

Lift Up Mine Eyes

Chapter One

Margaret Haywood glanced up from her work at the dining room table littered with cards and envelopes and well-marked, dog-eared lists. *Will I ever get these thank you notes finished?* Shoved to one side were a wilted yuletide centerpiece and a disorganized stack of opened Christmas greetings. “Rudolph the Red-Nose Reindeer” was playing softly in the background.”

Got to retire those holiday CD's. It's almost mid-January for gosh sakes! Not that the music did very much to make it joyous around here. But for the kids' sake, I tried.

She wiped the back of her hand across her forehead, too weary right at that moment to act on her resolution and shut down the background noise the out-of-season music provided. *I feel like I've been digging ditches. These last few weeks have been anything but “peace on earth, good will to men.”*

The ringing telephone interrupted her mini-pity-party, and she answered without remembering to check the Caller ID, in case it was yet another reporter.

“Margaret? Is anything wrong?”

P.C. Thank goodness, it's P.C. Dunigan!

“Wrong? Nothing more than you already know. Why?”

“You haven't called me in over a week. I was getting worried.”

Margaret glanced around the tired and dingy dining room of the home she was renting from her parents, and tried to find something positive. Anything. *All I see is that my entire life looks just like this whole house... in bad need of a total makeover.* “I just haven't been on top of my game,” she told her friend, an attorney in Tennessee. “I

thought divorcing Don was going to be difficult. That would have been a piece of cake compared to dealing with his death. Not to mention the news media.”

“It’s been a rough go, hasn’t it?”

Margaret fixed her eyes on a huge water stain in the ceiling. *I feel soiled, just like that water mark.* “It’s been hard on me, but it’s been even worse for the kids.” She ran her fingers through her hair. “Of course that’s made it even harder on me, to see them repeatedly hurt and embarrassed.”

“You and I always said Don was going to meet his match one day.”

“I know,” she replied, unable to hide the bone-tired exhaustion that dogged her every move. I thought he had, when he was arrested for trying to kill Jim Deaton.”

“I’m still trying to believe he actually came to the hospital where you and Jason were... with a gun, no less.”

“I agree. When he was arrested for shooting Jim, just because he was representing me in the divorce action, I thought that was as bad as it could get.”

“I guess it never pays to say “never”, does it?”

Details of that painful period were still as fresh as if they had occurred the night before. The middle-of-the-night call from the jail in Atlanta, informing her that her husband, Don, had been badly beaten by an irate inmate. “Come quickly,” the deputy had stressed.

They had. In a matter of only a few minutes, she and Brian and Sallie, accompanied by Margaret’s parents, Harold and Ruby Maxwell, were on the Interstate highway headed south from Carter’s Crossroads. *Poor Jason. I left him in the hospital*

simply because there wasn't time to get him released. Not that it would have made any difference.

“Are the kids still being harassed by the media?”

“Not like they were. Not like it was that night at the Grady Hospital ER. I'll never know how the TV stations got word of Don's death, because he was gone before we got there.”

“Somebody in the jail called in an anonymous tip,” P.C. suggested. “I'll guarantee you that's how they knew.”

Regardless of who did it, to walk out of the hospital trying to comfort my children and be overwhelmed with hordes of reporters and microphones and cameras at four o'clock in the morning was over the top.

“I would never have thought that.”

“Hate to burst your bubble of innocence, Pollyana. That's probably exactly how it happened.

“They sure upset two already distraught children, I can tell you that.” *All those lights and people jumping into their faces.*

“So, besides the news media, how are the three Haywood children adjusting?”

How are my children adjusting? I'm their mother, but I don't know how to answer that question.

“I'm glad they have the routine of school to anchor them. As you can imagine, they missed most of December, so it was a relief for me when classes resumed after the holidays.”

“Do they talk about Don?”

Does she mean do they talk about Don among themselves, or do they talk about him with me? They don't talk about anything with me if they can help it.

