



*the*  
**GREAT**  
*Christmas*  
**BOWL**

*a Christmas novella*

**SUSAN MAY WARREN**



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois

Visit Tyndale's exciting Web site at [www.tyndale.com](http://www.tyndale.com)

Visit Susan May Warren's Web site at [www.susanmaywarren.com](http://www.susanmaywarren.com)

*TYNDALE* and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

*The Great Christmas Bowl*

Copyright © 2009 by Susan May Warren. All rights reserved.

Front and back cover photographs taken by Stephen Vosloo. Copyright © by Tyndale House Publishers. All rights reserved.

Cover snowflake illustrations © by Dover Books. All rights reserved.

Interior photograph of pine branch © by Michael Koziarski/iStockphoto. All rights reserved.

Designed by Jessie McGrath

Edited by Sarah Mason

Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of either the author or the publisher.

---

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Warren, Susan May, date.

The great Christmas bowl / Susan May Warren.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-4143-2678-8

1. Christmas stories. I. Title.

PS3623.A865G74 2009

813'.6—dc22

2009005470

---

Printed in the United States of America

15 14 13 12 11 10 09

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For my precious family:*

*Andrew, David, Sarah, Peter, and Noah.*

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I LOVE FOOTBALL. And I love Christmas. And I love being a mother.

Last year, two monumental occurrences happened in the Warren life. First, my son Peter went out for football. I went berserk with joy and became a little over-the-top obsessed with supporting him. (So maybe he doesn't need brownies before *every* game.) I created my own cheering section. I was the loud mom in the bleachers. I realized about halfway through the season that football had created a monster out of me. (It wasn't all my fault—he kept scoring touchdowns!)

About the same time, my oldest son, David, got the lead in the community play—as Daddy Warbucks in *Annie*. On opening night, he came out on stage, head shaved, shoulders broad in a tuxedo, singing in his rich tenor, and I burst into tears that would last the entire Christmas season as I realized next year he'd be

heading off to college. It didn't help that my beautiful daughter, Sarah, got the role of Lily St. Regis, and when she opened her mouth to sing, I hardly recognized the grown woman onstage. Even Noah, my youngest, amazed me as he sang in the cast, and I wondered where my babies had gone.

Obviously, *The Great Christmas Bowl* was already simmering deep in my heart. But it never would have found the light of day if it hadn't been for Rachel Hauck. While attending our friend Anne's wedding in Nashville, we spent one evening watching college football and dreamed up a fun story about an obsessive mother during football season. (At the time, I might have had a lot of church activities on my plate, also.) We each had our own vision for the story and pledged that the first one who wrote it got to keep the idea. I went straight home and opened my computer.

But I was stuck on the mascot. I envisioned a beaver. Or a moose. But they didn't quite fit. So I asked the plotting mastermind who lives with me—my husband, Andrew. He shrugged and said, "Of course, it's a trout." *Of course*. And the Big Lake Trout was born.

I wrote this story over the Christmas season like a tailback, head down, plowing through the defensive line, my eyes on the end zone. I laughed aloud. I cried (I still do when I read the end). And my children gave me the biggest gift of all for Christmas—they let me

read it aloud to them at the dinner table every night. And *they* laughed. And they told me they loved it.

As a test, to see if I wasn't just dreaming up my own humor (maybe I still am), I gave it to my pal Ellen Tarver, who read it and, once again, helped me tweak it so it was just right.

I wrote the *Bowl* as a gift for my family. Because, you see, it's us. We have clam chowder (see recipe in the back). We have the Great Christmas Tree Hunt in the backyard, we have the crazy dog Gracie, and we live in a magical small town that may or may not look like the fictional Big Lake, with an amazing, loving church family (who resemble none of the players in the story, I might add!). Most of all, we love Christmas and our traditions.

I never thought the *Bowl* would really be published, so I'm grateful to my agent, Steve Laube, for loving the book and showing it to Karen Watson, who encouraged me by also loving it. And to Tyndale, for believing in the story, as simple and crazy as it is, and to Sarah Mason, who smoothed out all the rough edges.

