

{ a n o v e l }

The background of the cover features a soft, painterly illustration. At the top, a horizontal band is split into a gold shimmering left half and a purple shimmering right half. Below this, a piece of aged, cream-colored paper with faint cursive handwriting is shown, partially overlapping another sheet. A silver pen with a dark nib lies horizontally across the bottom of the paper. In the foreground, two soft, pinkish-orange tulip buds on green stems are visible, one on the left and one on the right, partially obscuring the bottom edge of the paper.

*After
Anne*

ROXANNE
HENKE

Readers everywhere rave about
Roxanne Henke's Coming Home to Brewster series....

Here's what they say about *After Anne*:

From California: "A dear friend gave me *After Anne*...Your book was awesome and should be sold with a box of Kleenex!"

From North Carolina: "I felt as though the characters were my best friends. The last time I cried this much was when I read James Patterson's *Suzanne's Diary for Nicholas*."

From Oregon: "I could hardly put the book down. Oprah should know about this!"

From Christianbooks.com: "*After Anne* is probably my favorite [book of the year]. This moving story of an unlikely friendship between two women will have you laughing and crying and longing for a relationship like theirs."

From North Dakota: "We read *After Anne* for our book club in our MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) and all fell in love with it."

And book number two, *Finding Ruth*...

From Virginia: "I read *Finding Ruth* after I finished *After Anne* and I thought this book couldn't be as good...but sure enough you did it again! You are my favorite author."

From California: "I just finished reading the last page of *Finding Ruth*....the tears went down my cheeks as I read it...But what kept me so on the edge....was your showing me Brewster town. I could see everyone, even their laugh lines."

From Kentucky: "Your book couldn't have come to me at a better time. I struggle with contentment or lack of. Thank you for a touching story that fit quite nicely into my life. I was moved by it...If I had my way, your book would be topping all the best-seller lists."

From Indiana: "I chose your book from the new fiction section at our public library without realizing it was a Christian book...I could hardly bear to put it down."

Via e-mail: "I love your characters, all of them, even the broken ones. Even the selfish ones. Even the unlovable ones. I can't remember the last time a book has made me feel such empathy for a fictitious person, first with Anne and Libby and now with Ruth's friends and family."

And book number three, *Becoming Olivia*

From Indiana: "I've been burning up the e-mail lines telling anyone who will listen that your books are required reading!"

From South Dakota: "I could not put it down! I could relate to so many of the things Olivia went through, especially the struggle with depression and anxiety."

From Ohio: I've just read *Becoming Olivia* and am so moved. There are many words to describe the book, but none seem adequate enough."

Via e-mail... "I am a voracious reader and many authors have touched me, moved me and changed me but you are the first one I've written to. I needed you to know how important your writing is to people like me. Thank you."

"I just finished *Becoming Olivia* and *had* to write and tell you how much I loved it. I have read all 3 of your books...but *Becoming Olivia* especially spoke to me...I know that this had to have been a difficult book for you to write, but you did a superb job, as always."

"[*Becoming Olivia*] is amazing for its healing powers...I'm going to use the book in my clinical practice to give to patients who know they don't feel right but don't think it's bad enough to be classified as depression. Thanks for telling the story so beautifully."

And about book four, *Always, Jan*

From Dorothy... "I just finished reading *Always Jan*, and, like your other books, I loved it...God has truly given you a beautiful talent."

From Ellen... "I just finished *Always Jan* and hated leaving Brewster as I read the last page...I absolutely loved this series...I want to go to Brewster and see these wonderful people. I want to go to Pumpkin Fest. I want to visit Aunt Ida. I wanted to buy her house. I want my life to be transformed like Jan's and Kenny's and I want to be a friend like Libby."

From Nancy... "I just finished your book, and Man! This is your best work yet!"

From a housewife and mother in Indiana... "I just finished reading the fourth book in the Brewster series. Wow! What a read...Life can sure be difficult at times and a good uplifting honest book is a treasure."

From Shelley... "I don't usually do this, but I really wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed *Always Jan*. I have read all four of your books and each one I have really enjoyed. Your books are one of my favorite gifts to give..."

*After
Anne*

ROXANNE
HENKE



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS

EUGENE, OREGON

All Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible: New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by the International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. The “NIV” and “New International Version” trademarks are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by International Bible Society.

Cover by Koechel Peterson & Associates, Minneapolis, Minnesota

While some of the medical aspects of this book are based on fact, the story is fiction and was written as a tribute to the power of friendship. Any resemblance to persons living or dead was meant to honor the memory of all friendships that leave a permanent mark upon your heart.

AFTER ANNE

Copyright © 2002 Roxanne Sayler Henke
Published by Harvest House Publishers
Eugene, Oregon 97402
www.harvesthousepublishers.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Henke, Roxanne, 1953–
After Anne / Roxanne Henke.
p. cm. — (Coming home to Brewster; 1)
ISBN 978-0-7369-0967-9
1. Female friendship—Fiction. I. Title.
PS3608.E55 A69 2002
813'.6—dc21

200105154

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, digital, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.


Printed in the United States of America

Proverbs 18:24

...there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

In memory of my best friend:
Lori Susan Duggan Abentroth
(October 19, 1957-July 9, 1987)


You told me to “put it in the book.”
Here’s the book.



Brewster, North Dakota. Middle America, USA. The kind of town where everybody knows your name. Where everybody knows what everyone else is doing...or thinking of doing. A place where neighbors run cookies over with the latest gossip. Where the waitress at the café is your next-door neighbor. Nine-man football. A twenty-bed hospital. A grocery store that offers home delivery on Thursdays. All these things can be found in Brewster.

What else can be found there? People with hopes and dreams. People in love and people with broken hearts. Friends and foes. Families and faith. When you get to know the people of Brewster, you'll find it isn't all that different from where you live.

Welcome to Brewster...it's a good place to call home.



Prologue

Libby

“Anne is my best friend.”

There. I said it.

“Anne is my best friend.” I say that in the present tense because I don’t like to think of her as gone. Instead, I think of her as...away. Off someplace where I can’t talk to her everyday like I used to.

After Anne...left, I thought I had two options:

One. Go crazy.

Two. Die of loneliness.

It turned out there was a third option I hadn’t imagined. But then, that’s my story.

Our story.

The Beginning

Five years earlier

Olivia

If someone would have told me that first night I met Anne that we would end up being best friends, I would have told them they were nuts. Pure and simple crazy.

What didn't I like about Anne? It's easier to say what I did like. Her scarf. That was about it. Her canary yellow scarf. If it had been tied a little bit tighter I might have liked it even better. Something about Anne just rubbed me the wrong way.

It was late October at a high school football game. The Brewster Badgers were playing for the conference title, and it was freezing that night. A typical North Dakota evening that matched my mood. Chilly. Our son, Brian, was playing. Well really, he was standing on the sidelines. Freshmen don't often get to play in the varsity games. But even from the sidelines Brian seemed to have a talent for getting injured. Bob and I felt it was our duty to be there, doing the "parent thing," cheering him on, insurance card on standby. Little did I know that Brian's knack for minor injury would turn out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Dan Jordan, Brewster's self-appointed Welcome Wagon, making his way down the sidelines trailing a new couple in town. He was stopping every foot or so, introducing them as though they were royalty. I really wasn't interested.

