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*I will answer them before they even call to me.
While they are still talking to me about their needs,
I will go ahead and answer their prayers!*

ISAIAH 65:24

Evelyn stood in the kitchen of her boardinghouse, Peerbaugh Place. The room was lit only by the light from the fridge. Gone were Mae's zucchini and bean sprouts, gone were Tessa's labeled Tupperware containing dabs of this and that, gone were Audra's Diet Coke and Summer's yogurt with sprinkles.

Her appetite left her. Who would have thought the food in a refrigerator could tell such a story?

Or rather, the lack of food in a refrigerator.

She shut the door, throwing the room into darkness. It was depressing. After vibrating with life for nine months, Peerbaugh Place was empty once more—and had been for two weeks now.

Evelyn let her eyes adjust to the dark before she snaked her way past the kitchen table to the light switch. With the lights blazing, with the clutter of coupons and recipes on the counter and the yellow curtains at the window, it looked like a cozy, lived-in place. The scent of last night's split pea soup lingered.

But without the sounds of her dear friends—her sisters—it was a hollow coziness and a phantom family. There one minute, gone the next.

At least that's what it felt like.

In truth, the emptying of Peerbaugh Place had been gradual—and joyful. In the ten months since the death of her husband, in the nine months since she'd opened her Victorian home to boarders, Evelyn had been witness to some wonderful milestones in the lives of her friends.

Tessa Klein had won a national contest and was off on a three-month world cruise. Just last week, Evelyn had received a postcard from Naples picturing a mosaic wall from Pompeii. History and Tessa Klein were the perfect match—if Tessa didn't make a pest of herself correcting the tour guides. But a cruise? Evelyn had trouble imagining Tessa lounging in a deck chair, sipping a drink with an umbrella in it. But maybe her good fortune had loosened Tessa up. Or not.

And Mae Fitzpatrick was—as of a month ago—Mae Ames, the boisterous and loving wife of their neighbor Collier. As expected, she'd defected to Collier's house across the street, so Evelyn still got to see her, but somehow having Mae visit was not the same as having Mae in-house, akin to ordering a bowl of apple brown Betty but having someone pull it away after only taking a nibble. She felt unsatisfied and a bit cheated.

Evelyn was drawn toward a picture that hung in the place of honor above the phone and straightened it. The artist was five-year-old Summer. The biggest blessing amidst the wistfulness was that Summer was officially hers now. With Audra's marriage to Evelyn's son, Russell, nearly two weeks ago on the Saturday after Christmas, Evelyn had become an instant grandma. And once the three of them got back from the honeymoon, Evelyn would resume her child-care duties with Summer on weekdays before and after school. That was a continued blessing she needed to count. But until then . . .

The clock in the entry chimed the hour: six o'clock. She'd been wandering through the house for over an hour. The world was

waking. She might as well get something done besides wallowing, wandering, and worrying.

She was unsuccessful. During the next hour, Evelyn's entire achievement—other than making herself a cup of coffee and getting dressed—was to worry and wander some more.

She'd grabbed up her cat, Peppers, and together they had visited each empty room, trying to see things as a prospective boarder might see them. Though she'd been running an ad in the *Carson Creek Chronicle* for over a month now—with first Mae's room up for grabs, then Tessa's, and now Audra and Summer's—she'd had lookers but no takers. The reasons cited had been varied: too small, not enough sun, too much sun, too many antiques, no modem hookup. Evelyn hadn't dared ask what a modem was.

She strolled through Mae's room, ran a hand along the walnut dresser that had belonged to Grandma Peerbaugh, and straightened the seascape painting that now hung over the bed, since Mae had taken her awful Picasso. From the very beginning Evelyn had removed most of the family knickknacks, providing space for each boarder to add her own pretties, but now she wondered if the rooms looked too bare. Too sanitized. Maybe if she put the fancies back people would sign a lease?

She moved to Tessa's room. It was painted a pale pink. Was pink in style anymore? Maybe she should paint the walls a neutral beige. And the quilt on the bed in the room that Audra and Summer had shared . . . it had been in the Peerbaugh family for generations, but boarders wouldn't care about such things. They would see only the faded colors and the slight fraying at the corners. Maybe she should call her friend Piper over to redecorate all the rental rooms. Piper had been such a help giving the master bedroom a redo, helping to turn it from Aaron's and Evelyn's room into Evelyn's.