Most of all, I'm grateful to God, who plunked this story in my heart and gave me a rich life, an incredible family, and the gift of salvation. I'm so grateful that He reached out of heaven to the downtrodden, the lost, and the hungry people who didn't know Him, to give us eternal nourishment so we will hunger no

*the Great Christmas Bowl*

more. This, I believe, is the true meaning of hospitality.  
I pray this Christmas season, you see the hospitality of  
Jesus Christ in your life.

*Merry Christmas!*

*Susan May Warren*



## PROLOGUE

THERE ARE SOME Christmases that slink by, their significance lost amid the flurry of parties, holiday card mailings, and the endless lists of stocking stuffers. They end well, perhaps, with a sigh of relief and a warm curl of happiness that signifies, once again, a successful season had by all.

There are other years, however, that stand out in stark relief. Moments when the trudge of time, however briefly, hiccups. Years when we remember exactly why we gather with family to celebrate a day of peace, of grace.

For me, such a stumble in time came in my forty-eighth year. The year I turned into a fish.

It happened by accident, as all monumental occurrences do. In fact, it wasn't until afterward that I realized the depth of what had transpired. My youngest son claims that I entered into my state fully cognizant of the ramifications. My perspective suggests I was tricked,

baited by the hope that my youngest son might find inspiration and purpose in my humble transformation and sacrifice.

Perhaps he did. But that year, the year I became a fish, also turned out to be the Christmas that would remind me, in years hence, that children do remember. They hold the memories we create as nourishment, filling in the nooks and crannies of their lives to make them stronger.

And eventually, they pass them on.

“Hey, Mom, I think it’s a day for soup.”

The voice of said youngest son, Kevin, greets me now as he stomps into the foyer after building a snowman and takes me back for a moment to those childhood days when he’d drop his football gear with a noisy thump, kick off his boots, and trumpet into the house.

I can hardly believe he is in graduate school. Especially since I didn’t think he’d graduate from high school. But here he is, home for Thanksgiving, his hair wild and long, his shoulders broader, his countenance stronger. He finally towers over his two older brothers and his sisters, of course, but he still bears that boyish smile that could make me say yes to anything.

He’s the only one home this year. Of my five children, only a few sprinkle back to the homestead for Thanksgiving, their own families and in-laws commandeering their time. I don’t blame them—with Big Lake located

three hours north of the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul, smack-dab in the woodsy middle of Minnesota, who knows when a three-day blizzard might strand them for a week or more in our little lakeside town. Indeed, only two days ago, a northern preseason blizzard that I feared would keep Kevin imprisoned in the big city ushered in high hopes of a white Christmas, giving a sheen of diamonds to the shaggy black pine trees ringing our yard. The pond out back finally froze over, and trees creaked in the cold wind off the lake. Our little town will soon be decked out with ribbons and wreaths, Main Street alive with twinkle lights, the shopwindows spray-painted with holly. Normally, I would eagerly wave good-bye to the dying brown grasses of fall, stiff with cold that begged for a snowy white blanket.

However, when the weatherman predicted snow for Thanksgiving, I bemoaned the timing and stared out the window into the blackness, not at all charmed by the Rockwellian nostalgia of a holiday blizzard as I waited for my youngest son's headlights to reach up our long gravel drive.

He arrived with fanfare Wednesday night, right behind a plow, dragging with him into our icy paradise Marci, the girl he brought home for our approval. Another jolt of reality. Now she enters the house right behind him, snowy and cold, clapping off the clinging ice from her knitted mittens.

“Mrs. Wallace, Kev tells me you have the most amazing chowder.” Marci peels off her scarf and glances at my son, her eyes shining.

“I thought we agreed you’d call me Marianne.” I hand her a mug of hot cocoa. It’s a store-bought mix, but I’ve relaxed my standards over the years.

Not about soup, of course.

