

A woman with long brown hair and red lipstick is shown from the chest down. She is wearing a sleeveless top with horizontal stripes in brown, yellow, and white, and a dark blue and white striped scarf. She is holding a brown hat with a gold emblem and a blue jacket. She is standing in a room with a window and a wooden desk. On the desk, there is a stack of blue papers tied with a string.

L O N G

W A Y

H O M E

a novel

L Y N N

A U S T I N

# PRAISE FOR LYNN AUSTIN

“[A] lovely stand-alone Christmas tale. . . . While fans of *If I Were You* will be eager to read the next chapter of Audrey’s and Eve’s lives, this charming book will also be a delight for inspirational readers looking for a feel-good Christmas story.”

**PUBLISHERS WEEKLY**, starred review of *The Wish Book Christmas*

“Austin’s latest novel has endearing characters with flaws that allow growth. . . . There’s no putting down this nostalgic, appealing read.”

**LIBRARY JOURNAL** on *The Wish Book Christmas*

“Austin shines in this excellent tale of three women who struggle to survive WWII in the Netherlands. . . . This is a must-read for fans of WWII inspirationals.”

**PUBLISHERS WEEKLY** on *Chasing Shadows*

“Austin has written a powerful tale of domestic heroism and faith, with all three women questioning and then turning to God for strength.”

**BOOKLIST** on *Chasing Shadows*

“As always, Austin has penned a moving, intricate, and lovely work of Christian fiction that is excellently researched with an underlying message of hope. Highly recommended.”

**HISTORICAL NOVEL SOCIETY** on *Chasing Shadows*

“If you enjoy historical novels set during World War II, you will not want to miss the very moving portrayal of this time period, *Chasing Shadows* by Lynn Austin. . . . It shows the importance of faith during difficult times. It also emphasizes the importance of doing the right things, even when those things are not easy to do.”

**FRESH FICTION**

“Austin transports readers into the lives of her characters, plunging them in the middle of a brutal war and giving them a unique take on the traditional World War II tale. Readers won’t be able to turn the pages fast enough to find out how Eve and Audrey met and what could have gone so terribly wrong.”

**LIBRARY JOURNAL**, starred review of *If I Were You*

“[A] tantalizing domestic drama. . . . Its message familiar and its world nostalgic and fragile, *If I Were You* looks for answers in changing identities and finds that it’s priceless to remain true to oneself.”

**FOREWORD REVIEWS**

“Lynn is a masterful storyteller. The characters become people you feel like you know and you truly care about. The plot has unexpected turns and keeps you riveted.”

**ECLA LIBRARIES** on *If I Were You*

“Lynn Austin is a master at exploring the depths of human relationships. Set against the backdrop of war and its aftermath, *If I Were You* is a beautifully woven page-turner.”

**SUSAN MEISSNER**, bestselling author of *Secrets of a Charmed Life* and *The Last Year of the War*

“I have long enjoyed Lynn Austin’s novels, but *If I Were You* resonates above all others. Austin weaves the plot and characters together with sheer perfection, and the ending—oh, pure delight to a reader’s heart!”

**TAMERA ALEXANDER**, bestselling author of *With This Pledge* and *A Note Yet Unsung*

“*If I Were You* is a page-turning, nail-biting, heart-stopping gem of a story. Once again, Lynn Austin has done her homework. Each detail rings true, pulling us into Audrey’s and Eve’s differing worlds of privilege and poverty, while we watch their friendship and their faith in God struggle to survive. I loved traveling along on their journey,

with all its unexpected twists and turns, and sighed with satisfaction when I reached the final page. *So good.*”

**LIZ CURTIS HIGGS**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Mine Is the Night*

“Lynn Austin has long been one of my favorite authors. With an intriguing premise and excellent writing, *If I Were You* is sure to garner accolades and appeal to fans of novels like *The Alice Network* and *The Nightingale*.”