Evelyn let her doubts push her onto the bed. Why was this

happening? When she'd first made the decision to open her home to boarders, the rooms had virtually rented themselves. Within twenty-four hours of calling out to God in desperation after her husband's death and learning of the unexpected financial crisis, after getting the idea to hang the old *Peerbaugh Place, Rooms 4 Rent* sign she'd found in the attic, the rooms were rented. It had happened in a blink, as if the thought and reality were one and the same.

Evelyn never regretted the decision. With the full house and new friends, she'd found the strength to carry on after Aaron's death.

"But now they've all deserted me." Evelyn hadn't meant to say the words aloud, and upon hearing her voice, realized how angry she sounded. Did she really begrudge Mae her new husband, Audra and Summer her son, or Tessa her cruise? Was she really that selfish?

She nodded, propelling herself off the bed. Enough of this pouting. She had work to do. She'd call Piper and have her stop over after work and take a look at the rooms. Piper was great at decorating on a shoestring, which was good, because that's all Evelyn had.

She went downstairs to call, but detoured onto the front porch, wrapping her sweater around her torso. A scattering of leaves skittered over the snow and up the steps to meet her. The *Peerbaugh Place, Rooms 4 Rent* sign swayed in the breeze, and Evelyn found herself wondering if a coat of fresh paint would help draw attention to it. Maybe if she used some neon color?

A garish sign on her lovely Victorian home? That would never do. Besides, such a move would shout desperation.

She watched her breath vaporize in the cold yet didn't want to go in quite yet. The cold woke her up and helped her think. She hoped she was a smarter landlord this time around. Where she'd filled Peerbaugh Place with Mae, Tessa, Audra and Summer with-

out so much as a renter's application, this time she was prepared. It's not that she'd had a bad experience. Just the opposite. It had been a God thing.

No, that wasn't exactly true. Evelyn knew God was behind the filling of Peerbaugh Place the first time. But this time, she felt it was her responsibility to be wiser and show God she'd matured as a businesswoman. She was prepared to have applicants fill out the paperwork; then she'd check references . . . the whole schmear.

She heard the screen door slam across the street.

"Well, top o' the morning to you, Evie." Mae zipped up a ski coat and headed toward her, diverting through a pile of snow Evelyn had watched Collier shovel the day before.

Once again, Evelyn was amazed at Mae's gumption. "Collier's not going to appreciate you messing up his hard work."

"Oh, pooh," Mae said, coming up the walk. "What good are piles and puddles if you can't walk through them?"

Evelyn thought of her own late husband. How would Aaron have reacted if Evelyn had walked through a pile of just-shoveled snow? The question was moot. Evelyn would never consider walking through snow, and that knowledge made her kind of sad. Sometimes she felt like an extremely elderly fifty-seven-year-old, while Mae made over-fifty look positively youthful.

Mae took the porch steps two at a time and snapped her on the shoulder. "How's the landlord business? How many you got filled?"

"None."

"None?"

Evelyn shook her head.

"What's up with this town? They don't know what they're missing. I loved my months at Peerbaugh Place."

"Care to move back in?"

Mae leaned close. "You'll find people, Evie."

Evelyn turned her ring—the silver friendship ring Mae had made for each of them. “But it’s taking so long. I’m beginning to wonder if the whole thing was a mistake. Maybe I should close her down.”

“Gracious geckos, Evie, Peerbaugh Place is a wonderful home.” She stilled Evelyn’s hand and held up her own to show her matching ring. “It was the birthplace of our sister circle. And it will be again, to another set of ladies.”

“It won’t be the same. They won’t be sisters.”

“We weren’t sisters either. Not at first.”

“But why is it taking so long?”

Mae stepped back. “I don’t know.”

Evelyn was surprised—and *not* comforted. Mae always had an opinion. About everything. “I was thinking I should redecorate the rooms,” she said. “Take out some of the antiques and replace them with some modern furniture.”

“Don’t you dare. Who wants to live in a Victorian house decorated with Danish modern?”

“Then what’s the answer?”

“Stop thinking so much.”

“Huh?”

Mae knocked some snow off the railing. “You’re analyzing this thing to death. You’ve done everything *you* can do to get the place rented, right?”

“Right.”