Frankly, I'm not the most liked woman in Brewster, so the fact that I wasn't as enthralled with Anne as everyone else seemed to be came as no surprise to me. I have my opinions and I'm not afraid to share them. And Anne just seemed like the type of person who would naturally become everybody else's best friend.

But not mine.

I couldn't help but overhear the bits of conversation that drifted my way. In-between the thumping of football pads and the cheerleaders' frantic yelling, I caught the basics. They had recently moved to Brewster. He was an insurance rep and on the road much of the time. Brewster was in the middle of his territory; that's why they'd moved here.

Looking back, I know Anne was overwhelmed trying to make a good impression on practically everyone in town that night. And she was doing a good job of it. I could already see Jan and Connie, the only two sort of good friends I had, following Anne down the sideline, chatting up a storm.

Anne bugged me before I even met her.

For instance, the way she said, "Hiiii-yiii!" to everyone she met irritated me.

She'd whip off her too-cute purple mitten and stick out her hand. Everyone else scrambled to get their hands out of their pockets, or from under their arms, then yanked off their own gloves just to shake her perky little hand, with its long, slender fingers. It wasn't until much later that I noticed Anne's crooked thumbs.

Then there was her hair. A jumble of auburn, corkscrew curls sticking out every which way from her purple stocking cap—with a tassel on top, no less. It was just too cute.

But the thing that bothered me the most was when Dan said to her, "I'd like you to meet Olivia Marsden, Brewster's resident bard." He was referring to my column for the *Brewster Banner*.

"Hiiii-yiii!" Anne said, whipping off her glove one more time. "Olivia—now there's a name I'll remember. I had a cat named Olivia. My sister and I called her Libby. We loved her soooo much. Glad to meet you, Libby."

Well, meow to you too. No one, and I mean *no one*, called me Libby.

Oh, and did I mention how, for reasons unknown to modern science, Anne took to me like cold macaroni and cheese to a kitchen counter top? That woman would not leave my side for love or rudeness. She stuck to me like glue through the whole game no matter how many people came by to say, “Hiiii-yiii!”

Anne

I knew the minute I met Libby she was someone I would like. It never occurred to me that night that we would become the friends we did. But right from the start I knew there was going to be a bond between us.

She was so cool. She didn't grab my hand and pump it like everyone else, all the while inviting me to coffee, lunch, dinner, PTA meetings, or making any of that insincere, first-meeting, I-just-know-we're-going-to-be-best-friends, kind of chit chat. Not Libby. She just stood there in her black wool coat, her breath forming measured puffs in the night air, and gave me a slight nod, a one-sided smile, and said, "Welcome to town." Then she turned to watch the game.

I envied her coolness. I just knew she was the kind of person who never said yes just to make someone feel good, or no, adding a million excuses, trying not to feel guilty. Libby was the kind of person who said yes, or no and left it at that. The kind of person who didn't play word games but told it like it was. The kind of person I'd prayed, with this move, to become.

There was an older woman in our last church who made a lasting impression on me. You could tell just by looking at her she was a woman of character. She stood so regally, and when she spoke, well, it practically sounded as though her words came straight from the Bible. Don't get me wrong—she wasn't one of those people who quote scripture verses at you in response to anything you say. No, it was just that her words were so wise and compassionate; the way she said them made me feel I'd been embraced with kindness. That's the kind of person I wanted to become.

The way Libby stood, and her simple but heartfelt words, reminded me a little bit of that woman. Oh, I liked Libby from the start. It made me feel calm just standing by her. So I did.

Olivia

Our ten-year-old daughter, Emily, had been begging to take piano lessons for the past five years. I'd been resisting just as long.

I have nothing but bad memories of my own years of taking lessons, including that infernal ticking of the metronome while my piano teacher tapped along to the beat with a twelve-inch ruler. Was I so bad that I needed two things keeping time for me? I know people only think these things happen in bad movies, but my teacher actually hit my hands with a ruler during one lesson when I wasn't keeping time to her liking. It was after that incident that I came home and told my mother in no uncertain terms that I was quitting lessons. To emphasize my point I took my piano theory book and tried to tear it in half. It rather ruined the drama of the moment when I realized it was too thick and I was too weak to tear it all at once. But I must admit, even all these years later I remember how good it felt to rip through that book page by page, my mother standing there in astonished quiet. When I was through, Mom walked to the phone and told my piano teacher, "It seems Olivia has a conflict that will make her unable to continue lessons this year." I guess she knew I meant it.

I have never had the urge to take up the piano again.

Mom, however, had the last word. Apparently, my mother never gave up hope that I would discover a love for the instrument. And even now I fondly remember the Christmas nights we stood around the piano, Mom playing, the rest of us trying our best to harmonize "Jingle Bells." Five years ago, when my mom died, my brother called and said, "Mom left you the piano."

Oh.

That old, mahogany-brown upright has sat in the far corner of our living room ever since. It's been a handy spot to display the kids' school photos and my one and only Waterford vase, a wedding gift from Bob's grandmother. On the few occasions we've needed extra seating, the bench has come in handy. Other than Emily, I don't think anyone in the family had given that piano a second thought in the last five years.

It must have been either a weak moment or that PMS time of the month when everything seems sad and emotional. Whatever the reason, this time when Emily asked in her all-things-are-possible voice to take piano lessons, I didn't give her the "lessons are expensive and you have to practice everyday" lecture. Instead I told her I would check into it. And I did.

Brewster's the size of town where no one is exactly a stranger, but you don't know everyone by name, either. I started asking around, and someone gave me the name of a Mrs. Abbot, who had just started teaching piano lessons. As luck would have it, when I was grocery shopping that day my eye was caught by a flyer featuring a black baby grand piano, the large words Piano Lessons, and those cutsey little tear-off-my-phone-number tags. "Mrs. Abbot," they said.

I knew the minute I heard her voice that it was Anne.

"Hiiii-yiii! You've reached the Abbots! We can't come to the phone right now, but if you leave a message..."

I almost hung up. But I was so surprised, and Emily was so set on lessons, that I found myself blurting out a message. "You probably don't remember me...we met a couple weeks ago at the football game...well, uh, my daughter...ummm, I heard that you were teaching piano lessons...uh, if this is the wrong Mrs. Abbot could you get back to me? Oh, this is Olivia Marsden...*Libby*...your cat, remember?"

Someday I'm going to invent an answering machine that enables callers to erase their failed attempts at coherent messages. Good grief! Could I have sounded any more unorganized and unsure of myself? I decided to make good use of my frustration and headed for my computer. My weekly column for the *Brewster Banner* was due, and

a column about leaving messages on answering machines was certainly a good way for me to vent.

I barely had the first paragraph typed when the phone rang. “Libby, hiiii-yiii!”

It was Anne. Mrs. Anne Abbot. Even her name was too cute. Why, she’d just run in from putting up the last of her tear-off phone number signs around town. She was the right Mrs. Abbot. Yes, she did teach piano lessons. She would be delighted to have Emily as a pupil.

Why didn’t that surprise me?



Emily was totally infatuated with Anne as a piano teacher.

“Oh, Mom,” she gushed when I picked her up from her first lesson. “Mrs. Abbot—Oh! I mean *Anne*, she asked me to call her, Anne, Mom, really she did—is *so* cool. I mean they don’t have any kids yet or anything, but I can tell they are *so* in love. Her husband, *Kevin*, is an insurance salesman, and he’s gone a whole lot, so Anne teaches lessons so she can keep in touch with people while he’s gone, and she *loves* chocolate, and the color red, and she hates to talk on the phone—it makes her ear hurt—and did you know she had a cat named, Olivia? Just like you. But she died, well, not you, but the cat, and Anne was so sad, and...”

