

Merry Heart

Chapter One

The trees, lush with their mid-summer greenery, hung low like a protective canopy over the narrow, two-lane asphalt strip that stretched ahead, over the hill then sharply down and around the curve. Saralynn Reilly lifted her foot from the accelerator, as much for safety, as to slow her passage through a magical area that was unlike anything she remembered. Right at that moment, it was almost as if she was the only person on earth.

“We almost there?” The voice came from the front passenger seat, from a traveling companion who had been mostly silent during the journey from south-central Mississippi. But Saralynn was accustomed to the tomb-like atmosphere in her car. It had been that way every time they made the trip.

I will admit, that first time, I wondered if I had made a serious mistake. I don't think Emma uttered one single word the entire way, until we pulled up to her mama's door in Fishtrap Hollow.

Since that fateful January day, when she had innocently volunteered to transport a resident from Boswell Center in Simpson County, Mississippi home to the northeast corner of the state for a funeral, Saralynn and her charge had made the trip on several occasions.

“We've got about another two hours,” she finally remembered to answer the voice on the other side of the car. “But isn't it pretty right along here? So cool... it's so peaceful.”

“But it ain't home.”

Gosh. Emma's an absolute chatterbox today. She rarely speaks when we travel.

“You miss home, don’t you, Emma?”

There was no answer, but Saralynn caught sight of a slight up and down movement of the woman’s head and realized, with more than a tinge of guilt, that tears were slowing tracking down the wrinkled cheeks.

I don’t even know how old she is, but I don’t guess you ever get too old to miss home. Especially when you don’t have the ability to go there whenever you want... I sure know how that feels.

As she piloted the car steadily northward from the village of Taylor, Saralynn couldn’t help but reflect how, in the last few months, her life had taken more unexpected turns than she could have ever imagined.

Then it hit her. *It’s been a year today! How could I have forgotten?* She wanted to pull to the side of the road and just sit and cry. But she knew she didn’t dare. Emma was highly excitable. *If I go to pieces, there’s no telling how Emma will react.*

“You know, Emma. I’m from a place called Boston. It’s a long way from here. We’d have to drive for at least three days to get there. So I don’t get to go home as often as I’d like, either.”

Emma didn’t respond, but Saralynn found that just talking to the silent form inches to her right kept her from flying to pieces. It was an impulse that hadn’t haunted her since early last fall, when she’d been dragged against her will to Mississippi. *I can’t tell Emma about Marc and Peter, how they were taken from me so suddenly. And I can’t burden her with my problems with Mama, either.*

The car emerged from beneath the trees and the unmerciful late July sun beat down on them again, quickly raising the temperature in the car a few uncomfortable degrees. Saralynn's hand shot out to lower the air.

“Got to make it cooler in here, before we roast.”

Again, there was only silence from the passenger seat. Saralynn couldn't decide if Emma even heard her. The icy blast from the vents reminded her of how frigid her mama had been since last fall, when she had disowned Saralynn, her only child. In a tirade of vicious accusations and cruel barbs, her mother had hopped a plane back to Boston.

She tried numerous times to call her mother, only to have the phone ring and ring. *Mama's got Caller ID. She knew it was me. Emma doesn't answer because her mental impairment makes her react that way. I'm not sure what Mama's problem is.* It had been less than three months earlier, on a pristine day in early May when, to her amazement and delight, her efforts had finally borne fruit. *Mama actually answered.* Saralynn's joy, however, was short-lived. Instead of the reconciliation she expected, her cheery “Hello, Mama, it's so great to hear your voice,” had been met with more venom than she could handle.

I hung up on her. Something I never thought I would do. But then, I never thought my own mother would turn rabid simply because she didn't want me to live here. In Boston the memories are too excruciating to even describe.

“I'm sure your mama will be glad to see you, Emma. I think she really likes it when you visit.”

Emma bobbed her head up and down.

“She's old.”

“How old is your mama?”

The other woman unfolded one of her brown spotted hands and began to extend one finger at a time. “Don’t rightly know. But she’s older than me,” she said proudly.

“And how old are you?”

I’m not supposed to ask the clients for any personal information, but gosh knows they volunteer whatever comes to their minds.

“When was Mr. I-zen-hair pres-e-dent?”

“I-zen-hair? Eye-zen-hower?... Eisenhower!”

“You mean President Dwight Eisenhower?”

There was only silence.

Has Emma gone back into her shell? I’d kind of gotten used to her company.