“Then quit dissecting the problem and let the big Landlord of landlords rent it for you.”

“God?”

“He did it the first time, didn’t He? We’ve all admitted that.”

Evelyn put a hand over her eyes. “Oh dear . . . I’m so ashamed. I didn’t pray; I haven’t asked—”

“Hey, better late than never.”

Evelyn looked over the yard and watched some leftover

leaves relinquish their hold and fall into the graceful care of the breeze. Where would they land? There was no way to tell. And maybe it didn't matter. Why not enjoy the journey?

Relinquish your hold, Evelyn. I've got you.

Evelyn turned back to Mae, taking her hand. "Will you pray with me?"

"You betcha."

They bowed their heads. As they said "Amen," they saw Collier come out of the house across the street. He eyed the scattered snow pile. He looked up and saw them. "Mae!"

She sprang from the porch. "Coming, Mr. Husband."



Evelyn answered the phone.

A woman's voice. "I'm calling about the room for rent?"

Lord, could this be a yes?

Evelyn told the woman about the rooms available. "Would you like to come see them?"

"If it's not too much trouble I'll be right over."

Amen.



Heddy Wainsworth walked through the three bedrooms a second time. Evelyn stood aside in the hallway, trying to pray, but not quite knowing what to pray for. Heddy was a prospective tenant. Evelyn needed a tenant. But was Heddy the kind of person she could live with? All external clues said yes, and yet . . .

Heddy was the essence of polite, calling Evelyn "Mrs. Peerbaugh" and saying "yes, ma'am" and "no, ma'am." Her nose kept her from crossing the line from pretty to beautiful, and her long wavy hair and pale skin joined with her delicate frame to

give her an ethereal quality. She wore a voile skirt that undulated around her legs, along with a classic cardigan set in the palest sea-foam green. Both reinforced her femininity yet were a bit disconcerting, being out of season.

As for her age? It was hard to say. Definitely over thirty, but beyond that, Evelyn wasn't sure. Whatever her age, her lissome daintiness made Evelyn a bit pouty about the fifteen extra pounds that had settled around her middle since her fortieth birthday. While Evelyn walked through a room, Heddy seemed to float. Her movements reminded Evelyn of Isadora Duncan, that dancer at the turn of the century who used all the flowing scarves. The woman gave the notion that she was there but not there, that any moment a breeze would pass through the room and take her away, leaving an observer wondering if anyone had ever been there at all.

Heddy made a third trip back to Mae's old room. "I like this one best. I adore the balcony. If it's all right with you, Mrs. Peerbaugh, I'll take it."

Evelyn blinked twice, shocked to actually hear the words she'd been waiting—and praying—to hear. "That's wonderful."

"I have good references," Heddy said.

Evelyn had nearly forgotten her landlord duties. "I'm sure you do. Let's go downstairs. I have an application for you to fill out."

They descended into the dining room, and Heddy meticulously filled out the form and handed it to Evelyn. "When will I know if I can have the room? I'm very eager to move in."

Evelyn looked over the form, so neatly filled out with a cursive that would make a calligrapher envious. Heddy had last lived in nearby Jackson. Five years in the same apartment. Surely that indicated stability. Did Evelyn really have to call her references? Couldn't she just tell Heddy yes right now?

Heddy had gotten up from the table and was taking in the

room. "This furniture is lovely. They don't make pieces like this anymore. Solid. Graceful detail. I don't abide by modern-looking pieces with straight lines and no adornment."

She likes antiques. "They're family heirlooms."

Heddy ran a finger along the walnut hutch. "Hmm . . . family . . ."

"Do you have family?"

Heddy opened her mouth to answer, then closed it. "Some." She moved to the silver tea service that sat on a cart by the window. "Ooh, do you use this often?"

"Not really. But I remember my mother-in-law using it when we used to come to Sunday supper."

"So you didn't grow up here?"

"It's my husband's family home. But he and I moved in nearly thirty years ago. We raised our son here."

"A child. How wonderful."

Evelyn noticed a pensive look to her eyes. She glanced at Heddy's ring finger. It was bare. "Have you ever been married?"

Heddy suddenly looked at her watch. "I'm sorry. I have to get to work. It's a new job. They want to show me around."

"Where are you working?"