My goodness, what was I paying for? This woman’s psychoanalysis? I thought she was going to teach Emily piano. But to give Mrs. Abbot—I mean, *Anne*—a little credit, Emily sat right down at our newly dusted piano and started practicing.

When Bob walked in from work that night, Emily was still at the piano. She was even playing a somewhat recognizable tune.

“Is that ‘Chopsticks?’” Bob asked. “Haven’t heard that since second grade, I believe. Hey, Em, I’m impressed.” Bob stood by the piano and plunked out an octave-higher version of the tune, somehow managing to match Emily’s uneven timing.

I hadn’t seen Emily grin that big in ages. I also didn’t know Bob could play piano, even if it was just “Chopsticks.”

Anne was already teaching me things I didn’t know.

Anne

I realize now that if it hadn't been for Emily, Libby and I probably would have never become friends. I didn't have a clue that Libby had taken an instant dislike to me. Each week, when she would drop Emily off for lessons, Libby always gave me what I thought was a friendly wave from the car. The fact that she never came inside to get Emily after lessons totally escaped me. I just assumed she was busy and in a hurry to get home.

Emily, however, had all the time in the world to chat. She was my first pupil, and Kevin was on the road almost constantly, so I guess I was lonely for company—even the company of a ten-year-old.

Emily was a fast learner, zipping through her scales and lessons, talking nonstop. I'd never seen a student who could talk in the meter of the music she was playing. In four-four time Emily would say, "I-had-a-fight...with-my-friend-Steph...I-got-a-B...in-ree-eea-ding." If it was a three-four tune she'd talk along with her fingers, "I-really...love-your-house...my-Mom-should...be-your-friend." She'd complete her final assigned piece and then look up at me with that Cheshire cat grin of hers. She knew she had me wrapped around her limber little finger.

I found myself hurrying through Emily's lessons so that we would have time for a cup of tea, which Emily stated, "makes me feel like Cinderella at the ball. But not when those mean old sisters were, like, mean to her." I always doctored her tea up with lots of sugar and usually had a plate of cookies waiting too. I started sending the extra cookies home with Emily. Kevin was never home to eat them, and eating cookies alone is no fun.

I'd been praying for a way to make new friends in Brewster. *Even just one friend would be fine, Lord.* And it seemed to me that Libby was

crossing my path for a reason. Cookies seemed like a pretty non-threatening way to let her know I was available for friendship.

I had no idea that Emily jumped into her mother's car, offered Libby cookies, then repeated practically everything I said, word for word all the way home. Now that I know Libby practically inside and out, I can see why she saw me as a threat to the friendships she had so carefully cultivated. For a time, she probably saw me as a threat to her relationship with Emily too. Libby was not the kind of person who made friends easily I found out. But when she was your friend, well, that's my point—she was your friend. There is a Bible verse in Proverbs that states, "There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." For me that friend turned out to be Libby. Period.

Olivia

“Okay, so what’s with the cookies? Does this woman think I can’t bake or something?” I’d finally confessed my unreasonable and unfounded dislike for Anne to my friend Jan.

“Oh hey, don’t sweat it.” Jan took a long swallow of coffee. “Look at it as one less thing you have to do. Say, Joey’s supposed to bring treats to his class next week. You don’t suppose you could get her to bake a batch for me, do you?” As usual, Jan had turned my confession into a joke, and then changed the subject. “I’m thinking of adding eggplant-colored highlights to my hair, but Jacob says...”

I was sorry I’d told her about Anne. I knew Jan would be on the phone within the hour telling Connie everything I’d said, even though Jan acted as if she wasn’t really listening to what I’d told her.

At that time, Connie and Jan were the two people in my life I could count as friends. I know now the friendship we had was so shallow a fish would have had a hard time staying afloat. But like a bullhead, I kept trying to swim in my old familiar pond.

Connie used to work at the bank with my husband, Bob. I met her at an office Christmas party about ten years ago. When we started talking about the upcoming school bond issue, she asked me to pass out campaign flyers in our neighborhood. Since she worked with Bob, I felt I needed to keep quiet for once and just do the job. After that she’d call me now and then for lunch. Three years ago Connie quit her job to start a freelance design firm out of her home. She is very committed to her business. There’s isn’t much she lets interfere once she sets her mind to a task. Needless to say, her business is flourishing, our friendship is not.

With Jan, on the other hand, what you see is what you get. Appropriately, I first met her at the hairdresser’s. She accused me of

trying to steal Jacob from her. He's our stylist. I was in the salon for my usual six-week, shoulder length, blunt cut when Jan pranced in fifteen minutes early (the only thing she's ever early for), and announced, "You're in my chair."

"Okay Goldilocks," I replied, swinging my head toward Jacob. "As soon as the wolf here gets done I'll get out of it."

It was supposed to be a joke, but I realized the moment I spoke that I sounded catty. As I started to apologize, Jan laughed. It was a high-pitched, tinkling, little girl laugh. I couldn't help but laugh, too.

By the time Jacob finished evening out the chunk he'd removed when I swung my head, Jan had grabbed a cup of coffee, plopped into the next chair, and started telling Jacob and me her latest dilemma. As I remember now, it had something to do with her "lousy first husband and his candy-apple-red Camaro." Whatever it was, she wouldn't let me leave in the middle of her sad and sordid tale. Eventually, we traded chairs and I listened, and listened...and listened. Jan could talk. Jacob had another appointment waiting and Jan still wasn't done. I found myself in a nearby cafe, drinking coffee and still listening. The only thing that made it bearable was that Jan was funny too. It was the next best thing to a junior high slumber party—the parties I never got invited to—talking about men and laughing. I interrupted Jan two hours later and told her I had to go pick up Emily from the sitter's. That was eight years ago. Jan and I have had back-to-back appointments with Jacob ever since. We always make a day of it, and we always laugh a lot. That's my point—she talks, I laugh. As Jan says, "I don't do listening very well."

She's right.



"Hey, earth to Olivia." Jan was waving her hand in front of my face.

"Oh, sorry." I glanced at my watch. "Guess I zoned out for a moment there." Actually, I was feeling guilty for the unfounded things I'd said about Anne. "Sorry Jan, I've got to cut things short today." I put on my coat and grabbed my car keys.

“But I just started telling you about the date I had last week.” Jan got that pouty, little girl look on her face that signifies, “you’re hurting my feelings.”

Well, too bad. She was hurting mine too by never listening, never really hearing what I said. “I’ve really got to run, Jan.” It was a feeble excuse, so I tried to appease her. “Give me a call later and I promise I’ll listen.”

I drove around town until it was time to pick up Emily, hearing the mean things I’d said about Anne to Jan echoing in my head. I cranked the radio up trying to drown out my words. It didn’t work.

Emily hopped in the car from her piano lessons, foaming at the mouth with a new batch of Anne Announcements, and balancing another plate of cookies.

“Anne was wearing a beau-ti-ful, long blue skirt today.” Emily had a dreamy, fairy-tale expression on her face. “She looked so pretty, Mom. Mmm, these cookies are sooo good. Anne showed me a picture of her twin sister and they don’t look *anything* alike. Mom, do you want a cookie? Anne said they are very different. Not the cookies, I mean her sister. Did you know that Anne has, like, *pretend* apples on her table? She said every home should have a touch of red in it. I told her they looked nice.”

