

# CHAPTER I



*Yes, you have been with me from birth;  
from my mother's womb you have cared for me.*

PSALM 71:6

1936

Filling his lungs with cool October air, Pastor Ezekiel Freeman started his morning vigil. He had laid out the route on a map when he first came to town. Each building brought people to mind, and he upheld them before the Lord, giving thanks for trials they had come through, praying over trials they now faced, and asking God what part he might play in helping them.

He headed for Thomas Jefferson High School. He passed by Eddie's Diner, the students' favorite hangout place. The lights were on inside. Eddie came to the front door. "Mornin', Zeke. How about a cup of coffee?"

Zeke sat at the counter while Eddie made stacks of hamburger patties. They talked high school football, and who might win a scholarship. Zeke thanked Eddie for the coffee and conversation and headed out into the dark again.

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He crossed Main Street and walked down to the railroad tracks toward Hobo Junction. He could see a campfire and approached the men sitting around it, asking if they minded if he joined them. Several had been around town long enough to have met Zeke before. Others were strangers, men who looked tired and worn from criss-crossing the country, picking up odd jobs along the way, living hand to mouth. One young man said he liked the feel of the town and hoped to stay. Zeke told him the lumberyard north of town was looking for a loader. He gave the young man a card with his name and the church's address and phone number. "Stop by anytime. I'd like to hear how you're doing."



The crickets in the tall grass and the hoot owl in a towering pine fell silent as a car pulled into Riverfront Park, stopping near the rest-rooms. A young woman got out of the driver's seat. The full moon gave her enough light to see where she was going.

Groaning in pain, she bent and put her hand over her swollen belly. The contractions were coming swiftly now, not even a minute between. She needed shelter, some hidden place to give birth. She stumbled through the darkness to the ladies' room, but the door wouldn't budge. Uttering a strangled sob, she turned away, searching.

Why had she driven so far? Why hadn't she checked into a motel? Now it was too late.



The town square was next on Zeke's route. He prayed for each of the shopkeepers, the council members who had a meeting in the afternoon at the town hall, and the travelers staying at the Haven Hotel. It was still dark when he walked along Second Street and spotted Leland Dutcher's produce truck turning at the mouth of the alley alongside Gruening's Market. Everyone called him Dutch, including

his wife, who was in the hospital, suffering through the last stages of cancer. Zeke had sat with her several times and knew she grieved more about her husband's lack of faith than her approaching death. "I know where I'm going. I'm more worried about where Dutch will end up." The man worked six days a week and saw no need to spend the seventh in church. In truth, he was mad at God and didn't want to give Him the time of day.

The truck's brakes squealed briefly as it stopped. Dutch rolled down his window. "Cold morning to be gadding about the streets, Pastor. Have a girlfriend tucked away somewhere?"

Ignoring the sarcasm, Zeke pushed his cold hands into his pockets. "This is the best time to pray."

"Well, hellfire and hallelujah, don't let me stop you from doing your business." He barked a hard laugh.

Zeke came closer. "I saw Sharon yesterday."

Dutch let out his breath. "Then you know she's not doing too well."

"No. She's not." Unless there was a miracle, she didn't have much time left. She would rest easier if she weren't so worried about her husband, but saying so right now would only make Dutch more belligerent.

"Go ahead, Pastor. Invite me to church."

"You already know the invitation is always open."

Dutch wilted slightly. "She's been after me for years. Right now, all I feel like doing is spitting in God's face. She's a good woman, the best I've ever known. If anyone deserves a miracle, Sharon does. Tell me what help God is giving her?"

"Her body will die, Dutch, but Sharon won't." He saw the flicker of pain and knew the man wasn't ready to listen to more. "Want help unloading the truck?"

"Thanks, but I think I can manage on my own." Dutch ground the gears, uttered a vile word, and drove down the alley.

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The child came in a rush of slick warmth, spilling from her body, and the young woman gasped in relief. The iron, clawing embrace was gone, leaving her time to catch her breath. Panting in the shadows beneath the bridge, she looked up between the steel supports to the star-studded sky.

The baby lay pale and perfect in the moonlight, on a dark blanket of earth. It was too dark to see whether it was a boy or girl, but then, what did that matter?

Body feverish, the young woman struggled out of her thin sweater and laid it over the infant.

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A cold breeze was blowing in. Zeke pulled up the collar of his jacket. He walked along Mason, across First and down McMurray, back up Second, toward Good Samaritan Hospital. The bridge came to mind, but it was in the other direction. During summer months, he often crossed over to Riverfront Park, especially when the camp was full of visitors living in pitched tents at the small adjacent campground.