"I just got a job as the hostess at Ruby's Diner. I hope I do a good job for them." She headed toward the door. Evelyn was impressed with her sincerity. She glanced at the application form, then at Heddy, whose hand was on the doorknob. "I think we can dispense with the formalities. You want the room, it's yours."

Heddy smiled wide, revealing a perfect set of teeth. "That would be grand. When can I move in?"

"Anytime."

"This afternoon? I'll be off work at two."

Evelyn was a bit taken aback, but said, "Certainly."

They shook hands, but as soon as Heddy left, Evelyn felt a stitch in her stomach. *Now that's an odd reaction.*

She pushed the feeling away.
One room down. Two to go.



The doorbell rang. A knock followed. Before Evelyn could get to the landing, another knock.

“Coming!” Evelyn saw the shadow of a woman through the leaded glass. The bell rang again just as she opened the door. Evelyn had rarely seen such a large woman. She was dressed stylishly, but two Evelyns could have fit into her clothes.

“You have a room for rent?” She waved a hand at the Peerbaugh Place sign swinging in the breeze.

Evelyn caught her mouth before it gaped. The idea of this woman sleeping in one of her delicate antique beds . . . the woman was waiting. “I . . . yes. I have two rooms for rent.”

“Then show me. My name is Anabelle Griese.” She stuck out a hand.

They shook hands across the doorway. “Evelyn Peerbaugh.”
There was a moment of awkward silence. “Well?”

The hint of impatience added to the first impression made Evelyn want to say no. But in an instant, she realized propriety demanded that she show the room. She let Anabelle in and racked her brain for points that would make this woman *not* want to live here. She showed her the parlor. “The tenants have their own bedroom and access to the rest of the public areas here on the first floor. There is a sunroom out back, the dining room, the kitchen with an eating area, and—”

“Is that the only TV?” Anabelle pointed to the small set in the corner of the parlor.

Evelyn jumped on her interest. Maybe she preferred one of those monster TVs. “Yes, I’m afraid that’s it. Actually, we don’t do a lot of TV watching. We like Peerbaugh Place to be a quiet—”

"Good. I hate TV. Our lives would be better without it."

Okay, forget that tack.

"The rooms to rent are upstairs, aren't they?"

Evelyn started up the steps. "There are four bedrooms on the upper level, including mine."

"How many bathrooms?"

Evelyn felt a slice of hope. "Only two. The rooms have to share, though there is a small shower in the powder room off the kitchen. I've just recently opened, but Peerbaugh Place was a boardinghouse back in the fifties. At that time my father-in-law had an extra shower installed down there for the boarders." She hesitated. "But it's a very small shower. Tiny really."

"So I'd have to share a bathroom?"

"Yes."

"I figured as much."

Evelyn showed Anabelle the two rooms left to rent. Going up the stairs caused her to breathe heavily, so much so that Evelyn feared for her health. Anabelle didn't say much but seemed to take in everything. Her eyes slid over the details of each room, her jaw set in a look of disapproval. When they returned downstairs to the parlor, Evelyn expected her to offer a brusque regret and leave.

"I have a few questions before we wrap this thing up," Anabelle said. When she headed to an old walnut rocker, Evelyn instinctively took two steps forward, her hand outstretched. "No! Not—"

Anabelle turned, and her eyes zeroed in on Evelyn's hand. Evelyn lowered it and felt herself blush. "Why don't we sit over here?"

Evelyn sat at one end of the couch and Anabelle, the other. Anabelle squirmed to get comfortable in the deep cushions. Evelyn thought about saying something about the chair incident, but couldn't find any words that wouldn't make it worse.

Anabelle broke the silence. "How are meals handled?"

Evelyn immediately found herself wondering how much food a woman of Anabelle's size consumed. The usual four-way split of the grocery bill might not be appropriate. A lie surfaced. "We buy our own, but we do take turns cooking. That is, unless someone has very specialized needs or . . . ah, wants . . . then we would have to adjust the system." Lame. Very lame.

A crease appeared between Anabelle's eyes. "Adjust the system to compensate for a fat pig like me?"

The words were a slap. "Oh no, I didn't—"

"You did. You were thinking those very words, weren't you?"

"No. We just want the expense to be fair to everyone." Oh dear. Evelyn looked away. She wished she could replay the last fifteen minutes. She wouldn't even open the door.

