

*Clicking on a Miracle*

*By*

*Salli J. Hollenzer*

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## INTRODUCTION

Nothing captures the heart like a tale of romance! You know...as when two star-crossed lovers meet, finding true love after suffering a lifetime of sorrow... Have you ever noticed that childhood fairy stories always end happily? Can you imagine Cinderella if the Fairy God Mother had not made all her dreams come true? Or what of Snow White if Prince Charming had never come to dispel the longing of her aching heart? If happy endings always happen for make-believe characters, don't real-life folks deserve to live happily ever after, too?

Well, hang on to your hopes because you're about to read a story that proves dreams *can* be magically realized. When it's obvious that heaven plays a hand in the ending, you will know that the tale is *true!*

And now here, my Friends, is the true-life account of how fairytale romance happened for us.

## CHAPTER ONE

Slowly, I steered my rattle-trap of a car up the quarter-mile rocky drive to our shabby farmhouse. Navigating the potholes on the rutted gravel lane hindered my pace, but I didn't care—I was in no hurry to arrive home.

“Well, there's a blessing,” I sighed, as I pulled onto the carport, noting the un-pruned shrubbery around the house. After so many years, the overgrowth of the trees and bushes in our yard finally obscured sight of the barnyard—the grungiest part of our property. With piles of old junk and used timber lying about, scorched and rusty burn barrels, and trash bags bursting with rubbish that accumulated for months before finally being burned, the barnyard was a hotbed of contention between my husband and me. “At least we live far enough from town that people seldom come here...” I thought.

Stepping out of my car, I sighed as my eyes caught sight of the fading pedals of my roses, wilting past their prime. Hesitating, my hand on the knob of the front door, I braced myself for the usual explosion of fiery darts:

“How much did you pay for this bag of cookies?” shouted Larry when I entered, waving

a package of Oreos over his head. “Huh? Tell me!”

“Oh, Larry, don’t start,” I moaned, hanging my jacket in the closet. “The boys need to take cookies to church tonight and I knew I wouldn’t have time—or energy—to bake them...”

“Salli, when will you get it through your head that I don’t work my fingers to the bone to provide for *your* personal luxuries?” He slapped the package of cookies on the kitchen counter, breaking most of them in the process.

“Larry, you’ve wasted the cookies--and now I’ll need to spend an hour baking!” I yelled back. I examined the crumpled package and then began combing the cupboards for ingredients to begin making a batch of cookies. “Besides, I work as hard as you do!” I protested. “What’s so wrong with buying an occasional box of cookies so that I don’t have to work so hard?”

“You don’t know what hard work is!” He glared at me with eyes darker than I recalled them ever appearing. “*And* you don’t know the value of a dollar!” he barked. Then, with a contemptuous glare, he said, “I’ve got better things to do than fight with you!” He wiped his mouth on the cuff of his shirt as he tramped past me, slamming the front door behind him. Leaving the kitchen, I started up the stairs to my bedroom, but collapsed in tired, frustrated tears.

“Dad’s a brick around your neck, Mom... *and you’re slowly drowning.*”

From my crumpled posture, I looked up. I thought I was alone when Larry stormed from the house, but there was my youngest child, Locke, standing above me on the landing. Though still reeling from my husband’s ill-mannered temper, I was fully aware of the loathing in Locke’s tone.

“Don’t stay with him on my account...” Locke turned, walked briskly back to his bedroom, then cranked up the volume of his rock music--as was his custom of late--to drown out, I suppose, the incessant bickering that had in recent days broken the icy silence of the tomb we

called our home.

I was on the brink of despair; something was terribly wrong in our family. I had faithfully lived the gospel all my life and had labored tirelessly to teach those beautiful principles to my children, but despite the fact that our family was active in church, somewhere along the way something had gone terribly wrong and it was keeping us from experiencing the joy family life can bring. Years of tension and conflict had taken their toll on all of us.

Twenty-five years before, I had met Larry after my sophomore year at Brigham Young University. When I came home to Portland after my second term that year, Larry was just completing his fifth year as a middle school science teacher and was also serving as our stake's Young Adult president. Sitting in the congregation, while he stood to conduct a fireside one Sunday night shortly after I returned home, I recall asking my girlfriend, "Who's that cute guy at the pulpit?"

"Who? That guy? That's Larry Clark—he was called as the Young Adult president last fall...he's a school teacher. He's got good looks...and a good job--all the girls in Young Adults want to get a date with him!"

"Hmmm," I recall thinking, "He *is* good lookin'! Maybe that'll be *my* goal for the summer, too!"

It didn't take long to attract Larry's attention and before I knew it he was stopping at my folk's house regularly to see how I was doing. He would often ride his bike up to the top of steep Cooper Mountain Road where my family lived at the time. I remember once, waiting for him, sitting on a tree stump in our yard with a grand view of the Tualatin Valley below; I was wearing a flowing homemade cotton dress, the breeze blowing my short-cropped hair. I was young and idealistic, and I saw him as strong and handsome...because, quite frankly, he was.

