



nancy moser
&
vonette bright

the
sister circle



the Sister Circle series book 1



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The Sister Circle

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Nancy Moser dedicates this book to
the sisters brought to me through birth:
Lois and Crystie;
the sisters brought to me through marriage:
Wendi, Deanna, Sheree, and Nikki;
the sisters brought to me through this project:
Vonette, Brenda, Becky, Anne, Kathy, and Danielle;
and the sisters brought to me over all the days that are my life. . . .
Thank you and bless you,
and may the bonds of our sisterhood increase in love, in faith,
and in chocolate.



Vonette Bright dedicates this book to
the sisters in the circle of my life:
My precious birth sister, Deanne Rice;
My sisters-in-love, Martha and Arulie Zachary,
Florence Skinner, and Lucille Bright;
My daughters-in-love, Terry and Katherine Bright.
I also wish to dedicate this volume (with gratitude)
to the more than one hundred Campus Crusade Staff women
who have served with me as personal associates
over the past fifty-one years.
They have ministered to and with me,
making it possible for me to be available
to minister to others worldwide.
Without them my life would have been very different,
and I would not have experienced the special joy
of bringing many new sisters into the faith.
I pray that all of these dear ones will be blessed by God
just as they have blessed me.
They are living examples of biblical sisterhood!



O my people, trust in him at all times.

Pour out your heart to him,

for God is our refuge.

PSALM 62:8

Evelyn wanted to throw the coffee in his face.

As if reading her mind, the man flinched. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Peerbaugh," he said. "I feel really bad."

Evelyn looked at the life insurance check in her hand. Ten thousand dollars. After paying the funeral expenses, there would be little left. "It's not your fault."

The man fidgeted in his chair, the china cup balanced precariously on his thigh. He looked down at Peppers the cat nervously, as she rubbed against the lower part of his leg.

Evelyn put a hand near the floor. "Come here, kitty." Peppers accepted the invitation and performed a graceful arc, finishing it against Evelyn's right ankle. She was rewarded with a scratch behind the ears.

"Perhaps your husband had other policies?" the man said. "People often have policies from more than one insurance company."

Evelyn shook her head. After the shock of Aaron's car accident a month ago, she'd gone through the drawer that held all their important papers and had found only the one effective

policy—*effective* being the key word. There were other policies—one for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars and one for fifty thousand—but both had been cashed in, and Evelyn had no idea where the money had gone. Unbelievable. Now this insurance check, combined with their minuscule bank accounts, was it.

Why hadn't Aaron confided in her about their financial situation? Their lifestyle had been comfortable but not lavish. He had offered no clue that they were struggling.

And she hadn't asked.

Why *hadn't* she asked?

Of course, for Evelyn to have known the extent of their troubles meant that Aaron would have had to admit them, and that was a whole new cake to cut. Aaron had worn a cloak of confidence like a king wearing a royal robe. Whatever life had to offer, he could handle it.

Ha! Who was left to handle it now?

Aaron had been as impractical as Waterford crystal at a picnic. Evelyn doubted he had ever allowed himself to consider the possibility of death. He was always high on dreams and low on common sense. If it hadn't been for Evelyn's insistence that they hold on to the Peerbaugh family home that had been in his family since 1900, Aaron would have uprooted her and their son multiple times. They'd have left Carson Creek and ended up in Seattle or Tampa on some get-rich scheme that would have left them living in a rented trailer with a telephone line strung over the branches of the nearest tree. Holding fast to the house had been one of the few times Evelyn had taken a stand—

"Mrs. Peerbaugh?"

She blinked her memories away. "Mmm?"

"If there's anything I can do . . ."

She set her cup on the coffee table that separated them. A plate of cookies lay untouched, but she realized it was too late to offer them again. And the way the man shifted in his seat and

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avoided her eyes told her he wanted to leave ASAP. Even though she didn't mind his company, there was no reason to make him uncomfortable any longer. It wasn't his fault her inheritance was so pitiful, and she was sure he had better things to do than to sit around comforting a widow about her husband's lack of foresight.

She stood, signaling the end to their meeting. "Well, Mr. . . ." She felt herself blush. She'd forgotten his name.

"Walker. Jim Walker."

She moved toward the door. "Yes, Mr. Walker. Thanks for coming by. I really appreciate your visit—and the check."

He raised a surprised eyebrow as if he didn't believe her last statement, wisely held the platitudes to a minimum, and left.

Evelyn leaned against the closed door and listened as his footsteps traveled down the porch steps and onto the stepping-stone walk. A car door. An engine. Then silence. Utter, complete silence except for the ticking of the mantel clock counting down the seconds that were left in *her* life.