Anabelle pulled her purse to her lap and retrieved a folded sheet of paper. "Here are my references. I'd like a room here, Mrs. Peerbaugh. I'm a good tenant and would be an asset to this establishment. All I'd like from you is your fair, unprejudiced consideration."

The way Anabelle stressed the words caused mental warning bells. But before Evelyn could think further, Anabelle pushed herself to standing. She shook Evelyn's hand, meeting her eyes. "Thank you for your time. I'll be waiting for your call."

Oh dear, indeed.



Evelyn sipped a cup of chamomile tea. Her stomach was still unsettled. Between the menacing mood Anabelle had left behind and the not-quite-right sensation Heddy had produced, Evelyn considered pulling the Peerbaugh Place sign from its hangers and locking the door. She wasn't cut out to be a landlord. The first round of tenants had been a fluke. The people who had answered

the ad this time gave her all the wrong feelings. Where was the sense of family? the feeling they'd known each other forever, even though they'd just met? Where was the potential for sisterhood?

Anabelle's aggressive nature made Evelyn want to crawl into a corner. She couldn't have Anabelle as a tenant. She just couldn't. She didn't even plan to call any of her references. And yet she had an awful feeling that if she didn't . . . Evelyn couldn't imagine Anabelle Griese taking no for an answer without a fight.

And then there was Heddy. With Heddy it was a done deal. Any minute now, she would appear on the doorstep with boxes of belongings, descending upon Peerbaugh Place like a fog, someone who could be seen and felt but not defined.

Evelyn shivered and with a start realized she was working herself into quite a mood. She'd prayed for tenants and she'd gotten one. But just one. Heddy was moving in, and no one was forcing her to accept Anabelle. She had every right to turn down a tenant's application. So there.

Her strong-woman number lasted ten seconds—until the doorbell rang again, signaling round two of her bout with doubt.

Heddy was at the door with two suitcases. She was still dressed in her flowing skirt. "Here I am, Mrs. Peerbaugh."

Evelyn opened the front door wide, looking past her to the car. "Please call me Evelyn. I'll go help with your other things."

"There are no other things. This is it."

Evelyn did a double take at the suitcases. "That's all?"

"It's a furnished room, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes, but usually—"

Heddy put a hand on Evelyn's arm. "Thank you, Evelyn, but I'll be fine. I don't want to trouble you one little bit." She headed up the stairs. "I'll let you know if I need anything."

How was it possible to gain a tenant yet feel more alone than before?



Evelyn pinched a dead bloom off the African violets in the sunroom. She looked up when she heard footsteps in the kitchen. "Here you are," Piper said.

Evelyn dropped the flower debris in a trash can. "Are you done with work already?" Piper was a counselor at the high school, and even though school wasn't resuming its second semester until next week, she'd had to report in.

"Just. Hey, don't let me stop your work."

"Nonsense. I need an excuse. I'm afraid these violets can't take much more attention. I'm pinching them to death."

"Aha. A frustrated gardener waiting for spring?"

"A frustrated landlord who's finding release wherever she can."

Piper sat on the morris chair, putting her feet on the ottoman. "I met your new tenant. I heard rumblings upstairs and thought she was you. Her door was ajar and I went in. She's pretty in a camellia, Southern belle sort of way." She stretched. "The point is, you finally rented a room. So why are you frustrated?"

Confronted with putting her frustration into words, Evelyn found there weren't any. "You notice anything unusual about her?"

"She only wears pastels."

"Really?"

Piper nodded. "Her closet door was open. All her clothes were pastels. But maybe I only noticed because I like deep tones and it's winter. Your new tenant appears to clothe herself in shades of eternal springtime."

"Maybe that's it. The springtime. It goes beyond the clothes. She's so . . . polite."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Of course not." Evelyn sank into the rocker, glancing toward

the kitchen. She kept her voice low. "Maybe it's just me, but I can't shake the feeling that something isn't quite right about her. That the manners—the correctness—are forced. A front."

"Ah yes, that happens all the time. I can see the headline now: 'Crazed Psychotic Criminal Uses Good Manners to Lull Victim into Submission.'"

Evelyn looked at the windowsill packed with violets. She'd missed a yellowed leaf. "I'm sure it's nothing."

"Actually . . ." Piper leaned close. "You might be onto something. When I went in her room, she was sitting on her little porch. In the cold. I think she'd been crying."

