

Christmas at Bluebird Valley

Shepherd's Grace Christmas 2013

(If you read carefully this Christmas drama should remind you of the Christmas Story from Matthew 2. Included in the story are titles of several songs written by Donnie Huffman. These songs were performed live at the original airing of the drama on December 15, 2013. The drama is written for the enjoyment and instruction of Shepherd's Grace Church. Below is the entire manuscript for that drama. Individuals may use the story for purposes of sharing, however any reprint or publication of the story without permission of the author, Jack Dickson, is strictly prohibited. Jack Dickson may be contacted at dickson7455@hotmail.com or at 1125 S. Summit Arkansas City, KS 67005. December 19, 2013)

In my mind's eye I can still see it, that face pressed against the frosted glass; The cold of his breath fogging the window pane, making it impossible to tell if he was outside looking in or inside looking out. The memory seems so fresh; hard to believe it has been three years now. Three long years. Three years and never a day, sometimes it seems like never a moment I don't think about her.

She came into my life in March of that year. Her name was Mary and we were quite taken with one another even from our first meeting. The day we met was a cold late spring day. Snow was still on the ground from the bitter winter. I saw her in the distance as she headed into the church. She turned toward me for just an instant and her smile melted all the winter cold from my heart. Instantly I captured her face in my mind; the longish auburn hair that swirled around cheeks bright with a rose colored blush from the cold, the clear green of her eyes filled with a light as bright as the candles that burned on the altar of the sanctuary on a Sunday morning, the smallish nose somewhat reddened by the cold and just the hint of a smile that tugged at the edges of her mouth. She was beautiful!

Intensely curious and more than somewhat smitten, I followed her into the church. It was to be an early Easter that year and the sanctuary was trimmed in the purple cloth of the season. Soft lights framed the altar and the familiar picture of the cross, the dove, the robe and the light silently hung to the side of the table. I entered quietly as I had done hundreds of times. I sat in the back pew and watched as she knelt and prayed in front. The church was so quiet I could hear her soft sobs and from my angle I could see the tears as they ran freely down her cheeks. I bowed my head and prayed as I had so often in that place. This time my prayer was for the woman I did not know; the woman who had captured my imagination yet who was so clearly in need of His comfort. I did not know her, but I prayed for her!

Not surprisingly, as I sat there, I watched my father enter the sanctuary. He knelt down by the woman and waited silently as she cried and prayed. His patience with others always amazed me! He possessed an incredible ability to just be present for them. He could offer comfort without words and encouragement with just a knowing glance. As he prayed with the woman she seemed to sense, more than know his presence. Slowly, she sat back in the chair. She sighed deeply and sobbed with a slightly louder gasp.

My father waited for what to me seemed an insufferable period of time for her to speak. After a time, she turned slightly to face him as he sat relaxed and inviting in the chair next to her. She began to speak in no more than a whisper. I did not want to eavesdrop on their conversation, and even if I did, I was quite unable to hear the words that were exchanged. They engaged each other in a brief but quite

intense conversation at the end of which my father gently slipped an arm around her shoulder and comforted her as she cried more openly. I could tell by the language of their bodies that she had shared something quite profound with him. After a time they both bowed their heads and I could see my father's lips moving as he prayed with her. She then stood and left.

I waited a moment as my father stood, looked intently and silently at me, aware of my presence, smiled somewhat weakly and left the sanctuary to return to his daily work as pastor. After he left I immediately headed for the door to see if I could still see the direction in which the woman headed. I looked anxiously down the street just in time to see her turn into the coffee shop up on Summit. I hurriedly followed after, not knowing exactly what I was going to do when I caught up with her.

I entered the coffee shop and looked around nervously. Old Mr. Huffman was seated at his usual booth. He'd probably been there awhile. She was seated at the counter and as I came in she noticed me and smiled wearily. She didn't seem to have the same energy in her smile that I had observed earlier but the candle bright twinkle was still in her eyes. I shyly walked over to her and took the vacant stool next to hers. I ordered a cup of coffee and tried to be as nonchalant as possible. The waitress brought my coffee and in my first sip I mustered the courage to glance her way! She was already looking at me with a note of recognition in her eyes.

"Didn't I see you in the church?" she asked. "Yes," I shyly answered. "Are you following me?" she said, a tone of concern starting to creep into her voice. "No," I lied and then "Yes...well sort of." Somewhat accusingly, she demanded, "Which is it; yes or no?" "I guess it is yes," I said. "I saw you as you went into the church and thought you smiled at me. My father is the pastor there and I am used to people around the church knowing me. I didn't recognize you but thought...well, you know."

"Your father is pastor?" she said. "Yes," I said quickly, thankful to change the subject from what I was afraid she thought was stalking to...well, to anything else. "He has been pastor at Bluebird Valley Grace Church for...well, for as long as I can remember!" "Did he...Did he tell you anything about me?" she asked with just the trace of a tear forming in her left eye. "My father...say anything about anyone at church!" I exclaimed. "I cannot imagine my father ever speaking to me about anyone he talked to at church!"