Oh, great. Now my daughter is going to have a fondness for fake fruit, all because of little-Miss-perfect-pretty-skirt-cookie-baker-piano-teacher.

My guilt over complaining to Jan sure hadn’t lasted long. I made myself feel even worse by taking out my frustration at home. I yelled at Brian for leaving his tennis shoes in front of the door for me to trip over. Later, I screamed at Emily to stop playing those infernal scales. They reminded me of Anne. And then, just to make sure no one felt left out, I berated Bob for not carrying his hammer back downstairs after he fixed the loose table leg I’d been harping about. Too bad we didn’t have a dog—I could have kicked that too.

All because of a plate of cookies.

Anne

Looking back, I realize those first months in Brewster were awful. Although back then, awful had a whole different meaning for me than it does now. But at the time, I was excited about the move—our fifth in eight years of marriage, and supposedly our last. I was especially excited about buying our first house and about Kevin’s promise that he would be home every night.

We moved into our little “bung-gallow,” as Dan Jordan called it, as he handed me his business card. “Real Estate Magnet,” it read. He went on to explain, “The house needs a tish of fixing up. Nothing that a well-stocked tool chest won’t handle...and some elbow grease.” He winked at Kevin.

Unfortunately, the only elbow around was mine.

Kevin had promised me this move would be different. By moving to Brewster we’d be in the very heart of his territory. Why, he’d be home every night! Why, we would have dinner together all the time! Why I believed him, I don’t know.

So there I was, using my excited little elbows to paint, wallpaper, and scrub every corner of our new home. Kevin kept his promise to be home for dinner. For three weeks. After that it was the same excuses as before. “I have a bunch of calls to make and it’s so much easier if I spend the night.” “I’m going to piggyback these meetings together, so I’ll be home later.” He was a salesman, all right. But this time I wasn’t buying.

In the last two towns we’d lived in I had spent my time in a sort of limbo. Always waiting for Kevin to come home and announce, “We’re moving.” I didn’t join any clubs—it was too hard to make friends and then leave. I’d learned that during our first three “stations,” as I came to call these towns. Places we passed through like a

slow-moving freight train. Sometimes I wondered if anyone there remembered me. Did anyone ever say, “Remember Anne? She always wore those purple mittens”? or “What would I have done if Anne hadn’t been here then?” I doubted it. I isolated myself from the pain of saying goodbye.

This time, things were going to be different. Kevin promised, and I wanted to believe him. But even if he wasn’t going to make our life any different, I was.

For the last few years I’d been praying that Kevin would feel a desire to be home more. The things he felt he needed to provide for us just weren’t as important to me as they were to him. I’d tried to explain that I’d rather have time with him than have things, and he had always responded, “Just a couple more years, Anne. Then you can have both—things and me.”

For years my twin sister, Andrea, had asked me why I stay married to Kevin. “He’s a jerk, Anne,” she had barked. “Dump him.”

It’s not that easy. I loved Kevin, faults and all. He wasn’t mean to me, he was certainly a hard worker, a quality my dad always touted, and I married him. When I said those vows I meant them. For better or for worse. If this was the worse, well, I guess I could take it. I kept hoping Kevin would decide that being home with me was more important than being out on the road, climbing some ladder of his own invention. Until that day comes, well, let’s just say I’m still here. Lonely. Waiting. Praying.

I have to admit I was scouting for friends at that first Brewster football game. We’d been in Brewster a month, and between working on the house and realizing Kevin wasn’t going to be around any more here than the last town, I was lonely. I gladly accepted Dan’s offer to take Kevin and me to the game and “show us what Brewster hospitality is like.” Kevin was glad to go, too. Any social event was a potential marketplace for business in his eyes.

The number of people I met that night was mind-boggling. Besides Libby, the only people I really remembered after the football game were Jan and Connie. I only remembered Jan because she had attached herself to me, asking me question after question as though

I was a game show contestant or something. And Connie handed me her business card with the comment, “In case you need a little help with your fixer-upper.”

Everyone was really nice, and that was the problem—they were too nice. I got the feeling Brewster was so small that people were tired of their old friends and were desperately looking for new ones. Namely, me. Libby was the only person who didn’t gush, who didn’t hand me a business card and make me feel as if she wanted me for something besides a friend. She was the only one who looked at me, said hello, then seemed to accept me for who I was.

As I said, I believe what people say, and when Libby said, “Welcome to Brewster,” I believed she meant it.

Little did I know she hated me.

Olivia

Emily had been taking piano lessons for about a month. You'd be surprised what a piano teacher can tell a student in four weeks of lessons. I'd learned that Anne loved candles and books, a point I have to admit that was in her favor. She also hated gladiolas. I questioned Emily on that one. Who ever heard of anyone hating gladiolas? But Emily, totally enamored with Anne, agreed that gladiolas were "tall, lanky flowers that looked gaudy in any arrangement." I'm sure that was a direct quote. Anne had missed being an honor student in high school because she practically flunked driver's education—a fact I was to find out for myself soon enough. And her husband was gone practically all the time.

In four weeks I knew Anne better than I knew Jan or Connie. Oh, and one more little thing—Anne had had coffee with Jan, twice, and Connie was coming over to give Anne some tips on decorating her house. My, weren't we the little social-butterfly-friend-stealer?

I knew the minute I saw Anne at the football game that she was going to march right in and take the only two friends I had. Why was I surprised to hear she'd already heard Jan's life story and would soon hear Connie's? Was I angry that she hadn't sought out mine?

Of course, now I know how foolish those thoughts were. But at the time, all I felt was left out as usual.

Anne

I'd met Jan for coffee twice. Once would have been enough. But I was lonely, and any company was better than none. In the first two hours I'd heard about Jan's "lousy first husband and his candy-apple-red Camaro," about her second marriage and her son, Joey, who "was the only good thing to come out of that," and about how she'd been trying for years to get her hairdresser, Jacob, to ask her out. She thought he was afraid he'd lose her as a customer if things didn't work out. Not that she'd be that petty or anything. The second time we had coffee I heard it all over again. I also learned that Connie would do anything to make her business succeed, so I should "watch out" if she offered to do any decorating for me. And Olivia, well, she was a good listener; didn't talk much, but you could count on her "in a pinch."

No kidding. If Jan only knew.

Lord, I questioned on the drive home, is this the friend you're sending me? She's not what I had in mind, so if Jan is the one, you're going to have to help me see her through your eyes. I was really hoping God had some other plan in mind for me. For Libby, too.

Actually, Emily was my best source of information about Libby. At times I felt like a stalker, asking questions about this woman I wanted so badly for a friend. "So," I'd casually ask between scales and theory, "what did your mom say about the C-minus on your history test?" Then I would microanalyze her answer while Emily counted out loud in three-four time.

Something about Libby intrigued me. I certainly couldn't explain it, because she gave me no encouragement at all. It had to be God, prodding me to keep on making an effort, because the plates I sent home with Emily, piled high with cookies, came back washed with no

note of thanks. The times I turned my friendly Emily's-piano-teacher waves into arm movements that beckoned Libby to come in and visit, were politely dismissed with a quick wave and a finger pointed at her watch. So whatever possessed Libby to call on me that day for help I can only say was a gift. From God to me. He knew how desperately I was going to need a friend.