"Oh dear. Then there *is* something."

"Maybe. But a few tears doesn't mean it's anything to be worried about. Lots of women cry. Especially during times of change."

Evelyn fingered her lower lip. "And Heddy is going through change. She used to live in Jackson and she just got a new job at Ruby's."

"New town, new home, new job. There you have it."

Evelyn wanted her wariness to dissipate, but it didn't.

"You're not convinced," Piper said.

"There are a few other things. More things left unsaid than things said."

"Like what?"

"She seemed to clam up when family was mentioned. I mentioned bringing up Russell here and she got wistful-looking. And when I asked if she'd been married, she suddenly had to go to work."

"Sounds like the woman has a secret."

"You think so?"

Piper pinched a piece of lint off her sleeve. "Perhaps something happened to her. Something she doesn't want to talk about."

Evelyn let her mind replay the moments spent with Heddy. "And something else. When she came to move in she only had two suitcases. Isn't that strange? Everyone comes with much more than that."

"What did her references say about her?"

Evelyn studied her flower-stained fingers. "I didn't check them."

She didn't like the look of disapproval on Piper's face. But it was no worse than the look Russell would give her when he found out. "She *does* like antiques."

"Well then."

"It does earn her brownie points."

"The main thing I want to know is why she's moving into a boardinghouse in the first place." Piper said.

"She didn't say."

"Why did she leave her last home?"

"She didn't say."

"Was she in a boardinghouse before?"

Evelyn was relieved to know the answer to that one. "She lived in that big apartment complex on the east side of Jackson. She lived there five years. That's why I didn't ask any more questions. Five years is a long time for an apartment dweller. That should prove she's stable."

"But where are all her possessions from the apartment?"

Evelyn was feeling more and more foolish. "I don't know."

"And why would she give all that up? Downsize like that? There's a story here. Something happened to her to bring her from point A to point B—or should I say, point PP for Peerbaugh Place."

Evelyn's lungs deflated. "There's a story I should have discovered before I let her move in. There's a story that's causing her to cry."

A moment of silence was Piper's answer.

"Oh dear. I thought I was getting over acting impulsively. I thought I was getting good at being a landlord."

"You'll be fine. She'll be fine. Everything will—"

Piper's voice broke, and for the first time Evelyn noticed a worry line etched between her eyes. It made her look older than her thirty-four years. "What's going on, Piper?"

She looked up, then down. "My mom and dad called. They're coming home."

"So soon? Why?" In October Wanda and Wayne Wellington had sold their house and taken off for a retirement life of traveling in their new RV.

"Dad wouldn't say. But I'm worried."

"Maybe they miss you."

"It's only been a few months."

"Maybe they're close and they're just swinging by."

"They were calling from South Carolina. Hardly within swinging-by distance."

Evelyn hesitated. "I'm sure it's nothing."

"I'm sure it's something. Dad's voice . . . it didn't sound right."

Suddenly Evelyn's concerns about Heddy and Anabelle seemed inconsequential. "When will they be here?"

"Saturday."

"But they don't have a house anymore. Do they need a place to stay? They can stay here."

"Thanks, but they can stay in my apartment. I'll sleep on the foldout, or they can always sleep in the RV. We'll be fine." She stood and headed to leave. "I'd better go. Thanks for listening."

"But I didn't—"

Piper turned, her eyes misty. "Say a prayer, Evelyn. I'd appreciate it."

Evelyn saw Piper to the front door. Piper, the person who'd led Evelyn to Christ, was asking *her* to pray. Evelyn had a bad

feeling about this. But she did what Piper asked and added a prayer about Heddy Wainsworth, just in case.



Evelyn stood in the upstairs hall and stared at Mae's—now Heddy's—closed door. Piper had found it ajar. She'd gone in and seen Heddy sitting on the porch. In the cold. Crying. Now the door was closed. It made a mute statement: Do not enter. Leave me alone.

"I'll let you know if I need anything, Evelyn." Not exactly an invitation for chitchat. But it had been hours now. And it was nearing dinnertime.

Evelyn tiptoed over to the door, held her breath, put her ear close, and listened. She heard the rustle of movement and soft humming. As the humming grew closer, Evelyn instinctively stepped back. The door opened.

Heddy put a hand to her chest. "You frightened me."