Margaret sighed and as the air escaped her body, she felt even that much more depleted. Physically and emotionally. "You might as well know, P.C., I'm not my children's favorite mother right now."

"Meaning what... exactly?" Her question contained a sharp edge.

"It's difficult for me to talk about..."

"Well try, because you've been through enough without having to carry a load of undeserved guilt."

"They think if I hadn't started the divorce, Don wouldn't have shot Jim, wouldn't have been in jail, and would still be here with us today."

"They said that!?"

Margaret hesitated, unwilling to assign guilt where none existed. "It's more what they haven't said than what they have," she answered finally. "They talk to me very little. Like they've built a glass wall between them and me."

"But that's ridiculous. How can those children possibly blame you?"

"They're hurting, P.C. Really hurting. I can understand that, because I'm hurting too."

"Of course you are, and the kids don't need to dump a load of unwarranted guilt on your back."

"They're not doing it deliberately. Don is never coming back, and they're having trouble coming to grips with that. Just like I am. When I was going to divorce him, I was

banishing him on my terms. But for him to be taken like he was... well... I feel like I was cheated.”

“But you had nothing to do with that. Don was his own worst enemy, because his arrogance convinced him he was omnipotent. Those type personalities fall, they always hit hard.”

Margaret had been poking at the dead Christmas arrangement as she and P.C. talked, and brown spruce needles were dropping all over the table top. *Just like the parts of my life.*

“In my heart, I know you’re right on target. But my head is waging war on my heart, and the fact that my children are withdrawing doesn’t help matters.”

“You want me to come down this weekend? I will, you know.”

“You know you’re always welcome,” Margaret assured her friend. “But I don’t know how much good you could do.”

“Well somebody’s going to have to do something.”

“I agree, and as unpopular as it’s going to be in some circles, I’m convinced the first thing I have to do is to get us out of this house.” She looked at the dirty, faded paint, the old carpet and the dated light fixtures. “It’s bad enough that this whole house is even more depressed than I am, but with Mama and Daddy right through the back fence, I never will get my children back.”

“Miss Ruby still giving you a hard time.”

Margaret’s right hand found its way back to her furrowed forehead, a place it had frequented many times over the past few weeks. “I strongly suspect Mama is feeding the children’s belief that my actions led to Don’s death.”

“You know, I would say I’m surprised that she’s giving you so much grief, but in truth, I’m not.”

Shock evident in her voice, Margaret asked, “You aren’t? Why?”

“It’s a common trait in domestic violence. There’s usually at least one family member who doesn’t support the victim when she tries to save herself. Unfortunately, in this case it’s your mama.”

“I always knew Mama was stubborn, but I’ve never seen her carry anything to the extent she has with this. You’d think after Don tried to kill a man, she’d see him for the monster he could be. But, no... Don’s dead and it’s all my fault.”

“Now you know you don’t really believe that,” P.C. affirmed.

“No, I don’t,” she said sadly. “But my children do, and Mama’s poisoning them against me. Which is why,” she said with a sudden determination she didn’t recognize, “I’ve got to get us out of here.”

“You mean out of that house? I knew you weren’t all that keen that your Dad bought it for you without your knowledge.”

“No, I wasn’t in favor of it, for all the reasons I’m seeing now. But at the same time, I thought it would be good for us to be in our house for Christmas, instead of in with the folks. So I took it.” She examined the lines in the palm of her hand. “Only now I’m not so sure it’s been worth it.”

“So what will you do, go back to the house on Redbud Way?”

“No way,” she replied immediately. “That house will be listed with a Realtor next week. The one thing the children and I agree upon is that none of us want to live there ever again.”

“So where will you go?”

Should I share with P.C. the bold plan that's been emerging over the past week? I can trust her.

“You're the first soul I've shared this with,” she cautioned her friend. “So please keep it under your hat until I tell you otherwise.”

“Sounds almost clandestine. You've sure got my curiosity aroused, so tell all. My lips are sealed.”