Olivia

When I think about it now, it's incredible how fast my unfounded animosity toward Anne melted. All it took was a week and a very bad day. Which actually turned out to be a good day. A very good day. The day I became friends with Anne.

I was waiting outside Anne's house to pick up Emily from her lessons, as usual, when Anne stepped out and waved, then motioned for me to come on in. Emily didn't help matters. She stood beside Anne, hopping up and down in that I'm-so-excited-I-could-squeal way that ten-year-olds have. I was still mad about Anne trying to make inroads with Jan and Connie. I'd also heard that Anne had put an ad in the *Brewster Banner* about starting a book club—something I'd been meaning to do for ten years. It seemed this woman was trying to take over not only my daughter and my friends, but also my life. No way was I going into her house; she'd probably siphon my mind right out of my head as she had Emily's, Jan's, and Connie's. I pointed to my watch and mouthed through the window, "Sorry, not today," acting as though I were in a hurry to get somewhere. Somewhere besides out of there.

I thought I'd done a good job of looking sincere, but when Emily hopped in the car she cried, "Mo-om, that was sooo lame!" She sat in sullen silence for a while, then launched into her usual Anne Announcements. "Did you know that Anne painted every room in her house by *herself*? I could never do that by myself. And she's going to play piano at her church on Sunday. Anne is, like, an *awesome* piano player. Oh and Mom, Anne, like *totally* wants to be your friend." Emily paused for a breath, then added, "I mean, she asks questions about you *all* the time."

And then, for the first time in months of Anne Announcements, Emily quit talking.

I was finally forced to ask my first post-piano lesson question. “What kind of questions?” I said in my “I’m really not curious” voice.

“Oh Mom—” Emily became animated. “Anne thinks you’re some kind of celebrity or something. She asked if you were *the* Olivia Marsden. You know, cuz of your newspaper column. Anne said she’d never met anyone who was a writer before, and she even has your column hanging on her fridge door. And, did you know that Anne...”

She called me a writer. Anne had called me a writer. After seven years of writing my column, “The Wry Eye,” for the *Brewster Banner*, even I couldn’t call myself a real writer. To me that column was just a way to make me write. My true dream (which I’d never admitted to a single soul) was to write a novel. A real novel. Not a boy-meets-girl-they-fall-in-love-break-up-get-back-together novel. But a novel. A serious novel. About? About?

That was the problem. I’d always wanted to write, but I could never figure out what to write about.

A writer wanna-be—that’s me.

My daydream was interrupted when something in Emily’s tone of voice led me to believe I’d missed something important in her ramblings about Anne. “Say that again, Emily.”

“I *sa-id*—” Emily was always very impatient when she realized I wasn’t giving her my full attention. “Anne and Kevin are going to have a baby. Don’t you think Kevin should be home more if he’s going to be a dad? I’d hate it if my dad was never home. Kevin is never home. But Anne says that when the baby comes, Kevin will want to be such a good dad that he will for sure find a way to be home more. Next week after I do my scales Anne’s going to...”

Okay, now I really felt like a heel. Even though I’d hardly had a thing to do with this woman since the day she’d moved to town, I actually felt as if I knew Anne better than Jan and Connie combined, thanks to Emily’s weekly Anne Announcements. I wasn’t often very good about putting myself into other people’s shoes, but I remembered vividly how I felt when I found out I was pregnant with Brian.

I'd wanted to tell the whole world, not just a ten-year-old piano student. Even if Emily was my daughter, charming and precocious, she was still ten. There was no way a ten-year-old could share the excitement of a pregnancy the way a girlfriend could.

Therein was the problem. I may have been a girl, but I was no friend to Anne.

Anne.

The first person to ever call me a writer.

That was when the first crack in my armor against Anne appeared.



As luck so often has a way of doing, it intervened. Or maybe I should say bad luck. In any case it was something. I didn't find out until much later that it was an answer to a prayer I hadn't known to pray.

The next week after I dropped Emily off at her piano lesson, I dashed home to pick up a letter that I'd planned to mail but had left lying on the counter. I was headed out the door when the phone rang.

"Mrs. Marsden?"

"Yes?" The male voice had a familiar ring, but I couldn't place it.

"This is Coach Rollins."

Small wonder that I didn't recognize his voice. He was usually screaming semi-cuss words from the sidelines of a ball game whenever I'd heard him speak. "Brian had a small mishap at basketball practice a few minutes ago. One of the assistant coaches took him over to the hospital and I think you should get over there right away. I don't want you to panic, but there was a lot of blood, and—"

That's when I hung up and ran out the door. I was halfway to the hospital when I remembered I needed to pick up Emily from Anne's in half an hour. There was no way I'd get to the hospital, check things out, and get back to pick up Emily in time—if I would be able to leave the hospital at all. Well, this was one week that maybe Anne would finally run out of things to tell Emily.

It turned out that Brian had a rather nasty cut on his chin. He'd come down from grabbing a rebound, his chin pounding into the

top of Dave Meier's head on the way down. Before the doctor would clear Brian to go home, he wanted to "run a few tests—concussion, jaw fracture, those sorts of things."

I left my insurance card with the nurse and went to find a pay phone. I called Bob at work to see if he could swing by and pick up Emily, but his secretary said he was out for the afternoon. I remembered then that Bob had an afternoon meeting in a nearby town and would be late for supper.

I dialed Jan to see if she could pick up Emily. "I'd love to, Olivia, I really would, but I have an appointment to get my nails done in five minutes. I'm already running late and you know how hard it is to get an appoint—"

I was getting really good at hanging up on people.

My last option was to call Connie. As I half-expected she told me, "I won't be able to fit that into my afternoon schedule." Connie was like that. No explanation, no guilt.

As it turned out, Connie wasn't my last option. Anne was.

Anne's number wasn't in the phone book yet, so I had to call information. Thanks to Emily's frequent Anne Announcements, I had no trouble remembering it would be listed under Kevin Abbot. I was hoping Anne would answer the phone, instead of letting it go to the answering machine during Emily's lesson.

"Hiiii-yiii! This is Anne."

I paused a moment, thinking it was the machine. Then I heard again, "Hiiii-yiii, this is Anne. Is anyone there?"

For once that "Hiiii-yiii!" of hers was music to my ears. "Mrs. Abbot, uh, Anne? This is Olivia Marsden, Emily's mom."

"Libby?" Immediately Anne sounded concerned. "Is something wrong? We were looking out the window, thinking you'd be pulling up any second."

"Actually yes, something is wrong. No, it's nothing serious. It's just that Brian got hurt at basketball practice and will need a few stitches. I'm over at the hospital right now. My husband, Bob, is out of town for the afternoon. And, well, I can't find anyone to pick up Emily from her lesson."

Anne went into what I now call her Super Friend mode. Even though you could have hardly called us acquaintances, much less friends, Anne announced that Emily would be staying at her house for supper. Better yet, why didn't I call Anne when I got Brian home from the hospital, and she would run supper over for all of us? Was there anyone she should call for me? Or, if I wanted, she could come to the hospital and sit with me.

All of a sudden I felt like crying. It was then that the second crack in my armor against Anne began to show.

Never did I imagine that by the end of the day I wouldn't be wearing any armor against Anne at all.