"Then why did you follow me?" she inquired. "I...I...I saw you smile as you went into the church. I, um I heard you cry as you prayed. I prayed for you as I sat in the back pew and when I saw you leave something told me to follow. I thought perhaps you could use a new friend." I explained. Suddenly there was a strange, somewhat soft smile that, while different from the one outside the church seemed inviting and open and once again won my heart. (Music : The Christmas Train begins to play)

End Chapter 1

The conductor's voice interrupted my thoughts. In a loud and monotonous voice he called out, "Next stop Bacastow Springs!" Still several more hours to Bluebird Valley I thought; Several more hours to home. I hadn't been back since Christmas three years ago. What a frightening and frustrating day that was. Christmas in Bluebird Valley had always been such a magical time! People came together for the wonderful Christmas pageants. Of course the most special pageant was always the one at Bluebird Valley Grace!

My father and the music director started working on it in the spring of every year. Their challenge, it seemed was to always make the next one even more elaborate, even more splendid, even more Spirit filled than the last!

A brief smile tugged at the corners of my mouth as I thought of the Christmas pageant. I had been in every Bluebird Valley Grace pageant that had ever been performed. In the very first one I was only a few months old and I was baby Jesus in the manger. From that moment, my father always planned a bigger and bigger part for me. It was almost as if he believed my participation in the pageant was essential to the continued growth of the church. I never understood his seeming obsession with my participation but I always tried to please him with my performance.

Father was a hard man to please. There were many years when our pageant received front page coverage in the newspaper with glowing accolades for all the performers and the wonderful Christmas message they conveyed. Father, however, always believed we could do better. He would make notes and write critique that he and the music director would address and discuss at great length. He pushed and pushed even to the point of causing the director to threaten resignation!

Every year though, father would step back at just the right time to save the relationship he had with the director. Every year, he would find some way to "save the show!"...that is until three years ago!

We had our first meeting to discuss the pageant in late June. I remember because it was the day Mary and I were to have lunch. Our meeting was in the morning and Mary and I had plans for lunch afterward. She told me she had something important to tell me.

I invited Mary to the pageant meeting. I thought she might like to be part of Christmas in Bluebird Valley..especially since it was her first year in town. She and I had been spending a lot of time together since that first meeting back in March. We discovered that we enjoyed many of the same things. We liked music; country gospel was our favorite. We liked the same kinds of food; she really enjoyed a good steak! We both liked winter as our favorite time of the year; she said the first snowfall in the mountains always took her breath away.

There was hardly a day we were not together. I knew I was falling in love with her and I hoped she was feeling the same way about me. Still I remember her seeming very nervous about that day, about the pageant, and about seeing my father again.

For some reason, father had not warmed to my relationship with Mary the way I thought he might. She was well educated, friendly, full of life and beautiful. She reminded me so much of my mother before she died and I never understood why my father couldn't see that in her. I never understood until that day in late June.

I remember asking at the pageant meeting about a part for Mary. I saw my father glance uncomfortably in her direction and I saw her look nervously at him. I thought Mary would make a wonderful Elizabeth but my father seemed to be set against the idea. Mary didn't seem comfortable with the idea of acting in the pageant either so I let it go. We finished the meeting without further incident and I looked forward to my lunch with Mary.

I was excited about lunch. She had something to tell me. I thought I knew what it might be, still the uncertainty left me with an eager feeling of nervousness and anticipation. As we headed to our favorite

spot, the coffee shop where we first met, she seemed distracted. I tried to point out items I thought she might be interested in; the band stand being set up for the upcoming 4th of July celebration and the new movie playing at the Burford but it was almost as if she didn't hear a word I had to say.

We entered the coffee shop but instead of leading me to "our stools" at the counter, she walked hesitatingly to a booth at the back of the store. A waitress brought menus and as I opened mine to see the daily specials, I noticed Mary look distractedly at hers. It was as if something ominous was on her mind and I began to feel the slightest sense of apprehension about why she asked me to lunch.

After several minutes of uncomfortable silence while we both shuffled through the daily specials, thankfully the waitress returned. She took our order, glanced at the apprehensive look on Mary's face and left. As soon as she left, I remember Mary sighing audibly and for the first time in what seemed like hours, I looked carefully at her. Immediately, I noticed the tear running down her face.

Lacking my father's patience and compassion, I quickly began to press her. "Mary! What's wrong," I asked. Failing to get a response, I quickly reached across the table and took her hand. Squeezing it tightly, I asked again, "What's wrong!" She looked away from me and her tears began to flow more freely.

"I...I n-n-never intended to get this close to you, " she sobbed! She went on, "You don't know anything about me!" "There...There are things I haven't told you!"

"You can tell me anything!" I remember saying.

She shook her head. "No!" "No, I cannot! There are things that are happening that I just can't tell you! I care about you too much and what I need to tell you would hurt you!"

She continued on with her conversation for several more seconds with me trying to interrupt her and reassure her but to no avail.

I continued to press her, to assure her, to comfort her. Finally, realizing that I was not going to relent in my insistence, she blurted it out! "I'm pregnant!" she sobbed. Then, looking at me with guilt and doubt in her eyes, with tears streaming steadily down her face she said in a more calm and matter of fact voice, "I'm pregnant." (Music starts playing—*Message of the Bells*)

End Chapter 2

Suddenly I am jarred back to reality. "Next Stop Osborn Corners!" the conductor shouted. "Osborn Corners!" he repeated. Osborn Corners I think, panic starting to fill my mind! How can it be Osborn Corners? Had I daydreamed my way through two stops? How could I not have heard that infernal conductor? Now there are only two more stops.