“She has amazing soup. Miracle soup.” It’s then Kevin meets my eye. He’s wearing that smile. “Tell her about the Great Christmas Bowl, Mom.”

“Oh, Kevin, no.” But even as I say it, I’m taking out the old recipe, a sudden hankering guiding my hands. I’ll just whip up a quick batch, add a chunk of French bread on the side.

Kevin notices, and his blue eyes fill with laughter. “Please. It’s a family story that Marci has to know. It’s time, don’t you think?”

*No, I don’t think.* “I can’t believe you remember that.”

He shakes his head, silently saying, *Really, Mom, are you serious?* Then he leans over and lands me one of those kisses that tells me no, he’ll never forget.

Truthfully, neither will I.

And as he grabs a knife to peel potatoes, I realize he still has the power to make me do anything.

Really, I mean anything.

## CHAPTER

# 1

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN a football fan, the kind of woman who could easily find herself parked on the sofa any given Sunday afternoon, rooting for my favorite team. I've never been a gambler, never played fantasy football, never followed my team during the hot summer months. I'm a fall-season-until-Super-Bowl-only fan, but die-hard nonetheless. Something about investing my emotions for three hours in the fate of eleven men dressed in purple tights soothes my busy spirit.

Having given birth to three sons, I dreamed I'd have the makings of a starring offensive lineup. My oldest son, Neil, would play quarterback; Brett would be a running back; and my youngest, Kevin, would be a wide receiver. My daughters and I would lead cheers from the stands. My husband, Mike, who had played in our hometown high school and helped bring them to state in his senior year, would help coach. We'd be

a football family, training with weights and running in the off-season. We'd plan our vacations around summer practices, and I'd join the booster club, maybe sell raffle tickets, even host the end-of-the-year potluck.

If girls could have played football in our tiny town, I know that Brianna and Amy would have joined the team. They became my cohorts, huddling under stadium blankets and clapping their mittens together as we cheered our high school team to victory.

Alas, Neil joined chess club, and Brett became a lead in the school plays.

The football gene seemed to have eluded even our youngest son. A boy who would rather sit on the sofa moving his thumbs in furious online game playing as his only form of exercise, Kevin didn't possess even a hint of interest in football. I knew he'd inherited some athleticism, as evidenced by the discarded sports equipment left in his wake over the years: hockey skates, pads, helmet, basketball shoes, a tennis racket, a baseball glove. All abandoned after one season of hopeful use.

The only sport that seemed to take had been soccer. For three years I entered into the world of soccer mom, investing in my own foldout chair and a cooler. Perhaps it was his boundless energy that allowed him to play nearly the entire game, but Kevin had a knack for getting the ball in the net. Too bad our community soccer program ended at sixth grade, because Big Lake might have had

its very own star. I'd hoped his interest would transfer to football, the other fall sport, but the old pigskin seemed as interesting to Kevin as cleaning his room.

Meanwhile, Neil, Brett, Brianna, and Amy graduated and moved out of the house, bound for college—most obtaining scholarships, much to the relief of my overworked, underpaid EMT husband. By the time Kevin moved into Neil's basement teen hangout room, Neil was married and working as a CPA in Milwaukee, Brett was doing commercials in Chicago, Brianna had started graduate school for psychology, and Amy was studying abroad in London.

I worried for Kevin as he approached his senior year, envisioning him taking on a post-high school job at the local Dairy Queen while he honed his gaming skills, waiting for his future to somehow find him in the dark recesses of our basement amid his piled dirty clothing, his unmade bed, and the debris of pizza cartons. How I longed for him to grow up.

So the day he came home from school clutching a medical release form for football in his hand, I wondered if perhaps he had a high fever and needed immediate hospitalization.

"I've been thinking of playing for a while," he said, shrugging. "It's my last chance."

Summertime had begun its slide into fall, the northern nights cooling. In two short months, we'd have our

first snowfall. As I stared at my son—his stringy blond hair, his muscles that just needed toning, the way his gaze slid away from me and onto the floor—I wondered if he expected me to say no.