Anne

The day started out ordinary enough. Kevin was up early, packing. He said he'd be gone three days this time. He insisted he really was excited about the baby. And once again, he vowed to make more time for us after the baby came. He even agreed to attend birthing classes with me. Of course, that was an easy promise to make since the classes were months down the road. Kevin gave me a quick kiss on the cheek and was out the door.

I walked to the kitchen, ready to mix up my weekly batch of cookies. Emily had a lesson that day. I pulled my recipe box from the cupboard, flipping through the cards until I spotted the gingersnap recipe I was looking for. Reaching into the cupboard, I grabbed my large mixing bowl from its familiar spot. This house and this town already felt like home. I'd had three calls about the book club I was trying to start. I had mentioned the club to Jan, thinking she'd feel bad if I didn't ask her. Her response was typical. "Listen, Anne honey, I'd love to be in this little club of yours, you know I would, but you have to promise me that the books aren't going to be too long, and I'm just assuming they'll be romances, right? I mean what fun would it be? What else would we talk about?"

Connie's response was typical, too. "I'll have to check my planner and get back to you. Leave me a message when you decide on a date. Oh, and did you decide on a carpet for the upstairs yet?"

I had really hoped Libby would call. I'd asked Emily to tell her about the club, because according to Emily her mother loved books. But the phone was silent.



Emily came bouncing in for her lesson which, as usual, seemed to fly by. Afterward, I offered Emily a cookie, then glanced out the

window. No Libby. I offered Emily a second cookie, then a third. I didn't want Emily to worry. Finally, I allowed Emily to eat a fourth cookie. By now Emily and I were standing in front of the window, watching. Neither one of us said a word, but we both knew Libby was late. Really late.

When the phone rang, Emily and I jumped. I could tell right away something was wrong. Libby sounded distracted and on the verge of tears. She said Brian just needed a few stitches but I knew that sometimes the relief of knowing nothing serious is wrong can cause you to cry just as much as if you'd found out you had cancer or something.

Olivia

If I could have eaten every bad word I'd ever said about Anne, I would've. Twice.

I don't know why I reacted so badly to Brian's injury. It really was nothing. Five stitches under his chin that made him look like a "tough dude," as Bob had been teasing him. I found Brian secretly examining his chin in the mirror on several occasions, trying to hide a small grin. He even gained a small measure of celebrity on the basketball team. The first guy with stitches that year. His tough-guy attitude didn't put me at ease, however. I had a lingering uneasiness about that day.

Maybe it was because I realized how quickly our lives could be changed.

Brian could have really been hurt—even paralyzed.

When I mentioned this to Jan, she said, "Good grief, Libby, get a grip. The kid had five stitches. Quit watching the news; it's putting goofy ideas in your head." I didn't even tell Connie what happened, and she never asked.

Maybe that's what bothered me. The only people in my life who were supposed to be concerned, who were supposed to care, didn't. And the one person I didn't expect a thing from, did. Anne.

There I was, sitting in the waiting room with Brian, waiting for the nurse to come back and give us some ointment and cleansing instructions. I was shaking like a leaf, wondering if a person could drive with one foot tapping like a jackhammer, when in walked Emily and Anne. At that moment any bad feeling or thought I'd ever had about Anne vanished like mist in the sun.

Emily ran to look at Brian's chin, which she pronounced "Gross!" and "Cool!" in the same breath.

Anne ran to me. Wrapping me in a tight hug she whispered, "It's okay. Sometimes these little things can be so hard." I thought she said something about "my thumbs," but just then the nurse walked in and I forgot all about what Anne had said. Until much later.

Having someone there calmed me down immensely. Enough to drive home, anyway. Anne followed with Emily and supper, as she had promised. It's amazing the appetite a person can work up just by worrying. The four of us polished off Anne's hot dish so fast that Anne kept apologizing, saying she should have grabbed two casseroles from the freezer instead of one. Emily, Brian, and I, with our mouths full of the last bites, said in unison, "Yeah, you should have!"

We all laughed. Anne, too.

Just like old friends.

By the end of the evening, Anne sat at the piano improvising versions of almost every childhood song I'd ever heard. Emily sat on the bench beside her, plunking along on the higher-octave keys that Anne pointed out before each song. Even Brian had shed his usual too-cool attitude and had moseyed to Anne's other side. I stood behind her, listening as Anne's voice and my children's combined in joyful harmony. Anne's fingers rolled across the keys, the opening bars of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" sounding through my living room.

"Listen up, everyone," Anne said, "we're going to sing this as a round. Emily, you and your mom start; Brian and I will join in after the first phrase. Here we go—" She trilled the keys like a drum roll.

"Just a minute," I announced loudly, "I don't sing."

Anne's hands continued moving, replaying the introduction. "Of course you do, Libby. Everybody sings." She trilled the keys again.

"I don't," I declared.

"She doesn't." Brian and Emily backed me up.

Anne stopped playing. She turned her head, looking over her shoulder at me, her brows furrowed. "I've never heard of anybody who doesn't sing."

"Well, now you have," I responded. "I don't."

“She doesn’t,” Emily said again, sounding like a perfectly trained parrot.

Anne placed her hands on her knees, as if to brace herself from this awful news. “I don’t believe you. Everybody can sing.”

“Let’s put it this way,” I explained, “I can sing. In fact, I can sing three notes at the same time; it’s just that none of them are on the piano.”

“That’s just nonsense,” Anne declared.

“Show her.” Emily stared up at me with sad, puppy dog eyes. “Pleeeeaassee, Mom?” She was really laying it on.

“You’ll see,” I declared, clearing my throat like a maestro warming up his orchestra.

Anne played the introduction again, trilling the keys, nodding her head in an exaggerated down beat at Emily and me.

“Ro-ooow, ro-ooow...” the sound coming from my throat sounded like a sick animal. “Ro-ooow your bo-aaat...”

Like a valiant soldier, Emily kept singing. But when it came time for Brian and Anne to start their part, Anne was laughing so hard she couldn’t get any words out of her mouth. Without Anne to back him up, Brian wasn’t about to sing. He started laughing along with Anne. Emily sang her little solo, while the three of us dissolved in laughter.

Finally, Anne pounded on the piano keys three times, as if in a huge, Ha! Ha! Ha! “You’re right,” she cried, “you really can’t sing!”

“She can’t!” Brian and Emily chorused.

We laughed until we were clutching our stomachs in a sort of delighted agony.

Just like old friends.

But it was only the beginning.

The Middle

Olivia

Those first two months of our friendship were like a junior high dream-come-true for me. At last I had the best friend I'd always dreamed about. It's not that I never wanted a friend, or even that I never had a close friend. It's just that I never had one like Anne.

Growing up had been hard for me, although I wouldn't dare say that to too many people. Most people in Brewster think I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth, and to a certain extent, I was. But I've learned that every person has a story—a scene or scenario that defines their life and explains it in a unique way. I have my story, too.

I grew up in Brewster and was known as “the Banker's Daughter.” People assumed I had it made. I didn't realize this until junior high when I heard Wayne Hughes call after me as I walked down the school hall, “Hey, Money Bags, why don't you throw some our way?” He elbowed his friend David, and they laughed, “Mon-ey Bags! Mon-ey Bags! Ha-ha-ha!”

I remember looking around, smiling, wanting to be in on the joke. Up until that moment I'd thought I was one of the group. When I looked around, there was no one else there, and suddenly it hit—they were laughing at me.