**JULIE KLASSEN**, author of *The Bridge to Belle Island*

“With her signature attention to detail and unvarnished portrayal of the human heart, Lynn Austin weaves a tale of redemption that bears witness to Christ’s power to make all things new.”

**SHARON GARLOUGH BROWN**, author of the Sensible Shoes series and *Shades of Light*, on *If I Were You*

“Lynn Austin’s tradition of masterful historical fiction continues in *If I Were You*, an impeccably researched look into the lives of two remarkable women. Her unparalleled skill at evoking the past . . . will appeal to fans of Ariel Lawhon and Lisa Wingate. While longtime fans will appreciate this introspective tale from a writer who deeply feels the nuances of human nature, those uninitiated will immediately recognize why her talented pen has led her to near-legendary status in the realm of inspirational fiction. An unforgettable read.”

**RACHEL MCMILLAN**, author of *The London Restoration*

“Lynn Austin knows how to create conflict with her characters. *Par excellence*. Her latest novel is no exception. *If I Were You* tells the story of a *Downton Abbey*-like friendship between Audrey, from the nobility, and Eve, a servant at Audrey’s manor house. . . . Bold and brilliant and clever, *If I Were You* will delight Lynn’s multitude of fans and garner many new ones.”

**ELIZABETH MUSSER**, author of *When I Close My Eyes*

# ALSO BY LYNN AUSTIN

*The Wish Book Christmas*

*Chasing Shadows*

*If I Were You*

*Sightings: Discovering  
God's Presence in Our  
Everyday Moments*

*Legacy of Mercy*

*Where We Belong*

*Waves of Mercy*

*On This Foundation*

*Keepers of the Covenant*

*Return to Me*

*Pilgrimage: My Journey to  
a Deeper Faith in the Land  
Where Jesus Walked*

*All Things New*

*Wonderland Creek*

*While We're Far Apart*

*Though Waters Roar*

*Until We Reach Home*

*A Proper Pursuit*

*A Woman's Place*

*All She Ever Wanted*

*Among the Gods*

*Faith of My Fathers*

*The Strength of His Hand*

*Song of Redemption*

*Gods and Kings*

*Candle in the Darkness*

*A Light to My Path*

*Fire by Night*

*Hidden Places*

*Wings of Refuge*

*Eve's Daughters*

*Fly Away*



# LONG WAY HOME

---

LYNN AUSTIN



Tyndale House Publishers  
Carol Stream, Illinois

Visit Tyndale online at [tyndale.com](http://tyndale.com).

Visit Lynn Austin's website at [lynnaustin.org](http://lynnaustin.org).

*Tyndale* and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Ministries.

*Long Way Home*

Copyright © 2022 by Lynn Austin. All rights reserved.

Unless otherwise noted, cover images are the property of their respective copyright holders from Shutterstock, and all rights are reserved. Woman © Richard Jenkins Photography; letters © Preto Perola; stained paper © donatas1205; brown paper © Krasovski Dmitri; officer's cap © Danny Smythe.

Author photograph taken by Laura Veldhof, copyright © 2016. All rights reserved.

Cover designed by Faceout Studios, Amanda Hudson

Interior designed by Dean H. Renninger

Edited by Kathryn S. Olson

Published in association with the literary agency of Natasha Kern Literary Agency, Inc., P.O. Box 1069, White Salmon, WA 98672.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Psalm 22:1 in chapter 1 and Matthew 6:9-13 in chapters 14 and 16 are taken from the *Holy Bible*, King James Version.

*Long Way Home* is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at [csresponse@tyndale.com](mailto:csresponse@tyndale.com), or call 1-855-277-9400.