“I'm thinking seriously of leaving Carter's Crossroads. You know, make a totally fresh start elsewhere, where none of us have to live under the shadow of Don Haywood's legacy – even though all of it isn't negative.”

I can't believe I've said those words aloud. It's the first time I've heard my thoughts verbalized.

“You would do that?” P.C. asked. “Leave Carter's Crossroads? My gosh, Margaret, where would you go?”

Here goes nothing.

“I'm thinking about a small town somewhere, where we're all strangers.”

“OK, that takes care of you, but what about your children? What about them? Surely you don't think you'll get them out of Mount Zion School without a battle?”

“I don't think the kids are as enamored of Mount Zion as they were when Don was alive.”

“You don't mean...?”

“I'm afraid I do,” Margaret replied, sensing the unspoken part of her friend's question. “It's like the school knows that Don's money isn't going to be flowing freely

any longer, and suddenly my children are no longer special. Not that they ever should have...”

A knock at the front door interrupted Margaret, who said to her friend, “There’s someone at the door. Can I call you back?”

“Sure. Catch you later.”

Margaret was already on her way to the door.

“But remember, I’ll come if you need me.”

“I know. Later.”

She peeped through the security lookout to find a nicely dressed woman, who appeared to be in her 40’s, standing on the other side. A second, closer glance disclosed that Annie Campbell, Margaret’s friend and director of the Carter’s Crossroads Battered Women’s Shelter, was standing alongside.

“Be right with you,” she called through the door, as she smoothed her hair, regretted she hadn’t applied makeup that morning, and cast a quick and disapproving glance around the cluttered living room. *Time was I would have gotten up out of my casket to keep guests from seeing my house looking like this. All the more reason I’ve got to seize control and do something.*

She released the deadbolt and swung open the door. “Annie. It’s so good to see you.” *Suddenly a horrible thought struck her.* “We didn’t have an appointment I’ve forgotten, did we?”

The short black woman stepped forward to take Margaret’s hand. “Not to worry,” she said, “you haven’t forgotten a commitment. May we come in?”

“Oh... oh... of course, where are my manners?”

“Probably the same place mine are, since I didn’t give you the courtesy of a warning call that I was on my way over,” she replied, as she stepped aside for the visitor to precede her.

“Please,” Margaret said, “make yourselves at home.” *That’s going to be a good one, since I can’t even seem to accomplish that here.* She indicated two Club chairs across from the sofa, where she seated herself as soon as the two guests had taken their chairs.

“Margaret,” Annie said, “I’d like to have you meet Barbara Kirkland. She’s with the state domestic violence coalition, and she and I had an appointment this morning. Only when I heard what one of her needs was, I adjourned the meeting and dragged her over here to meet you.”

Me? “I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“Trust me, you will.” She turned to the other woman who, Margaret realized, had been studying her intently. “Barbara, this Margaret Haywood, the woman I was telling you about who managed to pull off a marvelous holiday tour of homes for us, despite the worst of personal circumstances.” She smiled affectionately at Margaret who tried not to feel like a freak in the circus sideshow. *Why am I the center of attention?*

“Margaret... May I call you Margaret,” the visitor inquired. When she was assured that first names were acceptable, she continued. “First, please accept my condolences for all that you’ve been through, both before and after the death of your husband. I know that none of this has been easy.”

That’s for sure.

“I also know,” the guest continued, “that none of what happened was your fault. Regardless of what anyone else might say.”

“I know that, only it’s nice to hear someone else say it,” Margaret confessed.

“Unfortunately, there are too many women, too many victims who blame themselves and do an even more destructive number on themselves than their abusers ever thought about.”

I can believe that.

“Margaret’s been so strong through all of this,” Annie Campbell interjected. “I’ve marveled at her strength.”

“Please,” Margaret protested. “Annie has always been my personal cheering section. But the truth is, I’ve been more the consistency of Jello than cement. At first I didn’t want to accept the truth and then, once I did, there were so many times I wanted to call a halt when I saw what it was doing to my children.”