I am vaguely aware of music playing, a singer singing. (Sing first verse of *O Christmas Star*)

I think, "Has the music been playing the whole time? Have I really been that lost in my own thought?" Still it will be a couple of hours before I get to Bluebird Valley. My father has agreed to meet me at the station. My father...it has been almost 3 years since I have seen him. How we argued that Christmas Eve! How we argued every day since Mary told me her news! It still seems like our fighting was non-stop!

I remember going to him right after Mary told me. She told me he knew. She told me he had known since that first day in the church! He knew! Three months I had been seeing Mary and he knew! He never said a word! He never gave me any indication! He could see that I was falling for and he knew her secret. He never said a word! Even now I can still feel the rage I felt that day! I yelled at him and pointed my finger at him and accused him of caring more for others than he did for his own son!

“Pastor Jack!” I thought! Pastor indeed! “Who did he think he was shepherding?” Over and over I accused him...and over and over he just sat there! He listened as I ranted and raved and ravaged him as a person, as a pastor, and as my father! He just sat there.

Finally I stopped. I stood there in front of him...silent, my eyes downcast, my head bowed, my emotions completely spent. Somewhat absently, I felt the first tear roll down my cheek. It was immediately followed by another and then another as I began to sob uncontrollably! I fell to my knees; my body racked with sobs as all my feelings were poured out in my tears. I looked up between gasping sobs and felt more than saw him move to me. In that familiar, fatherly way I felt him touch me on the shoulder and then kneel in front of me so we were face to face.

“Please Joseph,” he pleaded. “Please try to understand. I never thought the two of you would become involved. On that day I met Mary in the church. She seemed so desperate. She had just been to the doctor and had her suspicions confirmed.” “What she told me, I understood to be in the strictest of confidence. I never said a word to anyone. People have to trust their pastor, you know, that they can say anything.”

I remember him moving closer to me then. He said, “Joseph, when I saw the two of you getting closer I was greatly troubled. I could see how much you cared for Mary but I didn’t know how deeply you had fallen for her.” “As the days and weeks went by and she said nothing to you, I couldn’t see where it was my place to say anything either.” “Don’t you see, I had to trust Mary with this secret. After all...it was her secret to share.”

Still in shock, I remember just kneeling there...numb to the world, not saying a thing, not able to move. For the longest time my father knelt there with me, his hand on my shoulder; then after awhile he withdrew. That was the last we talked of Mary and her situation for several months.(Play *Christmas is Coming*)

It was several weeks before I saw Mary again. Labor Day had come and gone and the first cool nights of fall were setting on. Mrs. Hittenbach was down at Walnut Park nearly everyday painting the early fall colors. One day I was headed over to see what fanciful fall object was destined to find its way onto her canvas when I saw her. She was sitting at one of the picnic tables sipping a hot beverage, seeming quite content to let the gentle breeze blow through her hair and enjoy the warmth of the late morning sun.

Unsure of myself, I thought at first that I could escape her notice. I turned to walk in another direction but she noticed my movement out of the corner of her eye and looked directly at me. Keenly aware of her gaze upon me, I turned to face her. She smiled...she smiled that same smile I saw on her face the very first time I ever saw her! Even in the cool of the fall morning, I could feel my face flush and my pulse race. How could she do that to me...even after all she had done to me!

Awkwardly, (Why did it seem that she always put me on the defensive?) I made my way over to where she was sitting. I stood in front of her and said in a somewhat stiff voice, “Hello, Mary.” “Hello, Joseph”

she answered back. "I was hoping you would call or come by...or even write to me," she said. I remember trying to sound casual as we talked, but every nerve in my body felt on edge! I wanted to scream at her! I wanted to reach out and touch her hand! I wanted to demand an explanation for her actions! I wanted to accuse her! I wanted to tell her how much I still cared for her! Instead, I just stood there clumsily trying to think of something clever to say. Finally, after what seemed a very long time all I could manage was, "how have you been?"

She placed her hands on her stomach and laughed gently. "Uncomfortable," she said. For the first time I noticed that her pregnancy was beginning to show. For the first time it crossed my mind that she would not have to tell others, that they would notice on their own. For the first time it crossed my mind that others would remember I was dating her and would assume I was the father. For the first time, I thought of my family, of my father's reputation and of what the entire town would be saying about us!

Quickly I tried to conceal the emotions I was sure were written boldly on my face. I turned slightly away and lied, "You look great!" Too late I realized I had been unsuccessful. Her mouth quivered as she reached out to take my hand. "Relax," she said. "I told you that day in the restaurant that you didn't have to be involved with me or with this child. You know you're not the father." "I know," I said. "What you didn't tell me was how you could have been involved with someone else while you were seeing me! I just don't understand!"

She cleared her throat, choked back a tear, heaved a somewhat heavy sigh and urged me to sit down. She clung to my hand so tightly that I did not feel as if I had a choice. As she tugged at my hand I obligingly sat and she turned to face me. There were tears in her beautiful green eyes. I had forgotten just how beautiful her eyes are! I stared into them to the point where I was lost. I remember her shaking my arm to get my attention. Joseph!...Joe! I remember being brought back from my long look into her eyes by the urgency of her voice! "Did you hear what I said?" she asked.

Reluctantly I admitted that I had not. She began to repeat herself. "I said, The baby is not yours and I do not know whose it is!"