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

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-4964-3739-6 (HC)

ISBN 978-1-4964-3740-2 (SC)

Printed in the United States of America

28 27 26 25 24 23 22  
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# 1

---

---

## *Peggy*

---

---

HUDSON VALLEY, NEW YORK

JUNE 1946

“I know it looks hopeless,” I told Jimmy Barnett’s father. “But we can’t give up until Jimmy is better. Until he’s home again.” We stood side by side on Blue Fence Farms that summer afternoon, watching one of their brand-new thoroughbred colts get the feel of his legs. Mr. Barnett and I were comfortable with each other and never needed to say much when we were together. He looked at me and nodded, and the sadness I saw in his eyes made me feel like someone had stuck a knife in my chest. Mr. B. took me on his veterinary rounds sometimes, even though I was just the gal who lived across the road from his clinic in the apartment above the auto-repair garage. He said I had a way with animals and they calmed right down when they were around me. But Jimmy was the one who should have been helping his father now that the war was finally over. They should have been driving around the countryside together to all the dairy farms and horse breeders, treating cows with mastitis and horses with colic. Jimmy had been studying to be a veterinarian like his dad before that awful December day when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

“We can’t let Jimmy give up on living,” I said.

Mr. Barnett didn’t reply right away. The new foal pranced around on the other side of the fence, his long, racehorse legs as thin as matchsticks. It made me smile to watch him. But Mr. B. wasn’t looking at the colt. He was gazing into the distance, where the sun lit up the mountain’s chalky cliffs. I thought of the psalm that says, “I look up to the mountains—does my help come from there? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth!” and I silently begged God to help us.

Mr. B. finally spoke. “Jim has to want our help, Peg. But he doesn’t.” He squinted his eyes as if the sun was shining in them, then added, “He doesn’t even want to live.” He turned and started walking back to his truck. His shoulders sagged, and I thought for the first time that he looked like an old man. He had always seemed so sturdy and strong to me, with a broad chest and arms that were brawny enough to wrestle a horse into a stall or hoist a baby calf into its pen. Yet he had a gentle smile and an easy laugh that made all of the lines in his face smile, too. How it must hurt Mr. and Mrs. Barnett to know that their only child tried to kill himself. Jimmy arrived home from the war more than a month ago, and in all that time he barely spoke to them. He wouldn’t talk to anyone. He just sat in his room and stared at nothing, like he was sleeping with his eyes open. When I visited him, he looked right through me without seeing me. I ran home in tears because for as long as I had known him, Jimmy was one of the very few people who really saw me.

Mr. B. climbed into his truck, an old 1938 Ford that he’d been driving around on all sorts of back roads and across cow pastures since before the war. Nobody was making new trucks during the war, but he’d planned to go down to the Ford dealership with Jimmy and buy a new one as soon as he arrived home from the Army. Jimmy came home but he wouldn’t go with his father. He wouldn’t leave his room, not even to buy a brand-new truck.

I yanked open the door on the passenger side and climbed in. It closed with a rusty-sounding creak. We were supposed to head back to

the veterinary clinic, but Mr. B. just sat there with his door open and one leg still hanging out. He was gazing at the mountains again, where cloud shadows moved across the slope below the cliffs.

“Mr. B.?” I said. “I’m sure Jimmy will get better again. He just needs more time.”

“I hope so,” he said with a sigh.

“He must have seen some horrible things during the war, and it will probably take him a while to get over them. But you fought in the first war, right? And you were okay afterwards.” There was a picture of a much-younger Mr. Barnett on the mantel in their living room, wearing an Army uniform. They put Jimmy’s picture beside it after he enlisted. Mr. Barnett had been a veterinarian in the Great War, back when they still used horses in the cavalry. Jimmy was a medic in this war and took care of soldiers, not horses. But I guessed he and his father witnessed many of the same things.

“Yes, some of the men I knew suffered from shell shock,” Mr. B. said. “They call it battle fatigue now. We were all told to go home and put the war behind us.”

“And you did that, right?”

“Jimmy and I are very different. He always did have a tender heart. Remember how he was with that dog of yours?”