“But you didn’t,” Barbara affirmed. “Which is why Annie thinks you would be perfect for a position we have in the state office.”

Me? A job in the state office? But what?... How?

“You are absolutely perfect,” Annie assured her. “When I told Barbara your background in fundraising for the school, and what you had triumphed over as a surviving violence victim, she couldn’t wait to meet you.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand. This all sounds terribly overwhelming.”

“You’ll have to forgive us,” Barbara said. “In our excitement, I’m afraid we may have come on a little too strong.” She reached across and took Margaret by the hand.

“Why don’t we begin again?”

Margaret smiled. “Why don’t we?”

Over the next few minutes, the out-of-town visitor explained that there was a need on the state level for someone who was an articulate speaker, who could function as a public relations department of one, and also organize fundraising events to benefit the organization.

“You know,” Annie explained, “the state group gets no government support. They depend entirely on contributions to underwrite their work. Trust me, you would be perfect for them.”

“Annie was so excited,” Barbara continued, “until I allowed her to kidnap me and drag me over here.” She smiled at Margaret. “And now I’m so glad I did, because I’m in total agreement.

Here I sit, in faded jeans and a sweatshirt, in a cosmetically-challenged house. My hair hasn’t been fixed today and I’m not wearing any makeup, and she thinks I’m state level material.

“Well, uh... uh... I don’t know...”

“Don’t give us an answer now,” Annie advised. “Think about it a few days, and you and Barbara get back together next week, after you’ve had time to process it, and talk some more.”

“Yes, Margaret. I don’t want to rush you, but I did want to take the opportunity to meet you while I was in town. I hope you’ll give this some serious consideration.” She fished in her purse and brought out a white square of cardboard, which she extended to Margaret. “Here’s my card. Today is Thursday. Why don’t you give me a call next Monday? I’ll be glad to drive back up here to visit further.”

“And now,” Annie advised her colleague, “you and I need to be going. I’m certain Margaret has other things to do, because I know we do.”

After she had seen her guests to the door, Margaret sat back down in her chair at the dining room table, but after just a few minutes, leaped to her feet and began to pace the house.

Oh, Lord. I’ve prayed every night for some guidance, for a direction. Could this be it? I feel so ill-equipped. How can I work effectively for other violence victims when I refused to see the demon that was in my own home until it was almost too late? Besides, this job would mean moving to Atlanta.

She was in the kitchen, fixing a toasted ham and cheese sandwich for a late lunch, when she heard what sounded like the front door opening. She was startled and dropped the cookie sheet she’d used to brown the sandwich. *Even after all these weeks, I still go weak when I hear an unexplained noise and think it’s Don coming after me.*

Even though she knew it couldn’t be Don, she moved cautiously to the door of the dining room, where she could clearly see the front entrance. *Mama and Daddy and the kids all have a key, even Jason.* She consulted the clock on the dining room sideboard. *But it’s too early for the kids and Mama or Daddy wouldn’t just use their key and come in. Even if they did, they’d call out to let me know they were here.*

When she got to where she could see the door, it was shut, as if it hadn’t been opened. *I know that’s what I heard.* Closer inspection revealed the deadbolt wasn’t engaged. *I know I threw the bolt home when I locked the door after Annie and Barbara left.*

Convinced that someone had indeed entered her house, she grabbed her phone and headed for the back door. Once in the yard, she called to her parents' house a few hundred yards away.

"Daddy," she said without waiting, when she heard his voice. "Come quick. Please. I think someone's in my house."

"I'll be right there."

In a matter of seconds he was coming through the connecting gate he'd built in the shared backyard fence.

"What happened?"

Margaret explained, "The only ones who have keys are you and Mama and me, and the kids. And they won't be out of school for another hour, yet."

"Your Mama's at home, making a pot of soup." He gazed up at the house, his face a study in anger. "I don't want to take any chances. I'm calling the police."

Oh, after the way the police abused me when Don was pulling their strings, I'd hoped I was through with them for a long time.