That day became a moment that defined my life. I'd never thought of myself as different from the other kids in my class. We grew up together, skinned our knees on the same playground, and swiped tomatoes from old Mrs. Hanner's garden. But just like that, I saw myself through another kind of mirror. One with a new reflection—someone else's prejudices. My classmates had decided they

didn't like me because they thought I was rich. Even though I received a small weekly allowance and an occasional new outfit that my mother had sewn, according to Wayne and David, "She thinks she's better than the rest of us." Almost overnight I was ostracized from the group.

Who knows? Maybe I started acting differently, too. When my mother asked, "Why don't Missy or Paula ever stop over anymore?" I'd shrugged my shoulders as junior high kids have been shrugging them for ages, and I mumbled, "I dunno." But one thing I did know was that their laughter hurt, and ignoring them was the only way I knew to protect myself.

That was when I started insisting that everyone call me Olivia. Not Libby, as I'd been called until then. Libby had been one of the group. Olivia wasn't. Somehow the name Olivia set me apart from the others. Made me seem sophisticated and distant. Set up a barrier between me and the people I used to think of as my friends.

Of course there were other defining moments in my life, but that was a big one. It made a deep impression. I built up a barrier between myself and others that was almost impossible to break down.

But Anne did it.

With pure and simple kindness, she did it.



I was a bit uneasy the first time Anne invited me over. I was sure her house would be filled with those cutesy wooden country cut-out figurines that I'd never been able to stomach. If it was, what would I say?

But I was wrong. Her house was lovely. Of course, the black baby grand piano was the first thing I noticed.

"It was a gift from my parents," Anne explained. "I think they still felt guilty." Before I could ask what she meant, Anne sat down, running her fingers expertly up and down the keyboard, producing a sound I'd only heard coming from speakers in my living room. When she was done playing I pushed my jaw closed with my hand as a joke. But it wasn't funny; she was *good*.

Anne got up from the piano bench and apologized, "Sorry, I can't keep my hands off piano keys when I see them."

"Wow." I was speechless. I cleared my throat and tried not to sound dumbstruck, "Where? How? When did you learn to play like that?"

"Well, for one, it takes lots of practice, but I can't take all the credit. It's a gift."

"What do you mean? A gift from who?"

"From God." Anne tilted her face upward, smiling.

I'd never heard anyone talk like that before, and it made me nervous. I tried to make light of her comment. "If He's handing out gifts, I wish He'd give some to me."

"Oh Libby," Anne laughed, "you've got gifts, too. You've got the gift of words."

"Yeah, right." My words came out sounding sarcastic. "If that's my gift, how come I'm always putting my foot in my mouth?"

"I was referring to your ability to write. Your column." Anne pointed to her fridge where, sure enough, there hung my latest column.

"Oh, those words." I couldn't help but smile, a feeling of pride rising in my chest. Right away I stuffed it down. "My gift isn't amounting to much. Seven dollars a week for a couple hours of work. I bet even God's laughing about good old Olivia's gift."

"Libby, did you hear me earlier? God gives you the gift, but you've got to put it to use." Anne ran her fingers lightly over the piano keys. "I practice a couple hours every day, I play in church whenever I'm needed, and until I started teaching piano lessons, I didn't get paid a penny to share my gift. It's just..." Anne struggled to find the right words. "...just...well, a gift. A present from God to me. I have to work really hard to be good at it, but when I play it's pure joy. Using my gift for others is my way of giving it back to God."

Okay, I was squirming now. If I'd have wanted to hear a sermon I'd have gone to church. Anne must have sensed my uneasiness. She pulled the piano cover over the keyboard and asked if I wanted to see the rest of the house.

Ah yes, like fifteen minutes ago. Before this conversation.

I thought I had pushed Anne's words out of my mind, but they kept floating through my thoughts as she took me through the house. I didn't know then how often in the coming days they would reappear to haunt me like an old ghost.

The house wasn't very big. The piano definitely dominated the living room, but Anne had done wonders with paint and a little creative furniture placement. Two denim-covered, overstuffed arm chairs were backed up to the baby grand piano, a rustic-looking chest displayed between them.

"Kevin's grandpa made that." Anne pointed with pride at the chest; a framed picture of Grandpa sat on top. Anne had thrown a blanket over a worn-looking sofa that faced the chairs. "I've been looking for a red couch to replace this old college thing." Anne straightened the blanket a bit. "But I'm not buying one until I find a couch I love."

"You're going to get a red couch?" I'd never heard of a red couch, and it certainly would never have occurred to me to actually buy one.

"I love red," Anne explained. "I think every house needs a touch of red in it. Of course, a red couch would be more than a touch, but what can I say? I love red."

Oh yes, I'd heard that decorating tip from Emily.

It didn't take long for Anne to show me the rest of the house. Except for the living room it was small, but oh, so comfortable-feeling. And Emily was right; Anne's pretend apples in a blue bowl on her kitchen table were pretty.



I started accompanying Emily to her piano lessons just so Anne and I could work in a few more minutes of visiting. As badly as Emily had wanted us to become friends, even she grew tired of our constant chatter.

"Mo-om, An-ne," she would whine, banging the piano keys harder than necessary. "Stop talking and listen to me play."

Once, with beyond ten-year-old wisdom, she stopped playing and announced, "Remember Mom, you're paying for me to be taking this lesson."

Anne and I clapped our hands over our mouths, but before Emily had played five measures we were talking again. Emily gave up trying to get us to be quiet. She just played a little louder each week.

I felt extremely guilty about the way I'd treated Anne those first months she was in Brewster. I confessed to her that I had decided I wouldn't like her. I told Anne how I was afraid she would steal Jan and Connie away from me. Anne laughed hard at that and told me, "You should be so lucky." In an effort to be totally honest and to let her know just how petty I could truly be, I also told Anne how much it had bugged me the way she'd said, "Hiiii-yiii!"

That greeting became our private joke.

"Hiiii-iii-yiii-iii!" She'd exaggerate when I'd answer the phone.

I'd squeal back, "Hiiii-yiii to you, too." Then we'd giggle like ten-year-olds. My own resident ten-year-old would roll her eyes.

The one thing I could do to make up for the time we'd lost was to share the joy of Anne's pregnancy with her. Anne bubbled over every time she spoke of her "baby to be," as she called it. Sometimes she'd say, "baby for me," or "baby for we," meaning her and Kevin.

I hadn't had a chance to get to know Kevin very well. He seemed to be gone an awful lot. When I asked, Anne seemed resigned. "It's always been this way, Libby. I've accepted the fact that Kevin is a workaholic, and all the nagging in the world isn't going to change that fact. I'm hoping when our baby is born he'll naturally want to stay home more. But I've also decided that I'm not going to live my life waiting for him to come home, either."

Anne went on to explain how in the last couple of towns they'd lived in, she'd created a barrier, not unlike the one I'd created for myself, to keep from getting too close to people and then having to leave. But unlike me, Anne had had many best friends over the years. Just none lately. I could see by the cards perched on her shelves and windowsills that the friends she did have had not forgotten her. There were "Congratulations, you're having a baby!" cards everywhere I looked. I too added my congratulations to her treasure trove by sending Anne cards, even though I saw her nearly every day. I

brought her small presents—a rattle, a bib, and a tape of lullabies played on the piano. I almost felt as if this was my pregnancy, too.