No one would be in the campground this time of year, with temperatures dropping and leaves falling.

The darkness was loosening, though it would still be a while before the sun rose. He should be turning for home, but the bridge loomed in his mind. Zeke changed direction and headed for the bridge and Riverfront Park.

He blew into his hands. He should have worn gloves this morning. He stopped at the corner, debating whether to go to the bridge or make his way home. He always showered and shaved before sitting down to breakfast with Marianne and Joshua. Going to the bridge now would mean he'd get home late.

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He felt a sense of urgency. Someone needed help. It would only take ten minutes to walk to the bridge, less if he quickened his pace. He wouldn't have any peace unless he did.

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Shivering violently, the young woman rolled up her car window, knowing she would never be free of guilt and regret. Her hand shook as she turned the key she had left in the ignition. She just wanted to get away from this place. She wanted to cover her head and forget everything that had happened, everything she had done wrong.

Turning the steering wheel, she pressed down too hard on the gas. The car skidded to one side, sending a rush of adrenaline through her. She corrected quickly, as the wheels shot pebbles like bullets into the park. Slowing, she turned right, toward the main road, staring ahead through tear-blurred eyes. She'd go north and find a cheap motel. Then she'd decide how to kill herself.

The breeze moved down over the sandy beach and beneath the bridge. No longer in the protected warmth of a mother's womb, the abandoned baby felt the stinging cold of the world. A soft cry came, then a plaintive wail. The sound carried across the water, but no lights went on in the houses above the river.

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The steel Pratt trusses rose above the trees. Zeke crossed the old river road and took the walkway over the bridge. He stopped halfway across and leaned on the railing. The river rippled beneath him. It had rained a few days ago, leaving the beach smooth and packed. The place was deserted.

*Why am I here, Lord?*

Zeke straightened, still troubled. He waited another moment and then turned away. Time to head home.

A soft mewling mingled with the sounds of the river. What was

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it? Holding the rail, he leaned over, peering into the shadows of the abutment. The sound came again. He walked quickly across the bridge and cut across the grassy knoll to the parking lot. Was it a kitten? People often dumped unwanted litters along the road.

He heard the sound again, and this time he recognized it. Joshua had sounded like that when he was an infant. *A baby, here?* He searched the shadows, heart pounding. He spotted footprints. He went down to the riverbank and followed them across the sand to the gravel beneath the bridge. Pebbles crunched under his feet.

He heard it again, weaker this time, but so close he looked carefully before he stepped. Frowning, he hunkered down and picked up what looked like a discarded sweater. “Oh, Lord . . .” A baby lay so still, so small, so white, he wondered if he was too late. A girl. He slipped his hands beneath her. She weighed next to nothing. As he lifted her into the curve of his arm, her arms spread like a tiny bird attempting flight, and she let out a tremulous cry.

Surging to his feet, Zeke yanked open his jacket, popping shirt buttons so he could tuck the baby against his skin. He breathed on her face to warm her up. “Scream, sweetheart; scream as loud as you can. You hold on to life, now. You hear?”

Zeke knew every shortcut and was at Good Samaritan Hospital before the sun came up.

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Zeke came back to the hospital in the middle of the day to see Sharon. Dutch was with her, looking grim and worn. He held his wife’s frail hand between his and didn’t speak. Zeke spoke to both of them. When Sharon held out her hand, he took it and prayed for her and for Dutch.

He couldn’t leave without going back to the nursery. He shouldn’t have been surprised to see Marianne standing outside the window, her arm around five-year-old Joshua. He felt tenderness and pride

well up inside him. Their son was all gangly arms, long skinny legs with knobby knees and big feet.

Joshua put his hands on the glass. "She's so little, Daddy. Was I that little?" The tiny baby girl slept soundly in a small hospital bassinet.

"No, Son. You were a whopping nine pounds." The look on Marianne's face concerned him. He took her hand. "We should head home, honey."

"Thank God you found her, Zeke. What would have happened to her if you hadn't?" Marianne looked at him. "We should adopt her."

"You know we can't. They'll find someone to take her." He tried to lead her away.

Marianne wouldn't budge. "Who better than us?"

Joshua joined in. "You found her, Daddy. Finders, keepers."

"She's not a penny I found on a sidewalk, Son. She needs a family."

"We're a family."

"You know what I mean." He cupped Marianne's cheek. "You've forgotten what it was like to take care of a new baby."

"I'm up to it, Zeke. I know I am. Why shouldn't she be ours?" She drew back. "Please don't look at me like that. I'm stronger than you think." Her eyes filled before she turned. "Just look at her. Doesn't she break your heart?"