"They're sending a car."

In just a matter of minutes, maybe three or four, a black and white and gold patrol car pulled into the driveway, and Margaret and her father hurried over to meet them. Margaret was chagrined to see the two officers who had responded to P.C.'s call at the Redbud Way house months before. They hadn't believed her then. Would they now? Now that Don wasn't alive to poison their minds?

"Yes, Ma'am, Mrs. Haywood? Dispatch said you had a prowler?"

"I'm not certain." She went on to explain the sequence of events.

The older officer smiled, "It's probably nothing, but let us check it out and set your mind at ease."

How quickly, and easily, our attitudes change. Could you possibly be greasing the skids so I'll continue to bankroll projects like Don did? As soon as she thought it, she regretted her rush to judgment. That wasn't fair, but does the leopard change his spots?

The two officers entered the house through the back door with their service revolvers at the ready. Margaret had drawn them a crude floor plan, and stood with her heart in her throat, praying she wouldn't hear those guns discharged. *Please, Lord, let it be my imagination and my nerves working overtime. Maybe I really didn't lock the deadbolt.*

She had convinced herself it was all in her mind, when the shorter of the two officers appeared at the back door. He motioned for Margaret and her father.

"You've got company, alright," he said, as he held open the screen door so they could enter the kitchen. "But it's not what you thought. Come see."

He led them toward the bedroom end of the house, while Margaret fought to keep her curiosity and her emotions at bay. *Who? Or what?*

Once outside Jason and Brian's bedroom, the officer halted and indicated that Margaret should enter first. She did, and as she was about to ask for specifics, her voice caught in her throat when she caught sight of Jason, seated on the side of his bed, with the other officer beside him."

"Jason!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing home?"

"This is your son?"

“This is Jason,” she told the officer. “Only I don’t know why he’s here at least an hour ahead of the school van.”

The officer touched her on the shoulder. “Since this is obviously a family issue and not a case of an intruder breaking and entering, we’ll go on our way. I think you can handle this.”

Her father showed the officers to the back door, while Margaret searched for the proper way to approach the little blond-headed boy who wouldn’t look at her. When her dad didn’t return, Margaret knew he’d gone back home, hesitant to intrude. *Thank goodness it was him and not Mama.*

Before she could formulate an approach, the cordless phone she still held in her hand rang. *Mount Zion School.* “Hello.”

“Margaret?”

The voice belonged to Catherine Poore, the receptionist. *I can remember a few weeks ago when I stopped being Margaret and became Mrs. Haywood. Looks like I’m back in good graces.*

“Yes, Catherine. You’re calling about Jason, right?”

“Well, uh... uh, yes, I am. But how did you know?”

“Because he’s right here with me.”

“Did you know he was leaving school?”

“I did not. But I will deal with it and I’ll talk to you all tomorrow. Thanks for letting me know so quickly.” *They were probably afraid if they lost my child I’d pull my money. That was ugly, but it’s going to take some time to forget how loudly Don’s money talked out there.*

“You know we should call the police,” the receptionist informed her.

“They already know, because I called them,” Margaret replied. “Just tell Headmaster Hunt that everything is under control and that I will talk with him tomorrow.”

She sat down beside the forlorn little boy and cupped her hand under his chin. “Jason. We have to talk about this. I’m not angry, because I’m certain in your mind, you had a good reason for what you did. But just because I understand, doesn’t mean it’s acceptable. You and I have to talk about this.”

She lifted his chin to where she could see into his troubled, teary blue eyes.

“I couldn’t stay there, Mommie. I just couldn’t.”

“And why is that?” she hoped there was no threat in her voice.

“The other kids. They keep talking about Daddy, about how he tried to kill that man, and...” The child broke down in sobs and buried his face in his hands.