The silence became a vacuum that sucked away all her energy. She let the solidity of the door guide her as she slid to the floor. Her challis skirt got hung up on a knee, revealing her slip. She moved to pull it primly down, but when she realized there was no one around to see, let it be. That would take getting used to, having no one around.

The tears began to flow uncontrollably—sobs she never expected. Thoughts of her life began to unfold like a book being opened. . . . She'd lived a pleasant, respectable life, enjoyed good friends, and reared an independent son. Now, in her golden years, was this all she had to show? This was it? Decades of humdrum, monotonous existence coupled with financial struggle?

She sniffed loudly and used her skirt to wipe her face. Then, without warning, she spoke aloud, "God, if You're out there . . . help! Tell me what I'm supposed to do next."

With effort, she took a deep breath, but the air entered in

ragged pieces. Why did she feel so worn-out? She used to be full of energy, and yet now, as a widow, her strength vacillated between the frenzy of a worker ant and a bug squashed beneath someone's foot. As if sensing her mood, Peppers nudged her face into Evelyn's calf. Evelyn picked her up and let the calico find her favorite position on Evelyn's shoulder, like a baby going to be burped. Peppers' purring resonated against Evelyn's chest like the comforting sound of cicadas on a summer evening.

Balancing Peppers with one hand, Evelyn drew the check front and center and stared at it. Add another zero and it would have been doable. What had Aaron been thinking?

Yet she couldn't blame it all on him. Hadn't she *let* him be irresponsible? Maybe if she'd been another type of person she could have told him, "Enough, Aaron! Quit going after the quick money, the big break, and settle for a better, steady job that can provide for your family."

But she hadn't said that. She couldn't count the number of times she'd sat across from him as he'd explained his latest big idea. He had been just successful enough to keep up their hopes that the big break was soon to come, that his invention ideas would solve their problems. He'd taken such pleasure in his schemes, his projects. High hopes that were never realized. His failures stemmed from two problems. He had a penchant for being one step behind in his inventions (they'd first seen Velcro in a store the same week Aaron had shown her his prototype for a similar product). Plus, he had a habit of not finishing what he started before moving on to the next project. Add the two qualities together and you got nothing done. Nothing accomplished.

But Evelyn hadn't held her tongue because she was a lady, *or* superior. She'd held back and let Aaron do his thing because she was a coward. She hated confrontation and avoided it at all cost. Go along to get along. Aaron used to become angry at her for saying, "I don't care."

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“Don’t you care about anything, Evelyn?”

It’s not that she didn’t care, but she often found decisions daunting and figured it was much safer—and easier—if she let someone else make the choices. Besides, most of the time it made the other person happy, and that was always a good thing.

Peppers squirmed and Evelyn let her go. Then she carefully balanced the check on one knee and sent it flying with a powerful flick of her finger. It didn’t fly very long but slid to the floor by the stairs, nudging a defenseless dust bunny. *Would a larger check have floated longer?* Garbage to garbage, dust to dust.

She wasn’t without assets. The front hall of the Peerbaugh home loomed before her, the oak staircase a massive Victorian sculpture, its faded flowered runner held in place by brass rods that would cost a fortune to duplicate. Solid brass light fixtures and doorknobs, lovely antiques. The entry table was crowned by a carved mirror and held an azalea plant from the funeral, an anniversary clock they’d received on their thirtieth, and a pink Depression-glass dish forever empty of Aaron’s keys and loose change.

Or *was* it empty?

Evelyn pushed herself to her feet, suddenly desperate to see if the dish held a souvenir of her husband’s last days. For a whole month she’d walked past and never noticed. But there it was: a quarter, two dimes, and three pennies spotting the glass. She reached to grab them, then withdrew her hand. The array of coins was a still-life composition, each coin placed just so to give an air of haphazardness to its art. She would not move them. Those coins would remain in that dish, undisturbed, until further notice. They were her legacy.

Which left the grand total of her inheritance at ten thousand dollars and forty-eight cents.

Suddenly, a new thought: What about their son, Russell? Where was his inheritance?

An answer loomed. Emotionally spent and physically weary but with new purpose, Evelyn staggered up the stairs to her bedroom and opened the top drawer of Aaron's dresser. She pawed through a haphazard array of paper scraps, pens, and newspaper clippings.

There it is!

Her hand closed around the Peerbaugh family pocket watch, a valuable and coveted possession—even if it no longer worked. This would be Russell's.

It was better than nothing.

Closing the drawer, she noticed a thin five-by-seven box and read the printing on the top: *The New Testament*. Ah yes. It was the Bible Aaron had received from his mother one birthday when she'd been especially disgusted with his flitty ways. "*There's direction for your life in this book, Son. Read it,*" she'd said.