"What!" I exclaimed. "You...you d...d...don't know whose baby it is?" She smiled at me and nodded! She seemed very comfortable that day. Her tone was even and measured and confident. "You left the café so quickly that last time we were together that I didn't have time to tell you the rest of my story." "What did you expect me to do?" I asked. I felt my voice starting to rise and I quickly looked around to make sure no one overheard our conversation. "You just laid this bombshell of a bit of news on me and you expected me to react how...like it was just another event in my life...like it was someone's birthday party of something?" Mary said, "I knew we were getting close. I knew I loved you and you loved me. You never said it, but I knew it! I knew it wouldn't be long before you would demand some sort of explanation from me. I wanted to tell you and there was no easy way! Will you listen to me now? (Sing first verse of *Guardian Angel of the King*)

End Chapter 3

I feel the train round a curve and gently force me against the window. I look out. For the first time, I begin to recognize the familiar shapes of mountains. I know we are nearing Bluebird Valley and the beautiful countryside that I have always called home. There is a longing in my heart to see the picturesque little village again; the main street that I know will be decorated for Christmas, each light

pole trimmed with garland and Red Poinsettia, all the buildings lined with white lights and the town square adorned with the most beautiful nativity I have ever seen. Bluebird Valley is a part of me...and, I am a part of it.

I stare out the window and realize once again that I have not been back in three years. "What could have changed in our little town in three years?" I wondered. I thought of the old train station. I remembered the many times I had stepped down from the train after going into the city to visit my grandparents. When I was very young, both my parents would meet me at the train. I would step down the last step onto a stool and then jump from there into my father's waiting arms. Mother would be standing right beside him and they would both hug me and hold me close to them and tell me how glad they were that I was home and how much they had missed me! I always felt so safe when I was back in Bluebird Valley with my parents. I knew no one or no thing could ever hurt me there.

That all changed the Thanksgiving I stayed at my grandparents and my parents traveled back to Bluebird Valley without me. Father had to preach that Sunday and mother was filling in for the regular church musician so she could travel away to be with family. I was to take the train home late Sunday so I could be home in time for school on Monday.

Thanksgiving Day was very cold that year and snow covered the streets of the city. The interstate highways were open but the roads off the interstate were still snow packed when my parents left. Father assured me that they would drive carefully when he hugged me as they left. I walked to the car with mother and hugged her tightly as she got in. Late that night the phone rang; it was my father. There had been a serious accident. Father suffered several broken bones and was taken to the hospital. "What about mother?" I blurted frantically to my grandfather. He stood motionless. I saw tears begin to stream down his face. Almost as if from a dream or a trance I watched him turn and come to me. He wrapped his arms around me and held me for the longest time, struggling to find his voice. Through gasps and sobs he told me that my mother had been killed in the accident.

Grandmother and Grandfather were too old to drive and the roads were too bad for us to travel by bus back to Bluebird Valley. The three of us took the train. I remember boarding the train with tears in my eyes. I snuggled deep into my grandmother's old coat and sobbed myself to sleep to the familiar sounds of the train's clickity-clack on the cold steel of the railroad tracks. That was the first time I remember seeing him. I woke, at least I think I woke looking toward the back of the rail car. Through sleepy eyes I saw his face pressed against the glass window of the door dividing the cars. His breath fogged the window so I couldn't tell if he was on the outside looking in or the inside looking out. He looked calm and serene and yet strong at the same time. I blinked and rubbed the sleep from my eyes and when I looked again he was gone. I got up and walked to the back of the car as you can only do on a train ride and I peered through the door glass. There was no sign of anyone moving in the next car. There was no one in the space between the cars.

I returned to our seats and I moved over to the other side of the train seat where my grandfather was sitting next to the aisle. I took the window seat and curled up there looking out the window at the familiar shapes of the mountains as we neared Bluebird Valley. We arrived at the train station about two hours later.

Suddenly the conductor's voice once again jarred me back to reality. "Johnson Junction, next stop Johnson Junction," He announced loudly. Then he called out, "Bucher Hills forty-five minutes. Last stop, Bluebird Valley." Only two more stops to home. The train seemed to be picking up speed as it hurtled relentlessly toward my destination.

I hadn't thought of Mother's death and the car accident for years it seemed. Perhaps it was the familiar scenery through the window of the train that reminded me of that difficult Christmas. Somehow we made it through the season. My father preached all the sermons of Advent and we held the Christmas Pageant on Christmas Eve. I remember that Christmas morning. Christmas was on a Wednesday that year and I woke later than usual. We always woke at the crack of dawn on Christmas Day at our house. I would creep down the stairs and sneak a peek at the gifts that had been carefully arranged under the tree. That year, father stayed in his room and I stayed in mine until almost mid-morning.

I opened my door and started to go downstairs. To my surprise everything was as it always had been. Packages were all carefully arranged and every detail of our Christmas tradition seemed to be in place right down to the Bible which was always opened to Isaiah 9. "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.⁷ His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this." I turned and saw my father standing on the stairway. I had not seen him stand by himself since Thanksgiving. He came and stood beside me and he took the book. Aloud he read the passage as he had always done then he turned to Luke 2 and handed me the book. "So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child;¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them." I knew the words by heart but I fixed my eyes on the page and read. (*Sing Sing me a Christmas Memory*)

End Chapter 4

My heart is beating faster now as I realize we are drawing ever closer to Bluebird Valley. I can feel my pulse race a little and my sense of anticipation grow. So much has changed for me over the past three years.

