sparkly green eyes. She was always out working in the garden or washing windows or mowing. The Hansen home never collected the large, dangling black spiders that inhabited the eaves and screened porches on most of the lake houses. Brenda took her broom to them every night, and she made sure her driveway was swept and her porch was neat as a pin. Steve

never helped her with that kind of thing anymore, not since his work kept him so busy. Charlie sure would hate to think Brenda was in trouble without her husband around to protect her.

Just as he was working up a full head of worry, Brenda emerged through the foyer with a mop in one hand and a wet pink cat under her arm. She peered through the window that was set into her front door.

Spotting Charlie, she put the cat down and gave him a bright smile. "Hey, there, Charlie!" Brenda said as she opened the door. She glanced over his shoulder at the porch swing. "I guess you've met Cody."

Charlie nodded and quirked an eyebrow at her. "You okay?"

"I am now that the lights are back on."

"Want me to call the sheriff?"

She leaned one shoulder against the doorframe and spoke in a low voice. "I don't think so. Have you ever seen him before?"

"No, but folks do come out of the woods sometimes, you know. They can live in the hills and hollers for years without attracting a bit of attention, and then something brings them back into the public. The sheriff would take him off your hands. I really think you should notify the authorities, Brenda."

"Oh, here comes Steve," she said. As a sleek silver hybrid car pulled into the Hansens' driveway, the garage door rose. "He missed all the excitement."

"Steve won't want someone like that hanging around Deepwater," Charlie predicted. "Might drive down real-estate values, you know. That husband of yours is sure stirring up things with his business. Heard he hired a secretary and took on a couple of agents. You folks have got such a pretty house here that—"

"Thank you, Charlie." Brenda cut him off as her husband walked up from behind her.

Steve Hansen had come into the house through the garage, and Charlie felt surprised to see him suddenly there. Steve peered around his neighbor to have a look at the stranger.

“Hey, Charlie,” he said, putting his arm across his wife’s shoulders. “Quite a storm, huh? Who’s that on the porch?”

“It’s Cody.” Brenda spoke as if a skinny man wearing a Cheerios T-shirt and sitting on her porch swing were the commonest thing in the world. She shrugged out from under Steve’s arm. “I fed him dinner. He likes my chocolate cake.”

“What?” Steve stared at her in disbelief. “Who is he?”

“Cody,” Brenda repeated. She smiled at Charlie again. “Thanks for checking on me. It’s nice to know someone cares.”

Charlie glanced at the man on the porch. Cody was licking his plate. “I guess I’ll get on home to Esther, then,” he said. “Give me a call if you need anything.”

“We’re fine.” Brenda tilted her head a little, the way she used to when she was talking to one of her kids. “Everything’s fine, Charlie. It really is. Just fine.”

Gripping his can of Mace, Charlie stepped past Cody and started back to his golf cart. He might ask Esther for three marshmallows tonight.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The principles and strategies illustrated in this novel are taken from *The Four Seasons of Marriage* by Gary Chapman. In this book, Dr. Chapman discusses marriage as a journey back and forth through different “seasons.”

- **Springtime** in marriage is a time of new beginnings, new patterns of life, new ways of listening, and new ways of loving.
- **Summer** couples share deep commitment, satisfaction, and security in each other’s love.
- **Fall** brings a sense of unwanted change and nagging emptiness appears.
- **Winter** means difficulty. Marriage is harder in this season of cold silence and bitter winds.

1. In *It Happens Every Spring*, which season of the year is it in Deepwater Cove, Missouri? Which season of marriage do you think Steve and Brenda Hansen are experiencing in their marriage? What are the signs that let you know?
2. In the scene in which Brenda and Steve eat dinner together and try to make plans for spring break (pages 69–77), they could have begun to thaw their winter marriage. What went wrong? What could each of them have said or done differently?
3. In the same scene, Brenda’s repeated references to Nick LeClair should be a clue to Steve that trouble is afoot. Why doesn’t he notice? How might it have helped if he had? Give an example of a helpful way in which Steve could have responded to his wife.
4. To Brenda, Steve’s work schedule means he has intentionally rejected and abandoned her and their marriage. This kind of all-or-nothing thinking is common. Is there another way Brenda could try to look at Steve’s choices? When and how does Brenda begin to see Steve’s job in a different light? Is there a situation in your marriage where you need to try to see things in a more balanced way?
5. When Steve is walking to the dock with his daughter Jessica (page 119), he explains his approach to solving problems in a marriage. What does he think a

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Gary Chapman is the author of *The Four Seasons of Marriage*, the perennial best seller *The Five Love Languages* (over 3.5 million copies sold), and numerous other marriage and family books. He is the director of Marriage & Family Life Consultants, Inc., an internationally known speaker, and host of *A Growing Marriage*, a syndicated radio program heard on more than 100 stations across North America. He and his wife, Karolyn, live in North Carolina.

Catherine Palmer lives in Missouri with her husband, Tim, and sons, Geoffrey and Andrei. She is a graduate of Southwest Baptist University and holds a master's degree in English from Baylor University. Her first book was published in 1988. Since then Catherine has won numerous awards for her writing, including the Christy Award—the highest honor in Christian fiction—in 2001 for *A Touch of Betrayal*. In 2005 she was given the Career Achievement Award for Inspirational Romance by *Romantic Times BOOKreviews Magazine*. More than 2 million copies of Catherine's novels are currently in print.