“Yeah, I remember.” The bedraggled stray showed up out of nowhere nine years ago when I was eleven, barely a week after Mama’s funeral. It kept hanging around Pop’s auto-repair garage, rummaging through our garbage every night. Pop waved a tire iron at him and shouted, “Hey! Get out of there, buster!” So I started calling him Buster. If you could have seen that dog back then, you wouldn’t wonder why everyone in town chased away his mangy hide. But I cleaned him up, took care of him, and fed him, and he turned out to be a real nice dog, with short beige fur, oversize pointy ears that stick up, and a long tail that wagged with happiness whenever he saw me. Buster and I became best friends. He was all I had, really, in the way of friends. I liked to think Mama was looking down at me from heaven and that she sent Buster to me.

One terrible day, Buster chased after a rabbit and ran right out into the middle of the road. Mrs. Franklin couldn't stop her car in time and hit him. I saw it all happen, and I raced into the road where Buster was yelping and whining and trying to drag himself out of the way. I scooped him up, blood and crushed bones and all, and just kept running with him, straight across the street to the veterinary clinic. There were people in the waiting room with their pedigreed dogs and fancy cats, but I ran in, covered with Buster's blood, crying and hollering, "Help! Help! Somebody help my dog! Please!"

It was summertime, and Jimmy was working at the clinic, and it's a good thing he was, too, because Mr. B. took one look at Buster and said, "He'll need to be put down." At first I thought he meant I should put him down on the floor, but Mr. B. shook his head and said, "The dog won't live. He's suffering."

"No, no, please! Can't you do something? Can't you operate on him?"

"I don't think there's much I can do. I'm sorry."

"You have to try! Buster is my best friend!"

"Even if I did work on him, there's not much chance your dog will survive the surgery. He may have internal injuries."

I heard what he said but I couldn't stop crying and begging. Then Jimmy spoke up. "Can't we give it a try, Dad? I've seen how that dog follows her everywhere."

"The leg can't be saved. It's too badly mangled."

"Then he'll hobble around on three legs," Jimmy said. "It'll be good experience for me to see you do surgery like that." I saw Mr. B. shake his head as if he didn't want to do it, and I started losing hope. But Jimmy leaned close to him and said, "The girl just lost her mother, remember?" I held my breath, waiting to see what would happen. Jimmy took Buster from my arms. "What's his name?"

"Buster."

"And what's your name?"

"Peggy. Peggy Ann Serrano. Please try to save him! Please!"

"Okay, Peggety. Now I can't promise you that Buster will live through

the operation, but I can promise that we'll try to save him. I won't give up on Buster until we've done everything we can possibly do." I still remembered Jimmy's words and how he said he wasn't going to give up. He always saw hope in places where there wasn't any.

I was over at the clinic every spare minute, taking care of Buster until we knew that he was going to live. Of course, I couldn't pay for an operation like that, so I told Mr. B. that I would clean the dog pens and the horse stalls for him—whatever he needed me to do. Jimmy became my hero for saving my dog. He nicknamed me Peggety that day and has called me that ever since.

"You operated on Buster nine years ago," I told Mr. B. now, "and he's running around on three legs just as good as you please."

"So he is." He gave me a small, sad smile and swung his leg inside the cab and slammed the door. A deep, wearying grief had settled over him ever since Decoration Day—the day that Jimmy tried to kill himself. I remembered the day because the village officials held a memorial service in the cemetery behind the church for all the fallen soldiers. I looked at Mr. Barnett's ashen face now and it seemed as if all hope had bled right out of him. I feared the sadness would be the death of him if Jimmy didn't get better. That was another reason why I couldn't give up—for Mr. Barnett's sake as much as for Jimmy's.

"Maybe the doctors will be able to figure out why he's so depressed," I said, "and they'll coax him into talking again. Maybe his battle fatigue will be better after he rests in the hospital for a while."

"Let's hope so." Mr. Barnett turned the key in the ignition and the truck growled to life.

The Barnetts lived beside the veterinary clinic in a comforting white farmhouse with bay windows in front and a frilly porch that wrapped around the front and sides. Before Jimmy went to war, that porch used to overflow with his friends on warm summer evenings. The music of the Andrews Sisters and Jimmy Dorsey's band would spill into the night from Jimmy's radio. I would gaze at the house from my bedroom window across the road and hum along to the music.