That spring when I met Mary I was about to graduate from college. I remember wanting to go away to school at the University of Kansas but I did not get the scholarships and father could not afford the out of state tuition. Instead I went to the small local college, Balsters University. I graduated from there with honors and a degree in Theological Studies. I was going to enroll in seminary at the beginning of the year and follow in my father's footsteps.

Mary and I had talked about it frequently and had made plans for an immediate future together. We had not talked about marriage but both of us were certainly thinking about it...that is...until that day in the restaurant. My whole life seemed as if it were finally setting up before me. I had my degree, I knew my future profession, I had the girl of my dreams...How could it all have been taken away so quickly! Not since my mother's death had I felt such a sense of desperate and devastating depression.

Right after Mary told me the news of her pregnancy I stormed out of the restaurant! I did not wait for any kind of explanation!...How could there be an explanation! My life was once again taken from me, changed...and certainly not for the better! That day when I saw her in the park I wasn't sure I was ready to listen to her. I wasn't sure I would ever be ready to listen to her. I was filled with such rage! I was filled with such a deep sense of betrayal! I remember trying to gain control of my emotions that day. I remember fighting my hand that she had hold of; fighting it to keep it from trembling.

Finally, I managed to control my emotions and my physical actions and I told her I was at least willing to listen to her. She invited me to sit. The sun was out and the day was cool but comfortable, never the less, I remember feeling a chill as I sat down. I shivered and she moved a little closer to me as if she could share some of the warmth she was feeling.

She began to speak slowly, "Joseph, what I have to tell you is going to sound incredible. It still sounds incredible to me and it has been over six months since I was told." "What do you mean told?" I asked. She said, "Joseph, let me tell this in my own way." "It is hard enough as it is and interruptions from anyone, even you will only make it more difficult." After a short pause and a deep breath she continued, "This is what I told your father on that first day we met." I interrupted again angrily, "You told him you were pregnant!" She looked sternly at me, just the faintest evidence of a tear at the corner of her eye. I had known her long enough to recognize this was not a tear of hurt but a tear of anger. It was obvious to me on that day that she was fighting all of her emotions and anger was one of them. I bit my tongue and apologized saying, "it won't happen again," and sat quietly waiting for her to continue.

"I told your father that day that I had been visited by a stranger. The stranger told me the most incredible story." She went on, "I couldn't believe how patient your father was as I tried to find the words to explain what I had been told." "He waited and slowly I began to recount how the stranger had come to visit me the first night I was in Bluebird Valley." "He told me I was to have a child. He told me the announcement of the birth would cause me great trouble, but that I should not be afraid!" She laughed nervously and continued, "Did he ever understate that part!" After another moment she said, "The stranger told me that the trouble would be resolved because God was involved with all of it." The stranger went on she said, "Your child will be the one who is to re-open communication with God! Your child will be the one God has chosen to lead God's faithful people, those who are willing to believe, to eternal life."

"The stranger said I would meet someone who would be kind and supportive and that person would offer me comfort and give me confidence that I could raise a child in faith and love even in a world so faithless and filled with hatred as the one we live in today," Mary said. She went on to say, "The next day I met you. You were so supportive and kind that day. You were so aware, so present that I believed you were the one of whom the stranger spoke! When we met in the café and you told me you prayed for me, I was more certain than ever that you were the one who would understand. I fell in love with you that day!"

I remember telling her that I fell in love with her that day also. I said, "I took one look at your smile, your eyes, and my heart melted!" I told her, "From the first moment I saw you, I knew I would have moved heaven and earth for you!"

Mary held up her hand. She swallowed hard and said, “let me continue. It really does get weirder!” The stranger told me God would provide one who would stand by me. The stranger said that despite all the evidence to the contrary, despite all the judgment and condemnation by the world there would be one who would embrace my situation and walk with me into God’s incredible promise.” She continued, “I believed that one was you.” She paused and wiped a tear from her cheek. “Then you left,” she said. I told you and you walked out! I couldn’t believe I made such a mistake!”

I nodded and lowered my head. She had expected more of me. She believed in me as a person, the kind of person who would listen regardless of what circumstances appeared to be. She believed in me as the kind of person who would be open to possibilities other than those that appeared before them. She believed in me after only knowing me for a few months as the kind of person I wanted to be. She believed in me, more than I believed in myself. She trusted me more than I trusted myself. She had faith in me more than I had in myself and I walked out!

With my head still bowed, I said weakly, “Is it too late?” There was a long silence. After a time I remember she spoke. “Too late for what?” she asked. “Too late for us,” I replied. “Too late for me to be that person you met in the café back in March. Too late for me to become that person you believed me to be; too late for me to be that person I want to be; too late for me to be that person God intends me to be?”

I remember her squeezing my hand even tighter then and for the first time I looked up. I saw it then! I saw the same smile I had seen tugging at her mouth the first time I ever laid eyes on her. Once again, the smile warmed my heart and this time it melted away all my fears. As she looked into my eyes with that beautiful smile on her face she asked, “are you sure that’s what you want?”

I remember nodding eagerly and sensing her move closer to me.

Suddenly the conductor violently aroused me from my train of thought. “Bucher Hills,” he called out! (*Play Shootin’ Down the Mistletoe*)

End Chapter 5

Feeling restless after the conductor’s call, I quietly start to gather my things and stuff them into my bag. It doesn’t take long. I never seem to carry much of my own stuff these days. I look around and smile a little at the thought. I settle back deeply into my seat and try to calm myself. The gentle rocking of the train along the track and the setting sun of oncoming evening cause me to close my eyes.