I took the pen and signed the form without reading it.

Teenage sons are often difficult to encourage. Instead of erupting into a wild jig of joy in the middle of the kitchen, I took the subtle route. I purchased football cleats and set them by the door to his room. I filled his water bottle every morning, packing it with ice, then slipping it into his backpack. I started baking pot roasts and cutting him the largest piece. I bought Bengay, put it on his pillow. I set vitamins out for him at breakfast.

And sometimes, yes, I snuck up in my SUV and sat at the edge of the field, behind the goalposts, watching practice.

My son had talent. A lot of talent. And I wasn't the only one who noticed. Our residence in a small town played to Kevin's odds, and being bigger and faster than most of his teammates made up for his inability to block. Coach Grant started him at tackle, then moved him to fullback, then, after noting his ability to twist out of a hold (thanks to years of wrestling for the remote control with his brothers), landed him at tailback.

To my silent glee, my son had the moves of Walter

Payton and could dance his way up the field, leaping opponents, breaking tackles, and generally restoring my faith in the Wallace family football gene. I couldn't wait for the season to start. Finally, I had a Big Lake Trout.

I purchased a season pass. A stadium cushion. A foam finger.

I was the first one in the gates on the day of the season opener. Mike stood on the sidelines next to the requisite ambulance, something that I'd always noted but never fully appreciated until now.

He waved to me as I plopped down my cushion, pulled my red and black stadium blanket over my knees, and wrestled out my digital camera, prepared to capture every moment of my son's magnificent run to victory. Mike had taken Kevin out for dinner the night before for what I hoped would be a pep talk/strategic-planning session. I wasn't the only one holding tightly to silent hopes.

"You're here early."

I looked up from reviewing shots of Brianna's college graduation to see Bud Finlaysen greeting me from the field. Bundled in orange hunting coveralls as an undergarment, he wore over the top the shiny black and silver costume of the Big Lake Trout team mascot. Bud had served as the Trout since what I assumed was the dawn of time, or at least the game of football, and we needed him like summer needs lemonade. He and his

fish costume comprised the entirety of our cheerleading squad. Our cheerleaders had defected three years prior, and despite the efforts of our paltry pep band, we were woefully lacking in sideline team spirit.

Bud held his headpiece under one arm, the gargantuan mouth gaping open. When worn, his face showed through the open mouth, the enormous fishy eyes googling out from atop his head, a spiky dorsal fin running along his back. He'd shove his hands into two front fins that sparkled with shiny silver material. The costume split at the bottom for his black boots, and a tail dragged behind him like a medieval dragon. Once fitted together, the Big Lake Trout towered nearly eight feet tall, although with the tail, it easily measured over ten. Ten feet of aquatic terror.

"I have a son playing tailback," I said, holding up my camera and taking a shot of Bud. "Gotta get a good seat."

Bud laughed. I remembered him from the days when I attended Big Lake High. He worked as the school janitor. Even then he seemed ancient, although he must have been only twenty years or so older than I was. Thin, with kind blue eyes and a hunch in his back, he'd drag his yellow mop bucket around the halls singing Christmas carols, even in May.

"Maybe this will be the year they go to state," he said, pulling on his giant head. "They've got some good

players.” He gave me a little wink, as if to suggest Kevin might be one of them.

I smiled, but inside I longed for his words to be true.

State champions. The Super Bowl of high school sports. I could barely think the words.

Bud moved up the field, where he stood at the gate, waiting for the team to pour out onto the field. I waved to friends as the stands filled. In a town of 1,300, a Friday night football game is the hot ticket. A coolness nipped the air, spiced with the bouquet of decaying leaves and someone grilling their last steaks of the season.

The band, a motley crew that took up four rows of seats, assembled. I hummed along as they warmed up with the school fight song.

Town grocer Gil Anderson manned the booth behind me and announced the team. I leaped to my feet in a display of disbelief and joy as the Trouts surged out of the school and onto the playing field.

