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A Word of Thanks *page 205*

SUSAN MAY WARREN



LOVE CAN WARM THE COLDEST HEART

*Ephesians 4:32: (ESV): Be kind to one another, tenderhearted,
forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*

Angels of Forgiveness



I felt as if I had been slapped. I gaped in horror as I stared at the empty storage room and tried to comprehend my mother-in-law's words, “. . . and we even made \$200!” She had sold all my worldly possessions without my permission. She was trying to be kind, but in doing so, she plowed a cavernous furrow through the garden of our friendship. I knew it would never bloom again.

Our family had just returned home after serving as missionaries for four years in Russia. We still hadn't found a place to live, and my mother-in-law wanted to help by clearing out room for us in her unfinished basement—in the space our hundred boxes of lifetime treasures once occupied. She'd sold everything from hand-knit sweaters to homemade quilts. Only a forlorn crate of John Denver records and a bag of used mittens remained.

The money she handed me from the proceeds of the sale felt like blood money. I had waited for four years to unwrap my wedding china, greet my books and knick-knacks, and slip back into my fine dresses. I couldn't believe I had put so much value on possessions, but I had, and now I was stripped.

Then I discovered she'd sold my Christmas ornaments. Every year since childhood my mother had given me a special gift at Christmas, a

new and unique tree decoration that symbolized my life for that year, as well as her love for me. The box of heirloom ornaments I had so carefully packed had been sold for a dollar; my memories traded for the price of two cheeseburgers.

A ball of anger swelled in my heart. As I curled in my bed, sobbing out my grief, the ball gained momentum and became an avalanche, burying any tendril of love I had left for the mother of my husband.

Christmas loomed close and everywhere I saw beautiful, glittering Christmas trees. My tree was naked, its arms bare against the white lights. Where was the golden star with my name etched on it, or my tiny porcelain piano? How could she have done this? I felt entombed by my anger.

Sometime in January I realized I had missed the joy that came with the advent season. It couldn't penetrate my icy heart. I could barely look at my mother-in-law, despite the fact she begged my forgiveness.

"I didn't know how much this would hurt you," she said, weeping. "I was just trying to help."

I turned a stone heart to her plea. Frost laced the edges of our conversations and although I said the words, "I forgive you," my soul was an iceberg and I knew I had not.

In the past, my mother-in-law had been my greatest supporter, encouraging me, helping me pack, babysitting, and stuffing thousands of newsletters. She had cried with me, prayed for me, and tolerated me living in her home. I missed her and knew that if I wanted warmth to reenter my heart, I had to forgive her. But nothing could ease the ache of losing my memories. I avoided her and resolved to live with the pain.

When we moved away in February, I slammed the door on our relationship and didn't talk to her again.

Three days before the following Christmas, a parcel arrived at our front door, my name etched on the front. Mystified, I opened it. Then, surrounded by my family's astonished gasps, I unwrapped, one by one, a collection of angel ornaments. From bears with wings and halos to gilded crystal angels holding trumpets, I hung a choir of heavenly hosts on my tree. Finally, I sank into the sofa as my children examined the decorations, *oohing* and *aahing*.

“Who’s it from?” my husband asked. I retrieved the box, dug through the tissue, and unearthed a small card. *Merry Christmas—Love, Mom* was scrawled out in my mother-in-law’s script. Tears burned my

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eyes and, as I let them free, my icy tomb of anger began to melt. My mother-in-law was not able to retrieve the past she had so carelessly discarded, but she was hoping to build a future, our future. And it would start with these angels, proclaiming the love and forgiveness that entered our world. If God could forgive me, who stole His Son’s life, certainly I could forgive my mother-in-law for stealing my . . . *stuff*.

Easter arrived and with it forgiveness finally flowered in my heart. We descended upon the in-laws for a visit and I wrapped my husband’s mother in a teary embrace. I had lost the little stuffed bunnies my grandmother had knit for me, but I had gained something better—the fragrance of forgiveness, and the everlasting hope that love can warm the coldest heart.

DIANN MILLS



GOD LISTENS

Jeremiah 20:9 (NIV): But if I say, "I will not mention him or speak any more in his name," his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.