Finally the other voice replied. “Don’t rightly know his first name. Just know Mama said I was born the same year Mr. I-zen-hair went to th’ White House.”

Saralynn had to watch the road in front of the car, because the wilderness was giving way to the hustle and bustle of the north Mississippi college town of Oxford. Still, she searched her brain for remnants of her old American History classes. *President Kennedy was killed in 1963 and he took office in 1961. Which meant the former military general went to the White House in 1953.*

She did some quick math. “That would make you over fifty, Emma.”

“If you say so.”

Obviously Emma isn’t concerned with her age.

The remainder of the trip passed quickly as the young woman behind the wheel guided the car through the turns until finally, the red cupola of the old courthouse just south of the Iuka business district came into view.

“We’re almost there. Next stop... Fishtrap Hollow.”

“Home,” Emma replied. “My real home.”

“Don’t ever forget home, Emma. There’s no place like home.”

“My home. My real home.”

“You’re absolutely right, my friend.” She patted the older woman’s arm.

Only sometimes home isn’t always where we think it is. I should know. For me, home truly is where my heart lives. Only every time my heart gets set, something changes. Ever since I began coming to Iuka, I don’t know where I belong anymore. There’s part of me here. And part of me lives in Simpson County. And despite what Mama thinks, there’s still a big part of my heart that remembers Boston, with an ache that cuts quicker than a sharp knife.

The car rounded the wide bend in the road and Saralynn heard, “There’s home.” The pronouncement was quick, full of emotion and assurance. *The only time Emma’s voice ever takes on any personality is when she talks about Fishtrap Hollow.*

“Yes it is, Emma.”

God, I thought I knew where my home is. But it’s not in Boston any longer, although a part of me still claims it. And before I came to Iuka the first time, I was so sure Miss Sallie’s house in south Mississippi was where I was supposed to be.

Saralynn pulled the car to a stop in the worn dirt driveway, and before she’d even gotten the gearshift into PARK, Emma opened her door and was climbing out.

“I’m home, Mama. I’m home,” she called in a loud and joyous voice, as she lumbered unsteadily across the sparsely sodded yard.

Now that I’ve uncovered my roots here in Tishomingo County, I’ve got all kinds of doubts again. Where do I belong? Where is my home? She watched the reunion of hugs and kisses between her friend and a stooped, shriveled up white-haired old woman. The yearning for such a reunion with her own mother caused an ache in her heart that completely closed up her throat.

How much hurt do I have to stand, Lord? How much pain is too much pain? She choked back a sob, fearing that to give it reign would unleash a torrent of emotions she wasn’t ready to handle. *How do I know where home is?*

It was a subject she broached reluctantly that evening while talking with Donna Hasty, from Rials Creek United Methodist Church in Simpson County. All the members of the small, rural church had adopted Saralynn early on, and they had been her mainstay after her mother’s abandonment.

Saralynn had called her friend after she remembered she’d told no one that she was returning to Iuka. *I don’t want them to feel like I’ve run out on them like Mama did on me.*

“Hey, friend, you sound like you’re a thousand miles away tonight,” Donna commented. “Is everything OK?”

Saralynn laughed, and was amazed at how much better she felt. *I didn’t really realize I was uptight.* “I’m in Iuka,” she told her friend. “It came up sudden like.”

“Is it Emma? Something wrong with her?”

“I drove Emma, yes. Something must be wrong, because her mother called Boswell and asked that she be brought home as quickly as possible.”

“So?”

Saralynn massaged her right shoulder somewhat awkwardly, while attempting to balance the cell phone against her ear. *My neck and shoulder really ache. I must have been tied in knots driving up here.* “From what I can see so far, nothing’s wrong. But I also know that Mrs. Jackson doesn’t cry wolf.”

“Then something must be wrong,” Donna counseled. “I’m sure if it’s anything major, you’ll find out soon enough. So how are you otherwise?”

Saralynn hesitated. *Do I really want to open this door?* “Donna?” May I ask you...?” Her words trailed off. *Should I or shouldn’t I?*

“Is this something you don’t want repeated?”

Saralynn could picture Donna with her face screwed up in its customary expression of concern. *She is one of the sweetest people I’ve ever known. Always worried about someone else. But she’s also trustworthy. She’s proven that.*

“It’s not a deep dark secret or anything, but I’m not comfortable having it talked.”

“If you want to unburden yourself, I’m ready to open my ears and shut my mouth. And if you still need some more time, you just tell me when.”