As far as Evelyn knew, Aaron had never even removed it from its box, much less read what was on the pages. The fact that it was still in its original package was testament to her husband's stubbornness at accepting his mother's—or anyone else's—advice.

Evelyn set her fingers upon it. Could there be advice for her within its pages?

She withdrew her hand and shut the drawer. Maybe. But not today. She had enough to think about today.



Evelyn spooned another helping of cashew chicken onto her plate, digging the final morsels from the white box.

Her son's fork stopped midway to his mouth. "Glad to see you've got some appetite back. What's the occasion?"

She retrieved a fallen cashew and licked her fingers. "Desperation."

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Russell gave her a look that reminded her of his father. "Mom, it'll be all right. I'll help out. You know I will. What's mine is yours."

She shook her head vigorously. "That's not the way it's supposed to work, Russell. The child is not supposed to give money to the parent. The parents are supposed to leave money to the child."

"I wasn't expecting anything." His inability to look her in the eye told a different story.

She put one hand on his, and with the other pulled the gold watch from the pocket of her skirt. She held it out to him, its chain slithering off the side of her hand like a lifeline being extended. "I know it's not much, but I want you to have this."

Russell hesitated a moment, then retrieved the watch and turned it over. He flipped open the cover then held it to his ear. "Does it work?"

"I . . . I don't think so." Her next words spilled out in a flood. "But it's been in the family for three generations, and you make four. I remember seeing your grandfather pull it out of his pocket and—"

"Dad never used this."

"But it was his."

"Did he want me to have it?"

All words died. *Oh dear.*

He looked up. Then down again. Then he set the watch aside, next to the salt and pepper shakers.

"I wish there was more to give you, Russell. And if there's anything in the house that would mean something special to you, just ask. I mean it." He shrugged, and her heart squeezed with the pain of inadequacy. "I'm just glad you're financially stable in your own right."

With a pause, then a shuffling of his shoulders and a blink, Russell seemed to erase the past minute and move on. "I am

financially independent. Which means I can help you." His jaw tightened. "Like Dad should have done."

"Don't be bitter, Russell. I'm . . . I'm trying not to be."

"But ten thousand dollars . . . what was he thinking?"

"You know your father. He was thinking of a thousand ways to get rich. Always the entrepreneur, always expecting the big turnaround. He didn't mean to leave me in such a desperate situation. And he certainly wasn't contemplating a premature death."

Russell snickered and Evelyn let it go. It would do no good to rehash Aaron's failings. He was dead. She was alone. Those were facts that couldn't be disputed. "There has to be a way for me to earn some money."

"As in you getting a job?"

His incredulous tone pushed a button on her anger, and all intentions to be gracious were shoved aside. "Tell me what choice I have, Russell. After thirty-one years of marriage I'm left with nothing. Nothing! The way I figure it, I've either been a weak fool or a dupe. I sat back and let your father take care of me, never confronting his flighty ways, never making him look past the moment. So now I've gotten what I deserve—which is nothing. I feel like I'm the victim of a con, a thirty-year con in which I've handed over my life savings—both monetary and emotional—and come up with nothing. If your father were here, I would tell . . . I would . . ." She realized she'd been ranting.

"You'd want to yell at him, but you wouldn't. You'd escape to the porch, where you'd hope he would come find you to talk, only he never would. Then after a while, after you'd calmed down, you'd go back inside and pick up as if nothing had happened."

She retrieved her fork, focusing on the food. "Don't mock me, Russell. That's my life you're talking about. Our life. And your father . . . he's dead. I loved—"

He stopped her hand with his. "I don't mean to hurt you, but

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the issue is not whether you loved him or whether he loved you. Or even how you argued and made up. Right now the point is, he failed to provide for you. He was negligent. He was wrong."

"But it does no good for me to . . . it doesn't change anything."

"It doesn't change anything, but I disagree with you about it not doing any good to express your anger. Anger, in itself, is not wrong. You need to let it out. The trick is not to sit and soak in it."

She managed a smile. "Or your skin will prune?"

"Something like that." They each took a bite and chewed in silence. "You mentioned getting a job . . ." His head shook back and forth.

"I promise not to become a brain surgeon—or a banker like you."

He looked at his plate. "I'm sure you can do anything you set out to do. But you have to be realistic. You've never had a job. Who's going to hire you with *no* experience? Plus, there's the issue of your age . . ." He glanced up, then down again.

He had a point. Getting a first job at age fifty-six was a stretch. "Isn't there a law against age discrimination?"

"Sure, but . . ." He shrugged.