My thoughts turn once again to Mary and our conversation that day in the park. I remembered her excitement and the total sense of calm she seemed to convey to me at the same time. I couldn’t imagine how she had coped over the past several months with the increasing discomfort of pregnancy, the knowledge of what she had shared with me about the stranger and the uncertainty she had experienced regarding our relationship.

After I expressed my desire to be involved with her and with the child and after she determined for herself that I was sincere she laid out her complete plan for raising the child. She said she couldn’t imagine a more perfect place to raise a child than Bluebird Valley. She said the people there seemed to just have the love of Christmas in their hearts all year long. She had rented a small house for her and

the baby and she was looking forward to fixing up the nursery, painting the rooms and preparing the entire house to be a home.

I remember joining in to her excitement. Her enthusiasm was contagious and her plans seemed so sound and practical. I couldn't imagine a single obstacle in her way. As it turned out, my imagination could not have been farther from the truth!

After my conversation with Mary I rushed back to Bluebird Valley Grace. I wanted to share our conversation with my father. I thought he would be as excited for the two of us as I was! How could he not be excited; how could he not embrace an opportunity to bring a servant of God into a world which so desperately needed to hear God's message!

When I got to the church my father was not in. I decided to wait in his study. I entered and looked around. On the walls were the many citations he had received over the years; citations for various efforts of community involvement. Noticeably hanging just behind his desk was his diploma from seminary. Master of Divinity was the degree which he had earned. He attended seminary more than 25 years earlier and had spent his lifetime in God's service. Just below the framed diploma was a picture of my mother and father on their wedding day. The image of my mother was exactly as I remembered her. It was as if she was frozen in time. The image of my father on that day, however was very different. In my mind I now saw him as older. There were now lines around his eyes and his hair was gray and thinning. Pastor Jack was clearly getting to the end of his time of public ministry I thought.

I turned from the wall and there in the door stood my father. "Joseph," he said, "what are you doing?" "I'm just waiting on you," I replied. "I have some exciting news."

"News," he asked. "Yes, I spoke with Mary!" I said excitedly. He looked at me apprehensively. "With...with Mary," he said slowly. "I thought...I thought the two of you were not seeing each other anymore." I said, "I happened to see her in the park earlier today and we talked. She told me the rest of her story. She told me everything she told you that first day! She told me about the stranger and the baby and the promise!" I blurted all at once. "Isn't it exciting?" I asked?

My father nodded slowly and with carefully measured words he said, "Yes...yes it is exciting, but Joseph, have you thought this all the way through? Have you considered what the people of Bluebird Valley will say? Have you considered your future at seminary? Have you thought of how you will raise a child and study for ministry and serve in a congregation all at the same time?" Then, haltingly he said, "Have you thought about what this will do to Bluebird Valley Grace?" Once word gets out," he went on, "how do you suppose our members will react? How do you suppose the people of this town will respond? How do you think you will ever be able to serve here as my replacement?"

I was stunned! All the years my father had helped young women who were pregnant and without a husband. All the years my father had taken up special offerings at Christmas and Easter to assist those who were single parents raising a family! All the nights he has personally sat with women in the hospital who were in labor and all alone! "How could he possibly forget all these things," I thought.

"Are you serious!" I screamed at him! "How dare you," I yelled! "You hypocrite!" I accused! "Your ministry, your life, your preaching have all been about justice in this world and your justification for justice has been salvation by the Grace of God!" "Now, when it is your family, when it is your situation,

when the circumstances look too worldly for you to comprehend...now you are concerned about How it Looks!!"

He said, "Joseph! I am not concerned with how it looks for me! I am concerned for how it looks for you, for the church, for the community. Who will believe this story Mary has told us? I offered her comfort on that first day because that is what she needed, not because I believed what she was saying." "I accepted her as I would anyone who comes through our doors and I was prepared to love her despite the wild-eyed craziness of her story!" "Joseph" he urged, "think about this!"

I did not storm out of his office that day as I had done with Mary at the café. Instead I responded, determined to keep the promise I made to myself early that morning...to be the kind of person Mary could trust, to walk with the kind of integrity I could be proud of, and most importantly to live the kind of life worthy of God's grace and love for me.

I spoke evenly with my father. I reminded him of our Christmas tradition. I reminded him of the promise of Isaiah 9 and how God had accomplished that promise once in an unusual way. I reminded him of the beauty of the story Luke tells of the birth of a baby in a manger on a cold, clear night. I urged him to think saying, "if God used a little child once, what would keep God from doing it again!"

My father slumped into his chair and sat there. He did not say another word. I left and weeks went by without any further conversation. The Christmas pageant was drawing near as was Mary's due date. She and I had continued with our plans. She insisted that I enter seminary in January just as I had planned to do. We agreed I would come back on weekends and that we would fix up the house together.

I carefully avoided the mention of marriage. I couldn't tell if she wanted it or not. I tried to listen, to see the signs. I remember thinking we were growing closer but I was frightened at the thought of a child. I remember the conversation we had about the stranger and what the stranger had told her about the child. I remember my father's reaction when I told him I was going forward with my relationship with Mary! I remember the Christmas Pageant that year...three years ago!

Rehearsals had been difficult. The tension between my father and me had affected the entire cast of the pageant. We tried to put our differences aside but neither of us was able to forget the conversation we had that day. I wanted to forgive him but I just kept feeling the same emotions I felt when my mother was killed. It took years for me to recognize that the accident was not his fault. I needed someone to blame and he was my target. It took him years to recognize that the accident was not his fault. He needed someone to blame and he was his target.