“It’s going to have to be tonight if I expect to get any sleep.” That said, she began to explain how, since first coming to Iuka and finding her roots, she felt a pull to the area in much the same fashion she’d felt Simpson County calling to her in the months before.

“So am I fickle? Two-faced? Wishy-washy?”

“No. Of course not. What would ever make you think that?”

Once started, it was like Saralynn's conscience couldn't stop. "It's just that I have come to love so many of you there. If I were to decide to relocate here, I wouldn't want anyone to think that I had used all of you and then, when something better came along, I jumped ship."

"Is Iuka better? Have you found something there that is an improvement over what you have here?"

Saralynn struggled to answer. "I can't say it's any better, but it's at least, almost as good as what I have there. Sort of."

Donna snickered. "A most definitive answer if ever I've heard one."

"You're making fun of me."

"No. Please. I truly am not," Donna assured her. "But let me offer a few words that might clarify things for you. Or maybe not. At any rate, there's no charge, so take this for what it's worth."

Where is she going with this? Please... not another tree analogy. The minute the thought left her mind, Saralynn was sorry. *That was very unkind. Thank goodness Donna can't read minds. At least I don't think she can!*

"Saralynn? Have you zoned out on me again?"

Oh, boy, does she know me! "I had, but I'm back. Sorry. Please, do go on."

As she lay on the bed watching the fan blades cutting wobbly circles in the ceiling, Saralynn braced herself for what she might hear. Donna wouldn't be cruel, but she would be honest.

"OK, friend. Here goes. First, you've been through a lot in the last year – and by the way, isn't today the first anniversary of Marc and Peter's deaths?"

She remembered. My own mother didn't even call to see if I was coping with it, but this dear, sweet angel remembered. Someone who didn't even know my guys remembered them... Saralynn gulped, "Yes, it's been a year today." She choked back a sob. "It blows me away that you remembered. And you never met either of them."

"In a manner of speaking, I've met them," Donna said. "Through you, with all your traits, your gentle nature, it's really easy to see both the Reilly men."

"Thank you, Donna. I can't tell you what it means to me. I felt certain I was the only one who knew, and it's been all I could do to keep from just bawling."

"You're welcome. But, as I was saying... You've been through a lot. You've lost your husband and son and, to some extent, your mother as well. That's a load. Naturally you're searching for an anchor. Plus, there's the excitement factor that goes along with discovering family you didn't know you had." She giggled. "At least as long as they're not related to Jesse James or Bonnie and Clyde!"

It was Saralynn's turn to laugh.

"So don't let this yearning for an anchor confuse you. It's normal. Very normal."

"But what if I should decide to move here permanently? What would all my friends there have to say about me?"

"We'd be thrilled that you'd found a place to land, we'd throw you a giant going-away party, and we'd pray for you. Before you left and after." She hesitated a moment.

"And we'd probably cry a little, too. Not for you, but for us. But in the end, we want what's best for you."

"You mean no one would be mad or insulted?"

"Good grief, no. Why would we? Disappointed? Yes. Angry? No way."

This isn't at all what I expected to hear.

Donna continued, "Let me ask you something."

"OK."

"First, are you truly in love with Iuka, or are you just in love with the idea of being in love with that area and your McIntire roots?"

"Gee, that's a hard one."

"And the second part may not be any easier."

"Go ahead."

"Have to asked God where He wants you to be?"

Saralynn was taken aback. *Why would I need to ask God? I pray to Him to help me do whatever I need to do. Not whether I should do it or not. Isn't that right?*

"No, I haven't asked God. I don't guess I realized I was supposed to."

"You don't have to," Donna advised. "But since God has a plan for each of us, it sometimes makes life a lot easier if we bring Him in on the decision process, instead of when it's time to clean up the mess because we made a wrong turn."

"You've given me a lot to think about," Saralynn assured her friend. "And now, I'd better get off this phone and get ready for bed. I just wanted you to know where I was. Didn't want anyone to worry."

"Pleasant dreams, Saralynn. Call me tomorrow and let's talk some more."

Donna's observations had given her too much to think about, and during the night, she had done exactly that. Her infatuation with the Iuka area had happened quickly and easily, almost without warning, just a few days after the New Year. In that way that life so often slips up on a person's blind side, Saralynn had been cleaning up after her

daily art class with clients at Boswell Regional Center near Magee, Mississippi, when she chanced upon a conversation between two staff members. Their words were mere background buzz until she heard the word “Iuka”.