How uncomplicated and carefree those early days of our friendship seem now. Anne was filled with joy, and so was I. I'd never known how wondrous it could be to have a best friend.

I'd never imagined how hard it could be, either.

Anne

It was April, four months into my pregnancy, and it was so exciting to have a girlfriend who cared about this baby as much as I did. Libby seemed to hang on my every word as I described the changes in my formerly trim body. I'd never been obsessed with my figure, but I have to admit, the day I couldn't, absolutely *couldn't* zip up my favorite jeans, I learned that a sleek physique was more important to me than I'd thought.

During those first months of my pregnancy, Kevin was attentive. Well, let's put it this way—Kevin was as attentive as he was ever going to be. I know he tried to listen to my glowing descriptions of what was happening inside my body. And I know it was truly wonderment I saw cross his face the first time he felt the baby kick. But Kevin remained Kevin. There, but preoccupied. And not even there all that much. When he was home, the next big customer was always on tomorrow's schedule. Always on his mind. Sometimes I envied those people because of the attention he gave them. But I was not going to let those feelings take away any of my joy. Besides, I had Libby.

Shopping for maternity clothes with her was a hoot. Maybe not for the salesclerk, but it was for us.

"Hey Anne, check this out." Libby walked out of the dressing room draped in a tent the size of a small country.

"No way. I am not getting that big."

"Wanna bet?" Libby turned full circle, the dress billowing around her in great folds.

Just then the formerly aloof salesclerk approached, a tight smile on her lips. "And just when is *your* baby due?"

Libby didn't miss a beat. "Ten years ago."

She bounced back into the dressing room. I crowded in behind her. Hugging our stomachs, we laughed until we were red in the face.

When the saleswoman called through the door in an unapproving voice, “I think you girls would be more comfortable in separate rooms,” we mouthed to each other, “girls?” and had another laughing fit.

At four months I really didn’t need maternity clothes; a big safety pin did the trick expanding my slacks. Actually it was a huge, old diaper pin that Libby had dug out of her collection of “ancient baby things,” as she called them. Libby was constantly telling me how things were during her years of having babies. There were only five years between us, Libby being older, but she’d had Brian in her first year of marriage—almost fifteen years ago—and it was amazing how things had changed.

She told me about using cloth diapers, rinsing them out in toilet water, soaking them in bleach, and washing them in hot water, twice. That chore alone made me glad we’d waited to have our baby. She also told me how I could heat up a bottle on the stove in a kettle, “just in case your microwave ever blows up.” And how she’d love to lend me a car seat, but they weren’t invented back then. “Okay,” Libby admitted when I questioned her, “maybe they did exist, but they weren’t the law.”

The only unchanging thing she could remember was how to prepare my breasts for nursing. And oh, how I wanted to nurse this baby. Libby talked to me in a woman-to-woman way, on a level I’d never experienced before. She was like the sister I’d always hoped to have.

People always assume that having a twin sister means we’ve been joined at the brain since birth. Maybe some twins are like that, but Andrea and I were never close. Andrea had viewed me as competition since she was old enough to grab my bottle away. I spent most of my growing-up years trying to appease her for whatever I had done to make her angry. And it seemed like most everything I did made her mad—including my pregnancy.

I hadn’t given up trying to understand Andrea, but at times it had been hard to have her for a sister. Andrea had two children ages six and two. She had a hysterectomy right after Cari was born, and she’s been mad at anyone who’s been pregnant since—including me.

I'd been trying to keep baby talk to a minimum during our rare phone calls. That was why Libby's womanly baby advice had been so welcome.

I'd always been a modest person, so when Libby started talking to me about preparing my breasts for nursing, well, I could feel myself turning beet-red simply listening to her. But leave it to Libby to tell it like it is.

"Anne, you have to look at me." Libby grabbed my chin and turned my face to her chest. "Believe me, you'll thank me some day."

She then took a washcloth and showed me how to brush it back and forth across my breast to condition my nipples for nursing. All I could see was the design on her blouse moving back and forth as she demonstrated. It was making me dizzy.

But what she said made sense, and I promised her I would do this embarrassing exercise twice a day. And, I did.

It hurt.



Libby was like a prison warden following up on a parole violator when it came to doing that exercise. I didn't dare skip a day. I was into my second week of conditioning when I noticed the lump.

At first I thought it was just one of those body changes that came with any pregnancy and that had been occurring for me with almost daily regularity. Something so insignificant I ignored it for a week. But the next week, the lump felt a little bigger, and I mentioned it to Libby.

"Oh yeah, I had that too," she assured me in that matter-of-fact way of hers. "It's probably a swollen milk duct."

But it wasn't.

Olivia

I really did think it was nothing. The day Anne told me about the lump on her right breast I pooh-poohed it as if it was just another “welcome to motherhood” rite of passage. I’d had swollen milk ducts during both my pregnancies. It looked and felt exactly like what I’d had. Even the doctor agreed.

Anne waited for her regular monthly checkup, her five-month check, to ask the doctor about it. She told me Dr. Barry examined the lump thoroughly and said, given her age, in his opinion it was nothing to worry about. Probably just a swollen milk duct.

“Let’s keep a watch on it,” he said. “In the meantime, your blood pressure is a little high. Why don’t you swing by next week and have the nurse check it?”

Anne and I examined that lump daily. It was under her arm, and it was starting to hurt when she put her arm down close to her body. Both of us thought maybe it was getting infected—if a milk duct could get infected. We didn’t know.

The next week when Anne stopped in for her blood pressure check, she mentioned the pain she was starting to feel to the nurse. The nurse too said, “Oh, it’s probably a swollen milk duct. I’ll mention it to Dr. Barry and see if he wants to do anything about it.”

Dr. Barry did step in to take a look, but wasn’t too concerned. “Listen Anne, I’ve got a five-day conference out of town next week. I don’t think this is anything for you to worry about, so let’s give it another week to subside. If it doesn’t then we might want to consider sending you on for a few tests.” He gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder. “In the meantime, you go home and take good care of that baby.”

And that’s what she did.

Anne

It was time for my five-month check anyway, so when I saw Dr. Barry I was surprised when the first thing he said was, “Let’s take a look at that swelling under your arm.”

I thought for sure he would have forgotten about it.

It hadn’t gotten any better; in fact, the lump seemed bigger. Dr. Barry thought so, too.

“Mmmm, Anne,” he said as he gently prodded the side of my breast, “I don’t think you need to get alarmed about this, but I do want to send you over to Carlton. The hospital there is better equipped to biopsy something of this nature.”

“Bi-op-sy?” My voice cracked as I repeated the word. I probably sounded as though I didn’t even know what a biopsy was, because Dr. Barry jumped right in.

“Anne, as I said, this is nothing for you to get alarmed about. They’ll go in and take a small tissue sample from this area.” He gently rubbed his fingers over the lump. “I’m trying to play it cautious. A lot of doctors would say let’s just watch this for a couple months. But if it turns out to be something, well, then we’ve lost a couple months. If you know what I mean.”

I really didn’t know what he meant. “What are you trying to tell me?”

Dr. Barry seemed uncomfortable, but he looked me straight in the eye and said directly, “Anne, there is an outside possibility that this could be cancerous.”

Okay. He’d said it. The word that had been floating around in the back of my mind for a month. Cancer. My hands went immediately to my stomach and my first thought was a prayer: *Dear Lord, protect my baby.*