I went into the farmhouse when Mr. Barnett and I got back, calling to Mrs. Barnett from the kitchen door to tell her we were home. “I’m upstairs, Peggy,” she called back. “Come on up.” I found her in Jimmy’s room. It needed cleaning after all the weeks he’d stayed in there with the window shades pulled down to block the sunlight as if he didn’t want to see the view of the distant mountain ridge or the new yellow-green buds that were bursting from the trees. But I didn’t think Mrs. Barnett was in there just to clean. She had been so excited when Jimmy wrote that he was coming home, and she’d made plans to cook all of his favorite meals, including the red velvet cake he always asked for on his birthday. Mrs. Barnett was my friend, too, and more of a mother to me than Pop’s girlfriend, Donna, had ever been.

After we knew that Buster would live, years ago, and I’d been cleaning dog pens and sweeping up for a while, Mrs. Barnett came to me one day and said, “I have a little present for you, Peggy, for working so hard.” It was a boxed set of bubble bath and talcum powder that smelled like roses. Then she filled up the tub for me in her own bathroom. She gave me a bottle of Halo shampoo that made my hair all shiny and nice and said I could keep that, too. When I turned thirteen, it was Mrs. Barnett who took me to buy my first bra and coached me through all the changes of womanhood. I made a regular pest of myself after Jimmy enlisted, running over to his house all the time, asking his mother if she’d heard from him. I knew how much she loved him and how she would suffer if the doctors couldn’t figure out a way to save him. I wanted to help Jimmy for her sake, too.

“Can I give you a hand with his room, Mrs. B.?” I asked her now. She turned to look at me and I saw tears in her eyes. Jimmy’s eyes were the same greenish-gray color as hers, like rainwater. They were kind eyes, filled with love and compassion the way I always imagined Jesus’ eyes must have looked. But Mrs. Barnett seemed older than ever before, too, her curly brown hair fading to gray like an old photograph, her sweet, wrinkled face lined with worry.

“Imagine . . . our Jimmy lived all through that war, went through all

those terrible battles in dangerous places with barely a scratch. And now this. I guess there are some wounds you just can't see."

"I'm going to find a way to help him." I carried the vacuum cleaner out of Jimmy's room and put it in the hall closet for her. "I'm not going to give up until he's better."

"Oh, Peggy—"

"I mean it. I know Mr. B. has work to do, but I can drive you over to the veterans' hospital once they let us visit him again. We'll talk to him and remind him of all the good reasons he has to live."

She sank down on his bed and ran her hand over the bedspread. "We waited so long for him to come home from the war and now . . . Well, we have to trust the doctors. They're the experts. But I can't bear to think of Jimmy all alone in that place."

"I'll go with you." She reached for my hands as I sat down beside her, and squeezed them. Tears slipped down her cheeks. I saw her throat working as if she was trying to talk but nothing would come out. She was the one who found Jimmy, barely alive, and I knew the memory still haunted her. She pulled me into her arms. "We won't give up, Mrs. B.," I said through my own tears. "We won't!"

She hugged me long and hard, then backed away to wipe her eyes on her apron. "Gordon and I tried so hard to get Jimmy to tell us what was wrong," she said. "We thought something terrible must have happened to make him so depressed. Something he just couldn't forget."

"Or maybe it was a lot of things all adding up."

"Yes . . . maybe."

"If we can figure out what made him so sad, we can all help carry part of that load for him. Maybe the answer is in there somewhere," I said, pointing to the duffel bag and rucksack Jimmy had dumped in the corner of his room. "Maybe we can piece the story together and figure out what went wrong."

"Do you really think so?" I saw hope in her eyes and the deep love she had for her son, and I wanted it to be true.