Both of us walked around each other. We both knew there was a five hundred pound elephant on the stage and neither of us wanted to acknowledge it. The day before the pageant Mary started going into labor. We knew the baby was going to come soon but seemed like it was going to be awhile. At our final dress rehearsal she was very uncomfortable but she did her best. My father was nervous. He was sharp with many of the cast and very critical of Mary.

I remember Mary being nearly in tears as she exited the stage. She came toward me and took my hand. She squeezed it tightly trying to fight back tears. My father followed her over and stood in front of both of us. "What are you two doing?" he demanded. "What are we doing?" I responded. "We are trying our best to get through this!" My father said, "You're not getting through anything! Mary has a baby

coming! You're playing father! Neither of you have faced the reality of this situation! What exactly is it that you're trying to get through!"

Mary spoke this time, "Pastor Jack! I am in love with your son. I'm not trying to take advantage of him or cause him any hurt." My father responded, "How long are you going to keep up this ridiculous story about a stranger and a fatherless conception and a promise from God! Why can't you be honest with him!" Mary gasped tearfully, "I have been honest with him! I have been honest with you! I have not said a word to anyone in town because I was afraid of how they might react to you and to Joseph and to the ministry you have worked your whole life to build! I know the kind of pressure this whole situation must have put you under but I have told the truth! I have always loved God and would never disrespect a person who has dedicated his life to the Lord's service!"

For the first time since my mother's death I saw my father on uncertain ground. "Y...y...you, you really believe what you told us? H...h...how could this be?" he asked. Mary said, "Every thing the stranger told me has happened exactly as he said it would. Just as you have tried to live your life faithfully, so have I. I have always loved and served the Lord! Why would I doubt God's plan now?"

My father said, "I have never witnessed such faith. I have never known anyone who would trust God as much as you!" I remember Mary smiling at that and saying, "Yes you have!" Then she found me with those beautiful eyes and once again my heart melted in the middle of Christmas at Bluebird Valley! (Sing Joy)

End Chapter 6

Jared out of my thoughts once again I hear the conductor call out one last time, "Last stop, Bluebird Valley! End of the line! All passengers must depart!" I glanced toward the back of the car as I tried to clear the cobwebs from my brain. I expected to see the stranger with his face pressed to the glass. He had accompanied me so many times these past three years. It seemed like at critical moments in my journey through seminary he was there.

I remember waking in the middle of the night during my first year. I was to present my first sermon the next day and I was terrified. I was preaching on *Two Christmas Stories* and I was trying to help the congregation of seminary students, professors and visitors to imagine the world today if they heard the promises made to the people of long ago. I had prepared the sermon as I had been taught. I recalled the experience of my father from his weekly preparation to work up the places where I wanted to make specific points. I had rehearsed my message in the space where I was to preach the next day, planning exactly where I was going to be in the sanctuary when I came to the key points I wanted the congregation to hear. Everything I knew how to do, I was prepared to do and yet I couldn't bring myself to the confidence I needed in order to make my message believable.

I remember getting up from my bed and walking around the small apartment. I looked through the window onto the back porch and there with his face pressed against the glass was the face of the stranger I had first seen that night on the train. Once again his breath fogged the window pane so I could not tell if he was inside or out. This time however, I could make out a gesture that he made to me. I watched as he knelt there, folded his hands and bowed his head. His attitude of prayer reminded me of a lesson I learned long before I came to seminary. "The power of the message begins with the willingness to pray." It was a lesson my father lived each and every week. He used to tell me, "the

message is never mine. It belongs to God and will not be all it can be unless I am willing to give it all to God!"

Through out seminary I saw the stranger on several more occasions. It seemed as if every time I was struggling with a point of faith the stranger appeared with a gesture reminding me of exactly what I needed to do to be most effective in the ministry I was trying to serve. I learned to trust the stranger to lead me in exactly the right way. I learned to allow the stranger to guide me even to places I never thought I wanted to go.

When the phone call came a few weeks ago, the one inviting me back to Bluebird Valley for Christmas, I was frightened. I hadn't returned to the valley since I entered seminary. The events of that last night before the pageant and the Christmas day that followed were so clearly etched in my mind that I couldn't bear to re-live them. During the conversation, I looked once again at the door to the back porch. There was the stranger, this time nodding in agreement with the request. It was as if I were being called back to Bluebird Valley. It was as if the force of my ministry which had begun long ago in that incredible place of love was now pulling me in a way that was beyond my control.

Now, as the train neared the station, I looked at the door between cars, a door just like the one where the stranger appeared to me years before as I traveled this same route with my grandparents. I expected to see the stranger, to receive encouragement from the stranger, to gain confidence from the stranger's presence. I was surprised when I did not see the stranger's face pressed against the glass.

The train was beginning to slow now. We were nearing the train station. I could begin to see the lights of the valley and my heart started pounding. At that moment I felt a gentle stirring next to me. I looked down at little Jesse. He would be three years old tomorrow; three years old on Christmas day. He had slept through the entire journey from the city out to Bluebird Valley.

This would be the first time Jesse saw the valley since the night he was born. Right after Mary and my father had their argument and then came to an understanding at the pageant dress rehearsal, I looked at Mary. I saw the love in her eyes and the faith in her voice and I was moved to a moment I had been hoping for in the weeks leading up to Christmas. Right there, in the awkwardness of the moment, in the tension of the entire cast looking on; with all eyes fixed squarely on Mary and Pastor Jack I interrupted.