"In an entry position between me and a pretty young thing, I'd lose?"

He shrugged again.

Evelyn took a big bite of rice, hoping the physical fuel would spark some brilliant idea that would solve everything. Her mind was blank.

Russell shoved his plate aside. "Moving on to another question . . . what are you going to do with this house? It was big when it was just you and Dad, but now that it's just you . . ."

"If only you'd do your part and give me some grandchildren."

"Gotta have a wife first." He grinned at her wickedly. "Actually, I don't *have* to have a wife . . ."

She pinched the tip of his nose. "You may be thirty but you're

still my baby boy, and as such, you'd better watch your mouth—and your morals."

"I didn't *say* anything."

"But you were thinking naughty thoughts."

"Since when did you become the thought police?"

"Since I became your mother."

He didn't argue; he took his plate to the sink and rinsed it off before putting it in the dishwasher. He returned to his chair, and she was suddenly struck by how much he looked like Aaron, and Aaron's father, Oscar. The Peerbaugh nose made its recipients more interesting than handsome. And the receding hairline—

"Mom, you're looking at me funny."

Evelyn nodded. "You remind me of your father and his father." She looked around, realizing where she was. "In fact, the first time I met your Grandpa Peerbaugh was in this very kitchen. Your father had brought me to dinner to meet his family. It was a full house then, full of Aaron's younger brother and sister, and two renters who lived in two of the bedrooms upstairs. Your grandfather had even had an extra bathroom installed—" Evelyn sucked in a breath. "That's it!"

"What's it?"

"Renters. I'll take in boarders!"

Russell shook his head. "Strangers in your house? I don't think that's a good idea."

"I would interview them, screen them. And once they moved in, they wouldn't *be* strangers."

Russell laughed. "You got that right. There are only two bathrooms upstairs. Two bathrooms and four bedrooms. Nobody's going to want to rent a room and have to share a bathroom."

"Who says?"

"People are used to having their own bathroom. Their privacy."

"People are spoiled."

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"Maybe. Maybe not. And there's only one kitchen."

"We'd share that too. We'd even eat together when we could. Like a family."

"Where would people entertain guests?"

"The parlor, the porch, the sunroom . . . they'd have the run of the house. I think there are a lot of people who would enjoy living in surroundings like this—even if they only had one bedroom to call their own."

"But your antiques. This house is a showplace. Would you want people touching Grandma Nelson's china or sitting in Aunt Mildred's walnut rocker?"

Evelyn stood and began to pace. Her hands danced as her thoughts pummeled her brain. "Those are just things, Russell. Things that have been used for generations. If something breaks, it breaks."

"You weren't that forgiving when I broke something."

"I've changed." She wasn't sure that was true. *If only Aaron were here. He'd take this idea and run with it.*

"How much rent could you charge?"

Evelyn stopped at the kitchen window, pinched a dead leaf off an African violet, and did the mental math. *There's no mortgage . . . just utilities and upkeep. And I'll be getting some Social Security . . .*

"Mom? How much would you charge?"

"I don't know yet. But I'll figure it out."

When she turned back to him, he was shaking his head. "Face it, Mom; you're the last person to tackle such a thing. You're the epitome of disorganization. The house is always clean, but if I asked you right now for a picture of Dad, you would draw photos from five different locations. Why, I've seen you hold a receipt in your hand for a full minute, trying to decide which drawer or purse to stuff it in."

Everything he said was true. "I'll be better. I'll work at it."

"And how are you going to manage rent and damage

deposits, house repairs, and tenant disputes? If someone yells at you, you'll probably run out to the porch. Or if they came to you with a sob story about not being able to pay the rent, you'll make them a cup of tea and give them a hug before telling them not to worry about it. So then *I'd* end up worrying about it; *I'd* end up the bad guy. I'm not sure I'm up for that."

"I'll make it work. I will."

He scooted his chair back. "Would you forget the whole thing if I wrote you a check for a few thousand?"

She straightened her shoulders and shook her head vehemently. "A boardinghouse is the answer; I know it is."

He stared at her, and there was a hint of disgust in his face. But also resignation. And even pride? "You've never come to a decision this fast in your life, Mom. *How* do you know? *How*?"

It was a good question that didn't have a clear answer. This feeling of certainty was foreign but undeniable. She put a fist to her heart, where her certainty was lodged. "How do I know? I just do."



Evelyn couldn't sleep. She used to fall asleep within thirty seconds of her head hitting the pillow, but since Aaron's accident the evenings and the nights were torture. Too quiet. Too much time to think, worry, and grieve. If only she didn't have to sleep.