"Yes, I do believe it. Let's look through his things together." I lifted

his rucksack from the floor and set it on the bed, watching as Mrs. Barnett reached inside and pulled out each item—a mess kit, a shaving set, his discharge papers. She found a pocket-size copy of the New Testament and Psalms, and I leafed through it, noticing that several verses had been underlined. On the back flyleaf, Jimmy had printed an address without any name: 573 S. Second Street, Brooklyn, NY.

“I wonder who this girl is,” Mrs. B. said. She had taken out a photograph in a simple metal frame of a pretty, young woman wearing a nurse’s cap. I turned it over and saw writing on the cardboard backing: *All my love, Gisela*. My pulse started doing the foxtrot. Maybe Gisela held the key that would unlock Jimmy’s depression.

“Is she a girlfriend from college?” I asked.

“I don’t think so. He didn’t have a steady girlfriend before he enlisted.”

“Gisela is an unusual name. Did Jimmy ever mention her in his letters?”

She got a faraway look on her face as if she were trying to peer back through time and across the vast Atlantic Ocean. “Not that I recall. But he wrote less frequently after the Nazis surrendered. He was working in a hospital . . .”

“Might she be one of the nurses he worked with? It looks like she’s wearing a nurse’s cap. Maybe that’s where he met her.”

“Maybe. But he didn’t mention a woman in his letters. Or after he got home. But then he barely spoke two words to us.” Mrs. Barnett and I searched all the way to the bottom of Jimmy’s rucksack, but we didn’t find anything else that told us who Gisela was. “I saved all the letters he sent home,” she said when we finished. “You can read through them if you’d like.”

“That’s a great idea. Maybe we’ll find another clue.”

She went into her bedroom to fetch them for me but was interrupted by the telephone. I heard her hurrying downstairs to the front hallway to answer it and then her voice in the distance. “Yes . . . Yes, I see . . . Ten o’clock, then . . . Thank you.”

She was out of breath after climbing the stairs again. “That was the

veterans' hospital. They want us to go there tomorrow morning to talk about a treatment for Jimmy."

"Is he getting better? Can he come home soon?"

"They didn't say. But we'll be allowed to visit with him briefly after our appointment with the doctor." I didn't ask Mrs. Barnett if I could go with her, but I must have had a pleading look on my face because she asked, "Do you want to come with us, Peggy?"

"Oh yes, if you'll let me. If the hospital will let me."

"They said family only, but you're part of our family after all these years, aren't you?"

I wondered if Mrs. Barnett had any idea how happy her words made me. I loved Jimmy Barnett and I loved his parents, too. Their home once held so much life and joy, and I wanted it to be that way again, for my own sake as well as for theirs. During the war, I worked at the IBM plant across the river, building aircraft cannons. I believed that if I did my part, the Allies would win, and Jimmy and his family would be safe, and life would go on. The war was over, and my prayers were answered when Jimmy came home. But nothing was the same as it used to be.

Mrs. Barnett handed me the box of letters she had fetched and we sat down on Jimmy's bed again. He had enlisted in 1942, and his letters filled a shoebox that once held a pair of Mr. Barnett's work boots. We only had time to skim the most recent letters, sent from Germany in flimsy airmail envelopes. We didn't find Gisela's name in any of them. "You can take the letters home to read, if you'd like," Mrs. B. said, but I shook my head. Jimmy's letters belonged here, with his parents. His words were precious to them, especially since he no longer spoke to anyone.

"But may I take this?" I held up the small New Testament and Psalms we'd found in his pack. I wanted to read the verses Jimmy had underlined, thinking they might have been important to him.

"Yes, of course," Mrs. Barnett replied. She drew me into her soft arms for a hug before I left, something we probably both needed.

I hurried across the road and ducked into Pop's garage before going

upstairs to change out of my work clothes. “You need me for anything, Pop? Before I get changed?”