"Mary," I said. In that moment, both she and my father swung quickly to face me! "Mary, will you marry me?" I asked. Instantly, she came to me. She took my hand and placed hers tightly into mine and she looked into my eyes with that same smile she had the first day I saw her. Without hesitating, she said, "Yes!" Then she said softly, "When?" I could feel my father looking on eagerly with just the trace of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. Almost instantly, I was aware of the entire cast seeming to hold their breath while they waited with Mary for the answer to her question.

"Now?" I answered more as a question than a statement. "Now!" she exclaimed, her eyes glistening and the smile on her face breaking into a grin that stretched from ear to ear! "Now," my father seemed to say mater-of-factly. "Now!" the cast roared enthusiastically!

Mary and I were married that night in the soft candle light and the purple cloth of the Advent season. We were married in Bluebird Valley Grace Church. Miss Dickson played the piano. I think she always had a thing for my father because she always hung around after service to talk to him and she had that puppy dog look of love in her eyes. Robert and Ross stood up with me, they were good men who you

could always count on. Becky and Wanda stood with Mary. You could always count on them for a good cry. After the ceremony we went back to the small house Mary and I had talked about fixing up. We celebrated there with Egg Nog and cookies.

The next night was Christmas night. We had the pageant and almost immediately after, Mary went into labor. At the moment of Jesse's birth, I looked up from holding Mary's hand as saw the stranger's face pressed against the glass of the door to the delivery room. For the first time, I remember being able to see an expression. It was one of peace and calm; of satisfaction.

I was to leave for seminary the following week and Mary and I agreed that our plans would not change. The people of Bluebird Valley and especially the people of Bluebird Valley Grace were very supportive of Mary and me and we knew that she would have plenty of help raising the baby. Someone, however gave an interview to one of the internet news services about the curious circumstances surrounding Mary's pregnancy. Before I could leave for seminary threats were made on her life and on the live of little Jesse.

At my father's insistence Mary and I packed up in the middle of the night and we both moved to the city with the child. For three years we stayed in a secluded place. My father pulled some strings at seminary and the school did not force me to give the address on any of my enrollment or records documents. For three years we lived in exile, never letting others know where we lived. The only contact I had was with my seminary classmates and I told none of them that I was married or about the child.

The phone call that came a few weeks ago was from Miss Dickson. She had taken more than a casual interest in my father and she called to tell me that he had taken ill. She hoped we would be able to come home for Christmas and she also said my father wanted me to preach the Christmas service. She did not know anything about the threats to Jesse or Mary but she said my father told her to tell me Matthew 2.

While Miss Dickson was still on the phone, I quickly got my Bible and turned to Matthew 2. I came to verse 20, "²⁰Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead," and immediately I said, we will be there!

The train was pulling into the station now. I was lost in my thoughts, wondering about the health of my father and about how Bluebird Valley might have changed. The train came to a stop and I looked up. I saw there...I saw there the same eyes and the same smile I had seen over three years ago and I heard that kind loving voice of my wife as she said to me, "Joseph, it is time to go."

I stood up as Mary bundled Jesse in his coat, gathered my belongings and we stepped into the aisle. I thanked the conductor for his work and we moved toward the rear of the car we were riding in. I looked ahead and felt Jesse slip his small hand into mine. I looked down at him and saw the same look of love I had long come to recognize in his mother's eyes. I looked back up and saw the stranger's face pressed against the glass of the door.

When we opened the door, the stranger had gone on ahead but we stepped safely into the future that was prepared for us. I stepped off the train first, then Mary and then Joseph stepped confidently onto a stool that had been set there for the younger passengers. He turned and looked at the people milling around Bluebird Valley Station and then he was wrapped up in a big hug by his grandfather.

As we left the station there were dozens of people from Bluebird Grace who came to greet us. They gathered our luggage and escorted us to the front of the station where we were ushered onto a carriage pulled by horses. Jesse beamed and Mary and I snuggled into the blanket that was provided as we made the cold ride down Summit Street. We saw the Christmas decorations that were as they always had been. The lights twinkled in the nippy night air and the Nativity stood even larger than I remembered it on the town square.

We rode by the church and by the café where Mary and I first talked so long ago and right up to the little house that we had first planned to live in three years ago. The house had been freshly painted and a beautiful white picket fence had been added. There were festive lights trimming the edge of the house and softly outlining the shape of the home. Inside the rooms were decorated and furnished. There was food in the refrigerator and a big banner that greeted us saying, "WELCOME BACK TO BLUEBIRD VALLEY...WELCOME HOME!" (Sing Christmas at Bluebird Valley)

Snowflakes are dancin' through the pines in Blue Bird Valley
and the mountains sleep in winter white
There's a smile on the face of everyone you meet
And the village lights twinkle red and green tonight

chorus

It's Christmas time in Blue Bird Valley
And love is just hoverin' on the mountain air
It's Christmas time in Blue Bird Valley
And there's someone special waiting for me there.

You won't meet a stranger if you come to Blue Bird Valley
With open arms they'll welcome you
And the wonderful thing I've come to realize
Is that Christmas Love lasts the whole year through

chorus

On Sunday morning we'll learn of Jesus birth
How on that starry night Heaven came to earth

Chorus

The End