"Sorry." Evelyn took another step back. "I was coming to ask if six o'clock was all right for dinner."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Evelyn. I should have told you. I'm going out for dinner with—I won't be joining you this evening. In fact, I'll be working through most meals, so . . ."

"Oh."

"Forgive my negligence in not telling you sooner. I wasn't thinking."

"It's okay," Evelyn said. But it wasn't. It really wasn't.

Heddy came into the hall, closed the door, and checked to see if it was locked.

Evelyn found the action disconcerting. Though all the bedrooms had keyed locks, no one ever used them. In fact, Mae, Audra, and Tessa had usually left their doors wide open.

They stood in the hall, two strangers standing too close.

Heddy looked at her watch. "I really have to—"

Evelyn stepped aside. "Of course. Have a nice evening."

"I will." Heddy descended the stairs and was gone.

Evelyn let the silence fill the gap caused by Heddy's departure. She sensed the invitation for a pity party being written in her mind. "This is ridiculous. I don't have to be alone." She had plenty of friends.

She phoned Mae and Collier, but they were going to choir practice. Russell and Audra were still out of town. Piper was getting ready for her parents' return. One by one she mentally scanned her friendship list but found it lacking. Since Aaron's death she'd let her entire life get wrapped up in Peerbaugh Place and its tenants. Now that they weren't so readily available, she felt like a wallflower at a dance with the music of life playing around her.

Evelyn headed to the kitchen, ready to let the pity party begin full force. There was some Rocky Road ice cream in the freezer. That would make a good first course.



The phone rang just as Evelyn finished her second helping of ice cream—probably preventing a third.

"Russell!"

"Hey, Mom. How are things?"

"Never mind me; how are you and the girls?"

"Fine, fine. But you first."

She did a quick mental scan and decided to let the healing work of the Rocky Road be sufficient and not burden her son.

"Everything's fine here, honey. I rented one of the rooms."

A pause. "I don't hear an exclamation point at the end of that statement."

"You can't *hear* an exclamation point."

"Exactly. I didn't *hear* an exclamation point. So what's wrong?"

Evelyn had to laugh. "If *you* can hear or not hear an exclamation point, then I can *see* Audra's good influence on you."

"How so?"

"Some of her woman's intuition is rubbing off on you."

"Sounds messy."

"Oh, you . . ."

"So what *aren't* you telling me, Mom?"

Evelyn wrapped the phone cord around her finger, trying to decide what her newly sensitive son would comprehend. "Let's just say my new tenant is unusual. She's a bit . . . ethereal."

"Are you being 'touched by an angel'?"

"No, no, not that kind of ethereal. Hard-to-pin-down ethereal. Elusive."

"Mysterious?"

"Kind of. She has a secret."

"Ah. Curiouser and curiouser."

"It's probably nothing," she said. "I'm just used to the openness of Audra and Summer."

"And Mae and Tessa. Four heart-on-their-sleeve kind of women."

"Sisters." For the second time that day, Evelyn looked down at the silver friendship ring Mae had made for each of them—including little Summer. She never took it off.

Russell seemed momentarily distracted. "I have two of your sisters pestering me right here. Audra and Summer say hi."

In the background she heard Summer's voice: "See you Sunday night, Aunt Evelyn!"

"I know. Can't wait, sweetie," Evelyn called into the phone.

"We've had a good time," Russell said, "but she's anxious to get home to see you and to start her second semester of kinder-

garten Monday. Be prepared for constant talking when you take her before and after school."

"I'll look forward to it. But remind her that I'm her grandma now. No more 'Aunt' Evelyn."

"I know. Bizarre, isn't it? Aunt Evelyn is now Grandma Evelyn, and your 'sister' Audra is now your daughter-in-law."

"But you're still my baby boy."

"Mom . . ."

"Thirty-one or eighty-one, that won't change. Bye, honey. See you Sunday."

Four more days. Just four more days.

A Note from the Authors

Dear sisters,

Welcome back to the sisterhood!

It is such a joy writing the Sister Circle books. Returning to Peerbaugh Place is like going home. Yet things have changed; things have happened since we've been gone. There are surprises to share. Surprises even to us.

But you created these characters. Certainly you know what's going on.
We wish!

This might sound strange, but it's a common phenomenon in the novel-writing world. Regarding the actions of the characters, we are often just as surprised as you are. We expect them to do something, think something, say something, but then they surprise us. We can fight it—or give them their freedom. We choose the latter. God chooses to give us free will, and so we do the same for our characters.