The moonlight sprinkled through the lace of the curtains, falling across the floor and rising up the side of Aaron's dresser. She'd neglected to close the top drawer all the way, and it stood out an inch, calling attention to itself. Aaron's top drawer. The drawer that had held Russell's pitiful inheritance of a gold watch. The drawer that held . . .

She got out of bed and opened it. Her eyes fell on their quarry. She removed the box from the drawer and the New Testament

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from the box. She returned to bed. The maroon leather binding was a little stiff, but the pages whiffled against themselves as she fanned them. She opened to the first page, which began with the book called Matthew. As she read, she had to make herself concentrate, but what did she have to lose?

Soon, concentration wasn't a problem. She read the genealogy of Jesus, the visit of the magi, and the early life of Jesus. She was captivated with the man called John the Baptist, who risked everything to say what God wanted him to say. And then there were the amazing words of Jesus to those who chose to follow Him.

It was good stuff. As interesting as any novel and more heady than the best self-help book. Why had she been so absorbed with the routines of life that she had not given this book the attention it so obviously deserved? She was a spiritual illiterate. Not something to be proud of. But something that could be rectified.

She nodded at her conclusion and went back to reading the book: "So I tell you, don't worry about everyday life." The words hit home. Hard. She wasn't supposed to worry about anything, not even food or clothes. God would provide. Worry wouldn't add a moment to her life. "Your heavenly Father already knows all your needs, and he will give you all you need from day to day if you live for him and make the Kingdom of God your primary concern."

She pulled the Bible to her chest. It was as if Jesus were speaking to her. To *her!* He knew what she needed and would make sure she got it. She laughed with the pure joy of it.

She read more. And more.



Evelyn woke up to find the Bible opened on her chest and the light still on. She glanced at the clock: 2:13 a.m. She'd read until after midnight and smiled at the memory of her accomplishment.

She set the Bible on the bedside table and reached for the light. But her hand stopped short.

Get up.

Compelled to follow the inner nudge, she put on her robe against the nip in the air and ventured into the second-floor hallway. She flipped on the light and found herself studying the layout of the rooms.

The house was a perfect square, with the staircase cutting a hole in the middle from the front entry. The upstairs hallway wound around the stairwell, providing access to the four bedrooms and passing by a window that overlooked the front porch. Each room had its own special perk. The two rooms in the front of the house each had a private balcony overlooking one side of the yard. The two bedrooms that looked out on the backyard had wonderful views of the garden, one even having a window seat. And sandwiched between the front and back bedrooms on each side of the upper level was a bathroom. If Evelyn kept the front room that she and Aaron had occupied . . . she really liked the morning sun that came onto their private porch.

But was she willing to share her bathroom with a stranger? Actually, there was a third bath on the first floor. It was tiny and only had a shower, but someone could use it, if need be. And if she let in only woman boarders . . . it could be like an extended slumber party. That could be fun. Couldn't it?

Her eyes were drawn to the cord hanging from the hall ceiling that, if pulled, brought down stairs that led to the attic and its attached turret room. When was the last time she'd been up there? A year ago? Funny how you could forget a room even existed.

Without thinking about it or even realizing she'd made a decision, Evelyn pulled the cord on the stairs and climbed toward the attic. Warm, musty air rushed down to meet her. She flicked the light switch near the top step. It was an attic right out of a movie—with trunks, orphan lampshades, crates, and assorted

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pieces of furniture. When she and Aaron had first moved into the house she'd fallen upon it like a treasure trove and had taken many days to sort through, claim, and reorganize the heirlooms of the Peerbaugh family. Over the years, when her own parents had died, she'd added a few of her own family treasures, things she didn't want to use but couldn't bring herself to give away.

Peppers did not hesitate a moment and began exploring the room—a bug smorgasbord. *Go to it, Peps. There's nothing I hate worse than spid—*

Evelyn spotted a dressing table with a trifold mirror and felt her heart flutter. She made a beeline for it, her eyes locked on the small drawer centered under the mirror. It had been so long since she'd looked inside.

She touched the drawer knob but then pulled her hand away. *No. This will do no good. You don't need to remember this right now. The past is past. Deal with the present and figure out your future.*

With difficulty, Evelyn stepped away from the temptation of the dresser. Then she closed her eyes and deliberately turned her back on it. After a cleansing breath, she opened her eyes. The first thing she saw across the room made her smile. Then laugh.

Russell had asked how she knew she was supposed to rent out her home. She strode to a wooden sign hanging from a rafter. She unfastened the two eye hooks holding it in place. She balanced it against her abdomen and traced a finger along the painted letters. Here was her confirmation. Here was her answer.

Peerbaugh Place, Rooms 4 Rent.