Eight years older than I, Larry possessed an inner conviction that bespoke a commitment to simplicity, turning his back on the trappings of the world—a trait I admired. He was a product of the seventies, seeking a less materialistic lifestyle than what previous generations had embraced. He wasn't really a hippy, he just longed for a more unsophisticated life. I admired those qualities, despite the fact he had been inactive in the church for several years and had not served a mission. But because he had been through the temple the year before I met him, I figured all that hadn't been right in his life had been resolved. He was active in the church and that's all that really seemed to matter at the time.

“Have you ever lied to me?” I asked Larry, innocently, one night. It was the Fourth of July, three months after we had started dating; we were sitting on my folks back lawn watching for fireworks from the fairground in the valley below. Larry's startled expression made him look as though I'd hit him with a two-by-four! He was obviously stunned by my question. I thought, for sure, he was hiding a juicy bit of information that would be fun to pull out of him, so I rolled over onto my knees and touched my nose to his nose.

“Okay, Buster! What have you lied about! You tell me!” I teased, playfully, pushing him over into the grass.

“I...well...sheesh,” he stammered. His eyes grew large and then misty as he stared back at me in disbelief. “Well, I, well...there was one time I did tell you a lie...of sorts,” he sought for words that didn't come easily.

“Yes...” I coaxed, smiling mischievously.

“Well, do you remember a few weeks ago when you asked me if I liked your last name?” Yes, I recalled our conversation when I had asked him that question. My maiden name was Danish, tricky to spell and nearly impossible to pronounce correctly. I had asked him what he

thought of it since it was a difficult moniker to master.

“I told you, at the time, that I *liked* your name, that I thought it was a great name—unique and special—like you, do you remember that?” he asked with quiet confidence, though still looking a bit alarmed. I nodded while I leaned back on the grass and folded my hands in my lap. I didn’t say anything because I wanted to give my handsome Romeo a chance to express what were obviously some tender thoughts. “I went home that night and prayed that I could tell you my real feelings someday. And I promised the Lord that if you ever asked me if I had lied to you...that I would...” he paused for a long time.

“*Yes...? You would...what?*” I asked.

“That I would tell you that I wished your last name was Clark...I would tell you that I wanted to *marry* you.” With those words, he scooted closer toward me in the grass, took my face in his hands and asked, “Salli, *will* you marry me?”

When I answered ‘yes’ three days later, after fasting and praying about my decision, Larry picked me up in his arms, twirled me around, and hollered, “Whoopieee...”

But now, after twenty-five years, all I had was a mean-spirited husband and teen-aged children that never wanted to be around their father. My son Locke’s hateful words on the stairs that day were not a surprise to me; it was not the first time someone dear had spoken the painful truth:

“My heart *aches* for you, Babe. The sparkle has gone out of your eyes... Years with Larry have broken your spirit.” I recalled the stab to my ego *those* words had inflicted when first spoken by my Uncle Moe, eight years before. In saying what he had, he’d breached our unspoken agreement to disregard my troubled marriage and go on as though nothing was wrong. But my resolve to present a cheerful disposition couldn’t change the fact that, even back then, I

was depressed and miserable.

Gary-Cooper-tall and slender, one thing I loved most about Uncle Moe was that he always called me, "Babe"; the same endearment he used for his own daughters who were all much older than I. As a teen-ager, I figured out that he called us all "Babe" because he was afraid of using the wrong name, but I took it as a compliment that he thought of me as one of his own.

As a widower, Uncle Moe had married Aunt Christie several years after her divorce, when I was 15 years-old—more than thirty years before. When they married, it was Uncle Moe and Aunt Christie that had gathered the pieces of my shattered life and offered me the guiding hand I needed back then. Newly wedded at the time, they had invited me to come live with them when my father died, suddenly, during my freshman year in high school. Uncle Moe had barely retired from his career as an Air Force pilot; a tough military colonel, I'm certain with a new bride and his long awaited retirement years ahead of him, he and Aunt Christie had grander plans than raising someone else's child.

But Uncle Moe was not an ordinary man; he was my mother's tenderhearted brother. My mother had died long before I was old enough to have a memory of her, but all during my growing-up years Uncle Moe had done his best to compensate for the void her death created in my life. Now, even though I was a grown woman, he continued to look out for my best interests.

“Babe, you’ve been reduced to enduring---and painfully, I might add—a hopeless marriage that has destroyed...not only *your* dignity...but the dignity of your kids, too! Feeding your family from grocery dumpsters...and living on a shoestring, all in the name of ‘conserving the environment’...*it makes my blood boil!*” My uncle’s uncharacteristic show of irritation made it clear, that day, his words came from deep-rooted anger.

“I know Larry has unconventional ideas, Uncle Moe,” I had responded with well-applied

patience in defense of my husband. “Providing for a large family is frustrating for him—but that doesn’t make him a terrible person... He’ll be better when the kids are grown. You’ll see...” I spoke as someone who had long before adopted the belief that weathering the billows of life brought on by an eccentric spouse would earn a crown in heaven.