It's for the best. Keeping the peace is essential for a smoothly run novel. And besides, would you want to argue with Tessa or Mae?

In this second of the Sister Circle books, we always planned on having Evelyn and Piper stick around. But the rest would either be away, living the rest of their lives off-page, or would have a minor role. Having won a three-month world cruise, Tessa

agreed to this idea, and so did Gillie with her new job opportunity, but . . .

Tell that to Mae. To quote Dylan Thomas, Mae would “not go gentle into that good night.” She hung around and insisted on putting her two cents’ worth into everything. (The question is, do we get our money’s worth?)

That left Audra and Summer. No way did they want to be left out—and Evelyn took a stand and cast her vote to have them stay close (yay, Evelyn!). And so they were drawn back into the fold.

What were we supposed to do? Tell them to get out? move on?

No indeed. That would have been against the code of sisterhood. We welcomed them back, made them a cup of tea, and settled in to listen to their latest news. And while we were chatting, we welcomed some newcomers too—though to be honest, it was not always easy. We do like things to stay the same, don’t we? It’s comfortable. It’s known. And letting strangers enter our lives takes an act of love. Sometimes a very deliberate act. Romans 9:25 says, “Those who were not My people, I will now call My people. And I will love those whom I did not love before.”

So that’s what we offer you with this book, and the next, and the next. . . . It’s our offering of love to our sisters—old and new. May the blessings of God be with you ’round every corner.

Vonette and Nancy

P.S. If you’ve had some wonderful Sister Circle experiences, we’d love to hear about them. Post them to the Sister Circle Web site (www.sistercircles.com) or write to us in care of Tyndale House Author Relations, P.O. Box 80, Wheaton, IL 60189-0080. Or if you have comments about the books, feel free to e-mail a note to nancy@nancymoser.com.

P.P.S. We used a wonderful sheepdog analogy in chapter 14 and would like to give credit for its inspiration to Phillip Keller's *Lessons from a Sheep Dog*. Thank you, Mr. Keller.

Scripture Verses in *'Round the Corner*

CHAPTER	TOPIC	VERSE
Chapter 1	Needs	Isaiah 65:24
Chapter 2	Trouble	Psalm 25:17-18
	Worry	Luke 12:25
	Worry	Matthew 6:34
Chapter 3	Companionship	2 Timothy 2:22
Chapter 4	Hope	Psalm 31:24
Chapter 5	Confusion	Ephesians 4:17
Chapter 6	Deception	Isaiah 28:17
Chapter 7	Purpose	Psalm 138:8
	Being	Psalm 100:3
	Purpose	Romans 12:5
Chapter 8	Purpose	Psalm 57:2
Chapter 9	Beginnings	Zechariah 4:10
Chapter 10	Motives	Jeremiah 17:10
	Love	Galatians 5:13-15
Chapter 11	Love	Galatians 5:6
	Love	1 John 4:16-17
	Plan	Psalm 139:16
Chapter 12	Truth	Psalm 86:11
	Praise	Matthew 25:21

Discussion Questions

CHAPTER 1

1. People come into our lives, affect us, then leave. It's inevitable. Which special "sister" from your past moved out of your life? Do you still keep in touch? If you haven't before, can you make the effort to contact her now?
2. Women often fall back on intuition. Evelyn lets Heddy move in based on feelings. Then she has second thoughts. When has your intuition been right about someone? When has it been wrong?
3. Anabelle Griese has a chip on her shoulder. And yet, do you think Evelyn *was* prejudiced against her because she was overweight? Have you ever been the victim of prejudice? or the one who has shown prejudice? What happened?

Faith Issue

Evelyn is impatient with God. He filled Peerbaugh Place so quickly the first time (and so well). This time. How are you impatient with God? When has God's timing ever been wrong?

CHAPTER 2

1. Evelyn almost goes into Heddy's room to snoop. Have you ever snooped? What were the consequences? What were your feelings, even if you weren't caught?
2. Even though it's Piper's mom who's sick, Piper gets comfort from *her*. Are you usually a comforter or the one needing comforting? Who among your group of sisters is the greatest comforter?
3. Evelyn wants things in Peerbaugh Place to be like they were