Cinderella



For the first time in my life, I felt like Cinderella.

But first let me back up, because the dirt of my sins was embedded in my heart. I'd made far too many mistakes as a single mom. Too numerous to list and too bad to confess even to my best girlfriend. Failed marriages and kids who needed a role model had been cast aside in favor of my own selfishness. Then God picked me up, healed my wounds, and took my hand. We began to walk together. I still slipped, but not to the gutter of despair where I'd come from. My friends commented on the change, and I didn't hesitate to tell them where my happiness and determination came from.

I understood hurt in a big way. I remember standing at my kitchen window, saying, "God, if You ever want a man in my life again, You'll have to put him at my front door wearing a T-shirt that says so." I was so reverent.

Life went on. Problems rose and fell like the tides, but with God walking beside me, I wasn't swept away, lost and alone.

My youngest son loved youth choir at church, and the piano accompanist took an interest in him. With my permission, he took my

son to events and entertainment that I couldn't afford. Soon he was taking two of my other sons. My oldest son was on his own, or he'd have tagged along too. After a few months, the man began inviting me along on their excursions. At first I declined because I wanted my sons to have a relationship with just him. But he encouraged me, and I began to be a part of the group. Many nights he stopped over to help the boys with their homework, and on Sundays he picked us up for church. I enjoyed his company, and we were friends—sort of a brother/sister relationship.

One July evening, the doorbell rang. There he stood, wearing a T-shirt that said "God Listens." I felt the heat flame my neck and face. I couldn't speak. Couldn't breathe. Until that moment, I'd forgotten about the irreverent message I'd sent heavenward a few years before. "No, God. Not him. He's not the right one. Have You checked his age? He's twelve years younger than I am, and he's never been married."

Naturally, I didn't tell anyone, certain God had made a mistake.

He called on a Saturday afternoon in early September. I was stenciling the ceiling of my living room, and we chatted for a while when he cleared his throat and said, "Why don't we get married? Everyone is talking about us anyway."

I nearly fell off the ladder.

That's when I knew God hadn't made a mistake. This man wasn't the one I would have selected. We were best friends, not potential spouses. After all, I could have been his babysitter. The whole idea was ludicrous, but my own choices for husbands had failed miserably. Maybe it was time I tried God—the God of second and third and fourth and however many chances we need to get something right.

We were married in November of that year. However, the story is not over. On our wedding day, we were to be married at the church office. No fuss. No frills. Just he and I and our sons. Upon my arrival, the parking lot was full. Folks got wind of the wedding and decided to show up. At the designated time, I walked to the pastor's office where my sons waited, but the groom wasn't there. The pastor smiled and said the groom couldn't be there, but he had a letter for me.

I was devastated.

Dear God, do not let him read a “dear John” letter in front of all these people.

The letter made me cry. Every sweet word was full of how he’d come to love each one of my sons and now me. He was excited about our future and would meet me at the altar. In fact, he had a carriage ready to drive us there—wherever “there” was.

The carriage happened to be our church bus, and no one knew the destination but the pastor and the best man who video-taped my every move. When the “carriage” pulled up in front of a two-story brick house with a sign leaning against the tree that welcomed me to our new home, I wept. My soon-to-be-husband had purchased this as our new home.

For the first time in my life, I felt like Cinderella.

Did I deserve any of this? Absolutely not. The blessings were far too numerous to count, and they continue. My point? God showed me true grace and mercy with my husband. My wedding day was a gift—a taste of heaven through the love of a godly man. I can only imagine eternity.

In November 2009, we will be married sixteen years. And the blessings continue.

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DIANN MILLS believes her readers should “Expect an Adventure.” She is a fiction writer who combines an adventuresome spirit with unforgettable characters to create action-packed novels. Currently she has over forty books in print and has sold a million and a half copies. DiAnn is a founding board member for American Christian Fiction Writers, a member of Inspirational Writers Alive, Advanced Writers and Speakers Association, and a mentor for the Christian Writers Guild. She speaks to various groups and teaches writing workshops. DiAnn and her husband live in Houston, Texas.