Margaret did the only thing she knew to do, she wrapped her arm around him and drew him close. *I’m just going to let him cry himself out. This is the first time he’s shed any tears since we broke the news to him that his daddy was dead.*

Gradually, Jason’s sobs began to subside and when she felt that he had regained control, she asked him, gently, “Jason. You know you can talk to me about any problem that you have. I won’t be angry, I promise.” *I hope I can keep that promise.*

The little boy looked at her, his face still red and puffy from crying, his eyes brimming with tears. “Mommie...” he asked, then faltered.

“It’s OK. Whatever’s troubling you, just spit it out.”

“What’s sex?”

Sex! Where did that come from?

Margaret struggled internally with her response before finally saying, “Sex is something that happens between a husband and wife that’s very private to them. But why are you asking about sex?”

Jason was conflicted, every movement, every expression illustrated his discomfort. “Some older guys at school said that daddy was killed because he wouldn’t have sex with one of the other prisoners.”

His upturned face was illuminated with questions and concerns. “Is that what happened?”

I’ve got to walk this line very carefully. “Listen, Jason. We probably will never know exactly what happened that night your daddy was beaten. I think, knowing your daddy’s temper, he and the other prisoner got into a disagreement. What happened from there is anybody’s guess. There was a physical fight and, unfortunately, Daddy got the worst of it.”

“But why would those boys say Daddy wouldn’t have sex if that’s something that a husband and his wife do? Daddy couldn’t have done it anyway, because you’re his wife.”

There is no way I can explain what happened without giving this little boy more information that he’s ready to process. What do I do?

“You know, Jason. It really doesn’t matter what those boys said. They weren’t there and they don’t know any more than we do.” *Children can be so cruel.* “They’re just talking because it makes them feel big.”

“But it scared me, Mommie. I didn’t know what this sex thing was, and I didn’t understand what they were talking about, when they asked me if I was queer just like him.”

They didn’t say that to this child!

“Do you know these boys’ names?”

“No, Ma’am. They’re older boys. In the eighth grade, I think.” The child looked expectantly into her face. “I didn’t understand the queer part Mommie, and I couldn’t answer them.”

“Am I queer? That’s why I came home, to ask you.”

“Why didn’t you just call me? I’d have come to school and brought you home.”

“I didn’t know what to do. I just knew I didn’t want to stay there. So I came home to ask you.”

He walked three miles to get away, to try and understand what these boys were accusing.

“So why didn’t you call out to me as you came in the front door? I heard the noise and thought someone had gotten in. That’s why Grandee and I called the police.”

Jason hung his head again. “Because by the time I got here, I was more afraid of being punished than I was of being queer, so I came to my room,” he mumbled so softly Margaret had to strain to hear his words.

“Listen, son. You can’t run away from school, ever again. If you have a problem, you call me. But don’t run away. Do we have a deal?”

She had to wait what seemed like forever for his response, but in the end, Margaret was rewarded with a quiet “Deal.”

“As for the boys calling you a queer, you’re going to have to believe what I’m about to tell you.”

He looked at her, expectation written all over his face.

“Queer is a term that isn’t very nice, and we don’t use it in polite society. It’s an insult, as bad as calling black people the “N” word.”

Jason’s eyes got larger.

“Take my word for it, you aren’t a queer. Again, those boys were using words they don’t even understand completely. But I don’t ever want to hear you use the word again. And when you’re a little older, we’ll talk about this again and I’ll answer any questions you have. Deal?”

“Deal,” he responded with the first sign of a smile she’d seen since the policeman escorted her into the bedroom . It felt like hours ago.

“Good. Now, how about an early after-school snack?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Maybe some cookies?”

“Cookies? You got ‘em.”

The two were walking toward the kitchen when Jason offered, “You know, I’m tired of going to Mount Zion School. And I’m tired of living here in Carter’s Crossroads.”

“You are?” *I can’t believe he’s gotten so deep. A few months ago he would never have expressed his wishes so openly and independently.*

“Yeah, er... Yes, Ma’am. I am. I wish we could all go somewhere where nobody knows us. And doesn’t know what happened with Daddy.”

Out of the mouths of babes!