Iuka! That’s where Miss Sallie lived before she came to the Sanitorium as a tuberculosis patient. I’ve wanted to go there ever since I first heard about the place.

In a matter of minutes, before she could even take time to debate the merits of her hasty decision, Saralynn had volunteered to drive a middle-aged client named Emma Jackson home for her father’s funeral.

I may have taken unfair advantage of the situation, because I don’t know if I could have found the courage to make that trip without a reason.

With only a few minutes to pack, Saralynn quickly found herself on the road with a sobbing, middle-aged woman who spoke not one word during the entire trip. She already knew where she was headed because, soon after she discovered the Iuka connection with her grandmother’s family, she’d routed a trip to the far northeastern corner of the state. But she had never been able to find reason enough – or was it the courage? -- to strike out for what felt to her like a totally foreign country.

Now she had a reason and, if she got there and discovered she’d made a mistake, no one would ever be the wiser. *Is it wrong of me to exploit the death of Emma’s father to disguise my own private agenda?* After seeing the way in which Emma and her old mother clung to each other during those three days, she decided she’d done no harm.

As for her personal agenda, she soon discovered that her family’s Tishomingo roots were as fascinating and rewarding as she had found the Simpson County portion of her background to be.

The main difference was that she didn't have the Rials Creek United Methodist Church family and her new friends in south Mississippi to help her understand her family connections.

Over the course of the next six months she and Emma had made the trip every four or five weeks, with the blessing and full permission of Mrs. Jackson, who seemed to resurrect and thrive on the presence of her only child. While she had stayed in a motel when she brought Emma for the funeral, from then on mother and daughter had insisted she stay in the Jackson home in Fishtrap Hollow, and she had accepted their hospitality.

At night the three would gather in the living room of the old farmhouse with a go-funny list and talk and watch TV. But during the day, Saralynn explored the area, conducted some quiet research, and asked questions when she couldn't discover the answers any other way. *Who would ever have dreamed, Lord, that I'd come all the way to Fishtrap Hollow to discover Miss Sallie's family lived just down the road from where I'm staying?*

The more she learned about her McIntire roots, the more intrigued she became. And with each trip to the rural hamlet that still wore the charm of an old and vintage town of the previous century, the more at home she found herself.

The latest trip home, as she had silently begun to consider the area, had come at the urgent request of Emma's mother, who had called Boswell to ask that her daughter come home at once. It was an emergency but she requested that Emma not be unduly alarmed.

To her, it's just another chance to go home, to see her mother. Oh, Lord, I know just how she feels.

Try as she might, Saralynn couldn't identify any type crisis or emergency that existed, even though she was consumed with curiosity and a deepening sense of dread. But she was too polite to ask. That evening, following one of Mrs. Jackson's simple but tasty country summer suppers, complete with fresh garden produce, the older woman asked Saralynn to take a walk. It was on that stroll through the flowerbeds that were somehow thriving in spite of the stifling summer heat, that the south Mississippi visitor learned the nature of the problem.

Mrs. Jackson's got a burden on her mind.

In a fashion that reminded Saralynn of Emma's particular manner, Mrs. Jackson didn't waste any words or try to sugarcoat her message. "I'm dying. Got maybe three months, the doctor says."

Saralynn saw the old woman's weary face in the orange rays of the setting sun. She felt an immediate empathy for this woman who had sent her only child to a residential care facility, when her own energies were no longer sufficient.

"I'm gonna tell Emma while she's here, but it won't be easy. Lord only knows how she'll take it."

What do I say, God? How do I respond? "I'm so... sorry," she managed to mumble. "How are you with it?"

"How else can I be? Don't have no choice. Sometimes God gives you more than you think you can handle, but somehow you do. He helps you with it."

"So you're resigned to..." she stammered, suddenly uncomfortable about being so blunt, "you're at peace with it?"

“We all got to die sometime,” Mrs. Jackson said very matter of factly. “When it’s your time, it’s your time.”

“I don’t know if I could be so accepting,” Saralynn said.

“Oh, I don’t want to go. I’m human enough to be selfish and ask why I can’t have some more time.”

“That’s how I’d feel, too.” *I wonder if Peter and Marc were this accepting when they discovered they were dead?* Her emotions were still too raw when it came to the subject of her boys, who were now only containers of ashes on a closet shelf three hundred miles away in Simpson County.

“But I’m more worried about how Emma’s going to be with it. And how can I assure her that she’ll be taken care of after I’m gone? She’s gotten so accustomed to coming home since you came into her life, I’m afraid knowing she’s always going to have to stay at Boswell is going to hurt her so bad.