ANDREA JONES MULLINS



THE GREATER THE DARKNESS,
THE BRIGHTER CHRIST'S
LIGHT WILL SHINE

*Daniel 12:3 (NRSV): Those who are wise
shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many
to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.*

Pushing Back the Darkness



God invites us to step into the darkness to see how bright our lamp can shine through His power. A light is never brighter than when it is shining in the darkest of nights. Leaving our lamp on the table with all the other lamps will never be as satisfying as allowing our lamp to fulfill what it was created to do—shine!

My friends Trudy and Lia came to my office to tell me about a new ministry to women in the adult entertainment industry. They invited me to join them and others in going into the nightclubs in Birmingham to encourage and minister to the exotic dancers there.

My first thoughts of this new venture of bringing Christ's light into a dark place were of the moral and social issues, what my husband might think, what my mother would say, whether my pastor would understand, how my church would respond. Yet, I could not let go of the voice within that prompted me, *If you don't go, who will? If you shouldn't go, who should?*

Although I had some reservations, I knew I had to go. I enlisted three prayer warriors who committed to pray that day, and on a Tuesday

afternoon I met Trudy and Lia at a church near the club we intended to visit. We prayed intensely and then went into the club.

The bouncer met us at the door. Trudy and Lia had been to the club a few times before, so they introduced me, and the three of us went in. The music was playing as the bouncer walked us to a table away from where most of the people gathered. At first I couldn't see much of anything. My eyes focused slowly and my gaze turned toward the only spots of light in the room.

There I first saw the reason I had come: beautiful women dancing, removing the few pieces of clothing they wore in response to the tips placed in their g-strings.

Spiritual gloom sought to strangle my resolve. The darkness closed in and I had thoughts of fleeing. But that morning a dear friend had held my hands and prayed, "Lord, give her a holy cool." As I remembered her prayer, I realized that the light—the light of the world, Christ Himself—was yet available in this dark place and ready for someone through whom He could shine.

Now, nearly ten years later, this same bouncer knows us well. The darkness is as formidable as it had been at the beginning, and still tries to blind me to the light. The darkness growls, *These women don't care that you come . . . You don't have their attention when you're here . . . You can't break the cycle . . . You don't have anything to offer them . . . Remember the drugs, the alcohol, the lack of modesty, the language . . . You can't help . . . Nobody cares . . .*

Yet someone did; it was Heather who cared most recently. "I know I'm better than this," she said as I stood beside her in the dressing room. At first I was surprised to have this young woman I'd never met begin to speak as though we were longtime friends. She reached into her bag and pulled out the photos of her children and the award she had received in her college class for the highest grade. She talked about her goals to finish school.

And then she said it. "I don't want to dance anymore."

I hadn't done anything in that dressing room, except stand there praying. I hadn't even been talking with anyone. But Christ was at work. He knew where I needed to be and just who it was who was reaching

out to find Him. My presence was evidence to Heather that the light of the world was a breath away. She was seeking the One who is the light that “shines in the darkness” (John 1:5). What Heather didn’t know was the struggle I was going through that evening, trying to decide whether or not to keep coming. The darkness seemed so powerful that I wondered if my effort to hold out the light that is Christ was making any difference for these women. I had planned that this was going to be my last night.

Then Heather spoke. “I know I’m better than this.” He was shining in the darkness. His light was pushing back the darkness. He was doing
..... what only His light can do, and all I had to do was show up.

ANDREA JONES MULLINS

has been publisher/director of New Hope Publishers since July 2004. She has led mission teams throughout the world, recently completed her doctor of ministry at Bakke Graduate University, and continues to minister to women who dance in the Birmingham nightclubs. She and her husband, Mike, live in Birmingham, Alabama. They have one daughter and three grandchildren.

I would never have seen what the light who is Christ can do in the darkest of places if I had refused to go where His light shines the brightest. I’ve seen His light shining with hues I hadn’t known were possible, breaking into lives with eternal transformation. All He asked was for someone to be there when a young woman cried out, “I know I’m better than this.”

Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever (Daniel 12:3).