He was bent over a car engine and didn’t even look up. “It’s not like you’re around if I did need you,” he muttered. I handled all of Pop’s paperwork and wrote up invoices for him. He was busy with a lot of car and tractor repairs these days and could have used more help, but I had returned to work at the veterinary clinic after my wartime job at the factory ended. I knew how to replace spark plugs and do oil changes, things I’d helped Pop do since I was a kid. He could have taught me more, but I enjoyed working with dogs and horses and even cows and pigs more than cars and trucks. There was nothing more amazing than watching a baby calf or a foal being born—that miracle of new life emerging into the world after a painful struggle. I never grew tired of it.

Over the years that I’d been working at Mr. Barnett’s clinic, I not only cleaned the dog kennels and horse stalls, but Mr. Barnett showed me how to feed the animals and keep watch over the sick ones until they’d recovered enough to go home. The clinic also boarded animals for their owners, so there was always a dog or two to walk or a horse to groom. A month after Buster’s surgery, I was feeding a newly spayed dog when Mr. Barnett asked, “How old are you, Peggy?”

“Eleven.”

“So tell me. Do you like working here?”

“Oh yes, sir! It’s the best part of my whole day.”

“Well, then. I think it’s time I started paying you for all the work you do around here.” My heart did a little dance. I loved working in the clinic. I hoped he really meant it.

“But . . . aren’t I still paying you for Buster’s operation?”

“You’ve already paid that debt,” he said with a wave of his hand. “If it’s okay with your father, I’d like to pay you to continue helping me after school. You have a nice way with the animals. They like you.”

I had nearly burst out bawling from his kind words. I had to swallow my tears and blink my eyes real fast. “I-I’ll ask Pop when I go home. But I’m sure he won’t mind.” And he hadn’t minded. The Great Depression

still cast a shadow over the country, and many people were desperate to earn a little extra money. But I could tell that Pop was disappointed in me for not taking more interest in the garage that was his livelihood.

“I’ll get to work and write up that invoice for you after I get changed,” I told Pop now. “And let me know what parts you want me to order.” Buster was waiting for me outside at the bottom of the steps to our apartment, his tail wagging in greeting. Pop’s girlfriend, Donna, wouldn’t let him come inside unless I was home, complaining that he stank up the place. I took a minute to greet him and let him know I was happy to see him, too, then told him to wait outside while I flew up the stairs to our apartment to change out of my barn clothes.

“You sound like a herd of elephants coming up those stairs!” Donna gripped from her usual place on our sagging sofa. She was still in her housecoat and a haze of cigarette smoke hovered around her.

“Sorry. I’m wearing my work boots.” I kicked them off near the door and opened one of the living room windows. It was nearly suppertime, but a quick peek into the kitchen told me she hadn’t started anything for our dinner. My pop loved Donna, so I tried very hard to love her, too. But I suspected that Donna would be happier if I moved out and she could have Pop all to herself. He’d been lonely after Mama died and had started drinking every night at the Crow Bar, where Donna worked as a barmaid. By the time I was in high school, she had moved in with us. The whole town knew that she lived here and that they weren’t married. And I’d been old enough to be embarrassed and ashamed about it.

Yet I understood Pop’s loneliness and how he’d needed someone to talk to. Mama had been the one who would rub his shoulders after a long day of work and make sure there was a hot meal on our table, even when money was tight after paying the mortgage on his garage. Mama was the one who sewed clothes for me out of hand-me-downs and sent me off to school with my hair brushed and braided. But she had felt very tired on the last morning I saw her, too tired to fix my hair or my lunch. She sat in an armchair in our living room, her swollen ankles

propped up on the footstool. “Can you pack your own lunch today like a big girl?” she’d asked.

“Okay, Mama.” I smeared jelly on a leftover biscuit and added an apple to my lunch sack. Before I left for school, Mama took my hand and laid it on her stomach to let me feel our baby kicking inside her.

I never saw her again. Pop came upstairs for lunch at noon and found her sprawled on the floor. He carried her to the car and raced to St. Luke’s Hospital, but it was too late. Mama and our baby both died a few hours later.