Each player’s hand connected with one of Bud’s fins on the way to the field.

I spotted Kevin right off, big number 33. He looked enormous with his pads. As he stretched, I noted how lean and strong he’d become over the past six weeks of training. I held my breath as he took the sidelines, wishing for a start for him. To my shock, he took the field after the kickoff, just behind the offensive line.

I've never been one to hold back when it comes to football. I cheered my lungs out, pretty sure the team needed my sideline coaching. And when Kevin got the ball and ran it in for a touchdown, I pounded Gretchen Gilstrap on the shoulders in front of me. "That's my son!"

She gave me a good-natured thumbs-up.

We won the game by two touchdowns and a field goal. As Kevin pulled off his helmet and looked for me in the stands, his blond hair sweaty and plastered to his face, I heard Bud's words again: "*Maybe this will be the year they go to state.*"

What is it they always say? Be careful what you wish for?



"Amazing run on Friday!"

"I didn't know your son could play football!"

"Kevin has his father's moves—I remember when Mike took them all the way to state!"

I love my church. I stood in the foyer, receiving accolades for birthing such a stupendous athlete, smiling now and again at Kevin, who was closing up shop at the sound board that he ran every Sunday. Mike had already gone to get the car—his favorite "giddyap and out of church" maneuver. I still had more compliments to gather.

After all, Kevin had been a ten-pound baby. I get some credit.

I worked my way to the fellowship hall to pick up my empty pan. With eighty members, sixty attendees on a good Sunday, we took turns hosting the mid-morning coffee break. I had whipped up a batch of my grandmother's almond coffee cake.

Pastor Backlund stood by the door, and when I finally reached him, he grinned widely. "Great game, Marianne."

"Thanks. I'll tell Kevin you said so."

"Must be strange to have your youngest be a senior this year."

I was trying not to think about that, but yes, although I was thrilled to see Kevin move off the sofa and onto the playing field, I was dreading the inevitable quiet that would invade our home next year. I smiled tightly.

"I hope that will leave you more time to get involved at church?" His eyebrow quirked up, as if I'd been somehow delinquent over the past twenty-five years. I was mentally doing the math, summing up just how many years in a row I'd taught Sunday school, when he added, "Would you consider taking on the role of hospitality chairperson?"

"Hey, Mom!" Kevin appeared beside me. "Can I head over to Coach's for lunch? A bunch of guys are getting together to talk about the game."

I glanced at him, back to the pastor. “Sure.”

“Perfect,” Kevin said, disappearing out the door.

“Wonderful,” Pastor Backlund said, reaching for his next parishioner.

Mike, now spotting me, leaned on his horn.

I’d have to call the pastor later and politely decline his offer to let me take command of the weekly coffee break, the quarterly potluck, and most importantly, the annual Christmas Tea. The hospitality position came staffed with women decades older than I, who could teach even Martha Stewart a few things about stretching a budget and creating centerpieces. I’d rather lead a camping trip for two hundred toddlers through a mosquito-infested jungle.

“Be back by supper!” I hollered to Kevin as he slid into his friend’s sedan. He didn’t even look back.

I climbed into our SUV next to Mike. His thoughts had already moved on, probably to the training he would attend next weekend. Or maybe just to lunch. We rode home in silence. I noticed how the brilliant greens of the poplar trees had turned brown, the maples to red, the oaks to orange. The wind had already stripped some of the trees naked.

I could admit that my leaves had started to turn. But I wasn’t ready to shed them yet.

I pressed my lips together and silently begged the winter winds to tarry.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SUSAN MAY WARREN is a former missionary to Russia, the mother of four children, and the wife of a guy who wooed her onto the back of his motorcycle for the adventure of a lifetime. The award-winning author of over twenty books, Susan loves to write and teach writing. She speaks at women's events around the country about God's amazing grace in our lives. Susan is active in her church and small community and makes her home on the north shore of Minnesota, where her husband runs a hotel.

Visit her Web site at [www.susanmaywarren.com](http://www.susanmaywarren.com).