But even as I brushed-off Uncle Moe’s concerns, I knew I would never see a change in Larry’s behavior. Each life event of the past that I had hoped would mark the dawn of Larry’s kinder, more reasonable nature had come and gone with no significant change.

But as quickly as the thought came into my mind, that day, I dismissed it as I always had. Trapped between my staunch determination to stay married and the reality of Larry’s cruelty, I turned from my uncle’s gaze to hide the flickering denial in my eyes. Uncle Moe continued:

“Babe,” he moaned, “when was the last time Larry did or said *anything* that came close to being polite, not to mention loving? Your Aunt Christie and I can’t sit by...*anymore*...and pretend it doesn’t matter!”

We sat in silence for several moments, then his voice mellowed kindly as he continued, “We’ve wondered for years if the twinkle wouldn’t come back to your eyes if Larry would just exercise a little kindness...and hold you in his arms every now and then...Instead,” his voice grew agitated again, “he’s sneering and derisive in every comment he makes to you and the kids....Sweetheart, he makes *your* life miserable because *he* hates living....Your aunt and I don’t have any hope that he’ll ever change...” Then, with heated boldness, he had said, “We want you to divorce him!”

Sadly, Uncle Moe’s petition, so long ago, had faded into the endless stream of well-intended counsel which tends to flow unheeded on ears not ripe to hear.

Now, years later, as I sat battle weary on the staircase, Locke’s words reawakened me to

the conundrum I had faced nearly my whole married life. The puzzle pieces simply didn't fit together. During our marriage, Larry and I had enjoyed many of life's greatest blessings: the gospel of Jesus Christ, a temple marriage, five beautiful children, and a charming 6 ½ acre fruit farm outside Portland, Oregon. With a full view of Mt. Hood out our front window, and a driveway lined with one-hundred apple trees, I had long held the opinion that we lived in the most beautiful spot in the world.

The Lord had granted our family many blessings, but over the years Larry had trashed our beautiful little farm by neglecting needed repairs and hoarding trash he collected from unseemly sources. Apparently depressed by the cares of life, Larry viewed living as a bitter joke, blinding him to the Lord's tender mercies.

Rising from the stairs that day, I left Locke at the house and got back into my car and drove the five miles straight to my aunt and uncle's home, hoping for solace from the two people whose opinion I trusted most. I knew they, above all others, loved me without qualification.

"This time you *must* leave him, Babe," my Uncle Moe said, adamantly, after I described the argument that had occurred between Larry and me that day. "I'm worried about you and the kids; Larry's temper is getting more and more insensible...I just don't trust him. If you're scared and don't know what to do—I'll file for you!" I appreciated my uncle's willingness to come to bat for me; it felt strangely comforting to hear the aggravation in his voice, but divorce still seemed like a terrifying prospect.

"I just can't believe the Lord would have sanctioned this marriage, in the first place, just to see it end in divorce, Uncle Moe...Tearing my family apart *can't* be the answer," I cried. "Maybe we should just get a legal separation..."

"There's a whole lot worse in life than divorce, Honey," my Aunt Christie piped up.

Originally from Texas, portly and ruddy cheeked, Aunt Christie had converted to the church in 1950 during her college days. Since that time, she had held nearly every calling in Relief Society on the ward and stake levels. Most recently, she busied herself bottling fruit in the summer and quilting blankets for military servicemen all winter. At home, she always wore her favorite floral apron over whatever shirt she had on, plaid or polka dot--she didn't care! Indifferent toward glamour and style, she focused first on "lifting the hands which hang down and strengthening the feeble knees".<sup>1</sup> It was rare for me to leave their home without a quart or two of freshly bottled peaches or raspberry jam.

All my married life, I had depended on my aunt and uncle's good-natured generosity. Their own children were scattered hither and yon around the country, so they often told me how happy it made them that I had stayed nearby to raise my family. Now, rocking together on the porch swing in the backyard of their home, which was situated on the fringes of an exquisite golf course, I could smell the scent of smoldering leaves on a nearby neighbor's burn pile. The foliage of the trees that swayed peacefully around us, in contrast to the grassy-green lawn, was turning orange-brown.

Uncle Moe reached over to pat Aunt Christie's hand. "How do you know your best days aren't ahead with someone new?" he asked me, though his eyes were fixed lovingly on Aunt Christie. She grinned back at him; I loved the fact that my aunt and uncle obviously adored each other.

"I just don't feel the Lord *wants* me to get divorced...I'm waiting for Him to open a *different* door," I said, as I leaned forward across my knees and fixed my gaze at the ground. They stared at me as the wheels turned in their heads. Finally, Aunt Christie spoke up:

"What're ya doin', Salli... Waitin' for him to *die*?" she asked. I didn't answer; I didn't

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<sup>1</sup> Doctrine and Covenants 81:5.

want to admit the truth. I glanced back at them as Uncle Moe shook his graying head.

“That’s the coward’s way, Babe,” he whispered, “. . .and that’s not how we raised you.”