As the older woman spoke, she wrung her hands. “Maybe I made a mistake letting her keep coming back, but after her daddy died, she was all I had. And I knew I wouldn’t be here always, I just didn’t think it would be this quick.” The little country woman looked Saralynn straight in the face. “I didn’t do the wrong thing... did I?” she implored.

Lord, how do I answer this woman? My own mother doesn’t want to see me and this poor soul wants me to reassure her that she hasn’t made problems for Emma, simply because she loves her and wants her close.

Saralynn struggled with her response. “You can’t ever make a mistake when you love someone,” she reassured the defeated looking woman as she put her arm around her shoulders. “Emma has many friends and staff at Boswell who love her, who will be there

for her. I know I certainly will be.” She didn’t feel like the answer was adequate, but it was all she could manage at that point.

“I’ve always felt so guilty because I couldn’t take care of her here at home, because I had to send her off. Now I’m gonna die and she’ll have to lose me all over again.”

The two women continued to walk until long after the lightning bugs began their nightly light show. Later, as Saralynn lay in bed, in the room she had possessively come to think of as her room, her heart ached. And despite her best efforts, the tears that had lurked just behind her eyes all day finally burst loose and flowed freely, until her pillow was damp and salty.

The problem is... I don't know if I'm crying for Mrs. Jackson and Emma, or for Peter and Marc? Or me?

True to her word, after the breakfast dishes were finished the next morning and the mid-day meal was underway, Mrs. Jackson asked Saralynn to join her on the porch where Emma sat in a high-back rocker with a hand-woven rush seat, rocking gently in rhythm with the music that played on the radio just inside the window. She appeared to have no troubles or worries.

Is she going to be able to understand all this?

The older woman pulled up a nearby rocker. “Emma? Honey? I need to talk to you a minute and I want you to listen carefully to what I have to say.”

Emma’s face glowed. “I always listen careful, Mama. That’s what Miss Ann always tells us,” she said proudly. “Don’t I, Saralynn?”

“Yes, you do. You’re very good about listening.”

Saralynn watched as tears welled up in the faded blue eyes of her hostess, and she felt her own emotions churn with empathy. *It was hard enough to hear that Peter and Marc would never be coming home again. But I believe it would have been harder for me to tell them that I wasn't going to be there any longer.*

If Emma noticed her mother's tears, she said nothing, but continued to rock. Only the look of expectancy on her face hinted that she understood something was about to happen.

"Emma, honey. Mama's got to tell you something and you've got to promise me you won't get upset."

Emma said nothing. Only her body language betrayed her uncertainty, as she kneaded her hands in silence.

"I'm gonna be leaving you real soon, Emma."

"You going to She-cargo to see Aunt Charlsie?"

A look of pain crossed the old woman's face. "Not this time, Emma. Not this time." She reached up and touched each side of Emma's wrinkled face, her work-worn hands cradling her child's head so gently. "No, honey, I'm not going to see Aunt Charlsie. But I am going to see your daddy."

Emma stopped rocking. Her perpetually happy face took on a suspicious, guarded expression. "But Mama. Daddy... Daddy..." she struggled with the words, "he's in heaven with Jesus."

"And I'm going to be with him and Jesus real soon, honey. Probably before Christmas, even."

Emma jerked her head from her mother's grasp and her face took on a look of pain and confusion. "Daddy's dead. I came home. Remember? Saralynn brought me. Didn't you?" She gave Saralynn a look of panic... "Mama! You can't go be with daddy!"

Saralynn felt her heart squeeze with grief. For the old woman who had such a burden. For the younger woman who would have trouble understanding what was about to befall her. And for herself. *The old pain is back, Lord. That old choking pain is about to tear my heart out.*

Mrs. Jackson reached out for her daughter's face again with resolution in her touch. Yet Saralynn marveled at the tenderness. And at the inner-strength the older woman displayed during what had to be a very painful time for her.

"Listen to me, Emma. You have to pay close attention to what I've got to tell you."

"But Mama... but Mama... you... can't... go... be... with... Daddy... and... Jesus... unless... you... die." She had spit the words out one at a time, as if each one consumed all of her energy. "You... can't... die... Mama. I... love... you."

"And I love you, too, Emma. You're so very precious to me. And I wouldn't leave you if I had any choice. But the doctor says I'm sick, Emma."