He did look, and his heart softened. But he had to be practical. "We should go."

Marianne squeezed his hand. "Pure, genuine religion in the sight of God is shown by caring for widows *and orphans*."

"Don't use Scripture against me when it's you I'm trying to protect."

Joshua looked up. "Protect from what, Daddy?"

"Nothing." Marianne gave Zeke a quelling glance. "It's just an idea your daddy got into his head a long time ago. He'll get over it. God put her in your arms, Zeke. Don't tell me He didn't." Marianne looked at him with doe eyes. "We have our boy. A little girl would make everything perfect. Haven't I said so?"

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She had. Marianne had always yearned for more children, but the doctor had warned them that her heart, damaged by childhood rheumatic fever, wasn't strong enough to survive another pregnancy.

Zeke felt his resolve dissolving. "Marianne. Please. Stop." It had taken months for her to recover after Joshua's birth. Caring for another newborn would be far too taxing for her.

"We can be foster parents. Let's bring her home as soon as we can. If it's too much, then . . ." Her eyes grew moist. "Please, Zeke."

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Ten days later, Dr. Rubenstein signed the release forms for little Jane Doe and placed her in Marianne's arms. "You'll make fine foster parents."

After the first three nights, Zeke started to worry. Marianne was up every two hours, feeding the baby. How long before her health suffered? Though she looked exhausted, she couldn't have been happier. Sitting in a rocking chair, Marianne cradled the baby in her arms and fed her a bottle of warm milk. "She needs a real name, Zeke. A name full of promise and hope."

"Abra means 'mother of nations.'" He said it before he could stop himself.

Marianne laughed. "You wanted her all along, didn't you? Don't pretend you didn't."

How could he not? Still, he felt a jab of fear. "We're foster parents, Marianne. Don't forget that. If things become too much for you, we'll call the caseworker. We'll have to give Abra back."

"Give her back to whom? The caseworker wants this to work. And I don't think there's anyone in town who'd take Abra away from us now. Do you?" Peter Matthews, a teacher at the local elementary school, and his wife, Priscilla, had expressed interest early on, but with an infant of their own, they had agreed Abra should stay with the Freemans if they were able to handle it.

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Marianne set the empty bottle aside and raised the baby to her shoulder. “We’ll need to save money so we can add another bedroom. Abra won’t be a baby for long. She’ll be in a crib, then a regular bed. She’ll need a room of her own.”

There was no reasoning with her. All of Marianne’s motherly instincts had kicked in, but each day wore her down a little more. Catnapping throughout the day helped, but catching a few minutes of sleep here and there wouldn’t be enough to keep her healthy. She was already tousle-haired and ashen, with dark circles under her eyes. “You sleep in tomorrow morning. I’ll take her with me.”

“In the dark?”

“Plenty of streetlights, and I know the town like the back of my hand.”

“She’ll be cold.”

“I’ll bundle her up.” He folded a blanket into a triangle, plucked Abra from Marianne’s arms, tied it around his waist and neck, and straightened. “See? She’s snug as a bug in a rug.” And right next to his heart, where she’d been from the first moment he laid eyes on her.

Sometimes Abra fussed when he took her out for his early morning walks, and he would sing hymns to her. “I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses . . .” She’d sleep for a while, and stir when Zeke stopped in at Eddie’s Diner or paused to talk with Dutch.

“Good of you to take on that little one. Isn’t she a cutie, with all that red hair.” Eddie ran a fingertip over Abra’s cheek.

Even hard-hearted Dutch smiled as he leaned out the window of his truck to peer at her. “Looks like a little angel.” He drew back. “Sharon and I always wanted kids.” He said it like it was another black mark against God. Sharon had passed away, and Zeke knew the man was grieving. When Abra’s tiny fingers grasped Dutch’s pinkie, he looked ready to cry. “Who’d leave a baby under a bridge, for heaven’s sake? Good thing you happened by.”

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“It was no accident, me going there that morning.”

“How so?” Dutch’s engine rumbled in neutral.

“I felt impelled to go. God does that sometimes.”

Dutch looked pained. “Well, I won’t speculate. No question that little girl needed someone that morning or she’d be dead and buried by now.” Like Sharon, his eyes said.

“If you ever want to talk, Dutch, just call.”

“Better just give up on me.”

“Sharon didn’t. Why should I?”

As Abra grew, she slept longer between feedings, and Marianne got more sleep. Even so, Zeke didn’t give up carrying Abra on his walks. “I’ll keep at it until she sleeps through the night.” Getting up every morning before the alarm, he’d dress and peek into the children’s bedroom and find Abra wide-awake, waiting for him.