Tomorrow’s trip to the veterans’ hospital to see Jimmy was still heavy on my mind as I went downstairs to work in Pop’s cluttered office. The familiar scents of engine oil and exhaust fumes saturated the space. Buster lay at my feet like my shadow as I wrote up invoices and ordered new fan belts and spark plugs. A few bills needed to be paid, but business at the garage was good, and we had more money coming in than going out. All the while I worked, writing checks and adding numbers on our adding machine, I kept reaching down to scratch behind Buster’s ears, and I prayed that the doctors would tell us Jimmy was getting better and that he would be able to come home tomorrow.

Along with Buster, Jimmy had helped fill the hole in my life during those terrible, lonely years after Mama died and everything at home had started falling apart. Jimmy did chores alongside me at the clinic after I started working there, and even though he was four years older than me, he would still take time to say, “How are you doing today, Peggety?” He would always ask me about my day the way Mama used to do.

About a year after Mama died, Jimmy found me slumped in an empty horse stall one day, crying my eyes out. “Hey, hey! What’s wrong, Peggety?” he’d asked.

“Nothing . . . nothing.” I sniffed and wiped my nose on my sleeve, but when I tried to stand up, he made me sit down again.

“Let’s just sit here a minute and you can tell me about it,” he’d said. He sank down in the straw beside me and waited. He just waited, as if he had all the time in the world, braiding a few pieces of straw together

while he did. His patience won me over. My story spilled out with my tears.

“Some kids pushed me down in the mud on my way home from school, then they laughed at me. They always make fun of me, saying that I have cooties. Sometimes they call me ‘grease monkey,’ and they make ape noises at me because of Pop’s garage, and because I can never get the grease out from under my fingernails after I help him. But today they made fun of me because of Buster. They called me ‘dog girl,’ and they howled and barked at me all the way home.” I felt beat up all over again as I told Jimmy my story.

“Who are these kids?” he said when I finished. He was roaring mad. “Tell me their names, and I’ll take care of them for you.” There were too many to name.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said.

“Of course it matters!”

“Pop says I have to learn to stand up for myself.” He’d also said, “*Sticks and stones may break your bones, but names will never hurt you.*” But that wasn’t true. The names did hurt.

“Those other kids are wrong,” Jimmy said. “You’re a great kid, Peggety. And Buster is one of the bravest dogs I know.” Tears filled my eyes again at his words. “You should tell your teacher about those bullies.”

“Okay.” I had nodded my head so he would believe that I would do it. But my teacher that year was Miss Hastings, and she looked at me the same way all the kids in my class did. I longed to stand close to her because she smelled nice, the way my mama had. I’d started to forget my mama, and I didn’t want to. But whenever I got too close, Miss Hastings would back away a little bit.

I never told her about the bullies, of course. The kids still made fun of me, and Miss Hastings still kept her distance from me. But the fact that Jimmy had cared, that he would have stood up to all those other kids for me, meant everything. “*You’re a great kid, Peggety. You’re a great kid.*” I repeated those words to myself again and again. And I kept the little straw braid he had made to remind me of them.

That was years ago, but oh, how I wished Jimmy would open his soul to me now the way I had with him that day. I would listen to him and do anything I could to make things right. It was a terrible feeling not to be able to help my best friend.

I took Buster up to my room after Donna left for work. That night, I read through all the New Testament verses Jimmy had underlined in his little Bible, trying to see a pattern, but I couldn't. I was ready to give up when I saw that the first verse of Psalm 22 had been underlined. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?" In the margin beside it, he'd written *Gisela*.

I made up my mind that when we visited Jimmy tomorrow, I would bring his little Bible. I still had the braid of straw he'd made, and I used it to mark the page with Psalm 22. Jimmy used to believe in God and in prayer. I wondered if he still did.

I turned off the light, picturing the woman's face in the photograph. "Who are you, Gisela?" I asked the smiling girl. "What happened that Jimmy can't bear to talk about it?"