Emma's face brightened. "I was sick last winter and the doctor gave me some medicine." She looked at her mother, her face alight with assurance that she had resolved the problem. "He can give you some medicine, too."

Saralynn noticed that Mrs. Jackson raised her head a bit higher, as if she were jacking up her reserve, preparing for a battle she knew she must win. "I wish the doctor

could give me some medicine, Sugar. But it's my heart. It's worn out and there's no medicine that can make it better."

Tears began to course down Emma's face, and Saralynn could see her withdrawing from the situation. Her rocking chair began to move back and forth, and the harder the expression on her face became, the faster the chair moved.

Lord, what do I do? How can I help these people who have come to mean so much to me? And who needs me worse? Emma or her mother?

Mrs. Jackson rose slowly from her rocker with what Saralynn saw was difficulty and defeat. "She took it about like I figured she would. I've seen her like this before. She'll just have to let all this sink in before I can do anything else." She sniffed the air. "Do I smell my beans burning?" She shuffled from the porch into the house, and Saralynn could hear the rattle of pot lids coming from the direction of the kitchen.

Emma, meanwhile, continued rocking at a pace Saralynn was certain would soon wear grooves in the porch floor. On her face she maintained a stubborn, wooden expression that sent the clear message she didn't wish to be bothered.

And I won't bother her, Lord. Until You tell me I should.

Emma refused to abandon her armchair journey into acceptance and did not join her mother and her friend for the noon meal. Saralynn tried to make conversation, but it was clear from Mrs. Jackson's responses that she, too, wanted time alone with herself. She even declined Saralynn's usual help with the dishes, and her guest wandered back to her bedroom, uncertain how best to help the situation.

As she lay on her bed, attempting to keep her eyes trained on the page of the book she'd begun the evening before, Saralynn found that her mind's eye was the more

dominant one. Instead, her memory replayed the events of the past year at dizzying speed.

I couldn't ever have imagined over a year ago that I would confront all that I have in the past twelve months. Peter and Marc being killed in that terrible accident back in Boston. Mama insisting that I come with her to Mississippi to settle Miss Sallie's estate. Learning that Mama had lied about so many parts of the past, and then her abandonment when she realized that I would no longer blindly do her bidding.

It had only been after she found Miss Sallie's diaries that Saralynn had learned, through her grandmother's own words, how her mother had deceived her for so many years. *I never dreamed Mama could have been so mercenary, capable of extorting money from my father's family to divorce him and take me far away.*

A sob escaped her lips. *She told me my father was dead. Dead!*

Knowing how painful Marc and Peter's deaths had been for her, Saralynn found it impossible to fathom how her mother could have so easily created the death of husband and lived with that lie for a lifetime. *Mama is so hard-hearted. Nothing like Mrs. Jackson.*

Suddenly Saralynn wanted nothing more than to withdraw, to curl up in a knot, and forget that the world existed. *I don't want to think about Mama... or Peter and Marc... or even about Emma or Mrs. Jackson right now.* She turned over and buried her face in the pillow.

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A nearby knocking coaxed Saralynn from the slumber that had consumed her. *I must have fallen asleep. What's that noise?* She raised up on one elbow.

“Saralynn, honey.” There was the knock again. *It’s Mrs. Jackson.* “Saralynn? May I come in?”

Saralynn swung her legs over the side of the big wrought-iron bed and limped her sleep-deadened body over to the door. “Yes, Mrs. Jackson. Please come in.”

Her hostess took a close look at the younger woman. “Oh, dear. You were asleep and I disturbed you. I’m sorry, honey.” She patted Saralynn’s arm.

“I was just waking up. Honest,” she reassured her hostess. *It’s not totally the truth, but I needed to be up and doing, if the evening light is any indication.* “So don’t give it a second thought. Besides, don’t we need to be working on dinn... supper?”

“There’s time enough for that,” Mrs. Jackson said. “I wanted to apologize for earlier.”

“Apologize?”

“I pushed you away and that wasn’t fair to you.” She leaned over and kissed Saralynn’s cheek. “You’ve become like another daughter to me, and we’ve put you in an awkward position. Can you ever forgive us?”

“But there’s nothing to forgive, I assure you.”

Mrs. Jackson hugged her in a comfortable and familiar way. “You really are one of us now, you know.”

“I’ve certainly come to feel that way, thanks to you.” *I really have discovered that home is where the heart is. Thank you, Lord, for sending Mrs. Jackson into my life. Only now I have to adjust to the idea she’s going to leave me, also.*