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Even the demands of an easy child could wear on someone, and Zeke saw the toll on Marianne.

When he came home one afternoon in June and found Marianne asleep on the couch while Abra, now four years old, dunked her doll up and down in the toilet bowl, he knew things were going to have to change. “You’re exhausted.”

“Abra can get into something faster than I can say, ‘Jack Sprat could eat no fat.’”

“You can’t go on like this, Marianne.”

Others in the congregation noticed how tired Marianne looked and voiced concern. Priscilla Matthews spoke to them one Sunday after services. Her husband had put up gates so their four-year-old, Penny, couldn’t escape the living room. “The whole room is one big playpen right now, Marianne. I gave up and packed away everything breakable. Why don’t you have Zeke bring Abra over a couple

afternoons a week? You can rest without worry or interruptions for a few hours.”

Marianne resisted, but Zeke insisted it was a perfect solution.

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Zeke bought lumber, nails, tar paper, and shingles and started work on a bedroom off the back of the house. Nine-year-old Joshua sat on the boards, holding them steady while Zeke sawed. One of the parishioners added wiring for electricity. Another built a platform bed with pullout drawers and helped Zeke put in windows overlooking the backyard.

Though Zeke was less than enthusiastic about his son moving into a narrow, converted-back-porch bedroom, Joshua loved his “fort.” His best buddy, Davy Upton, came over to spend the night, but the quarters were so tight, Zeke ended up pitching a tent for them on the back lawn. When he came back inside, he slumped into his easy chair. “The fort is too small.”

Marianne smiled, Abra tucked close beside her in the easy chair, a book of Bible stories open. “I don’t hear Joshua complaining. Those boys sound happy as crows in a cornfield, Zeke.”

“For now.” If Joshua took after his father, and his uncles back in Iowa, he would outgrow the space before he reached high school.

Zeke turned on the radio and went through the mail. The radio had nothing but bad news. Hitler grew ever more ambitious. The insatiable führer continued sending planes west across the English Channel to bomb England while his troops stormed Russia’s borders to the east. Charles Lydickson, the town banker, said it was only a matter of time before America got involved. The Atlantic Ocean wasn’t any protection with all those roaming German U-boats eager to sink ships.

Zeke thanked God Joshua was only nine years old, and then felt guilty, knowing how many other fathers had sons who might soon be going off to war.

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When Marianne finished reading the story of David and Goliath, she pressed Abra closer. The child was half-asleep, and Marianne looked too weary to rise. When she tried, Zeke came out of his seat. “Let me tuck her in tonight.” He lifted Abra away from Marianne’s side. The child melted against him, her head on his shoulder, her thumb in her mouth.

Pulling the covers up and snuggling them around her, he bowed his head. She made prayer hands, and he put his around hers. “Our Father, who art in heaven . . .” When they finished, he leaned down and kissed her. “Sleep tight.”

Before he could raise his head, she wrapped her arms around his neck. “I love you, Daddy.” He said he loved her, too. He kissed each cheek and her forehead before he left the room.

Marianne looked wilted. He frowned. She shook her head, smiling faintly. “I’m fine, Zeke. Just tired. There’s nothing wrong with me that a good night’s sleep won’t cure.”

Zeke knew that wasn’t true when she started to rise and swayed slightly. He caught her up in his arms and carried her into their bedroom, then sat on the bed with her in his lap. “I’m calling the doctor.”

“You know what he’ll say.” She started to cry.

“We need to start making other plans.” He didn’t have the heart to say it any other way, but she knew what he meant.

“I’m not giving up Abra.”

“Marianne . . .”

“She needs me.”

“*I* need you.”

“You love her as much as I do, Zeke. How can you even think about giving her away?”

“We should never have brought her home.”

Zeke rocked his wife for a moment, then helped her remove her chenille robe and settled her in bed. He kissed her and turned out the light before closing the door.

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He almost tripped over Abra, sitting cross-legged in the hallway, her teddy bear clutched against her chest, thumb in her mouth. He felt a jolt of misgiving. How much had she overheard?

He lifted her into his arms. "You're supposed to be in bed, little one." Tucking her in again, Zeke tapped her on the nose. "Stay under the covers this time." He kissed her. "Go to sleep."

Sinking into his chair in the living room, he put his head in his hands. *Did I misunderstand, Lord? Did I allow Marianne to sway me when You had another plan for Abra? You know how much I love them both. What do I do now, Lord? God, what do I do now?*

