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Tales from Grace Chapel Inn



The Kindness of Strangers

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Guideposts

New York

The Kindness of Strangers

ISBN-10: 0-8249-3221-8

ISBN-13: 978-0-8249-3221-3

Published by Guideposts

16 East 34th Street

New York, New York 10016

Guideposts.org

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Distributed by Ideals Publications, a Guideposts company

2630 Elm Hill Pike, Suite 100

Nashville, TN 37214

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Meier, Susan.

The kindness of strangers / Susan Meier.

p. cm. — (Tales from Grace Chapel Inn ; bk. 23) 1. Sisters—Fiction. 2. Bed and breakfast accommodations—Fiction. 3. Pennsylvania—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3563.E3463K56 2013

813'.54—dc23

2012029304

Cover design by Müllerhaus

Cover illustration by Deborah Chabrian

Interior design by Marisa Jackson

Typeset by Aptara, Inc.

Printed and bound in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Acknowledgments



*B*ehind so many good writers is a patient spouse. My husband Mike is no exception. He deserves at least half the credit for everything I do!

—Susan Meier

GRACE CHAPEL INN



A place where one can be
refreshed and encouraged,
a place of hope and healing,
a place where God is at home.

Chapter One



Louise Howard Smith sat at the kitchen table of Grace Chapel Inn studying Florence Simpson. Wearing a yellow dress with her brown hair fixed in a neat twist, Florence had dropped in that sunny May morning for an unannounced visit, and Louise wasn't quite sure what to make of it.

When Louise and her sisters decided to turn their family home into a bed-and-breakfast after their father's death, Louise immediately realized that she would have to adjust to the easy familiarity with which the residents of the small Pennsylvania town of Acorn Hill conducted themselves. Most of her adult life, she had lived in Philadelphia with her now deceased husband, Eliot, where neighbors were seen and heard, but personal connections were rarely made. Florence had been one of her greatest challenges.

Though stout, Florence was a reasonably attractive woman for her sixty-plus years. Unfortunately, she could be a bit aggressive and self-centered. She didn't seem to notice that Louise's sister Jane was cleaning the kitchen after having served breakfast to the guests, or that Louise herself was preparing to check out the ones who would be leaving after their weekend stays. "Would you like a sweet bun, Florence?" Jane asked, always a pleasant hostess.

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At fifty, Jane was the youngest of the three Howard sisters. She had long, dark hair that she wore in a ponytail, fair skin and blue eyes. A white bib apron covered her blue jeans and bright-pink shirt. An experienced chef, Jane was happy to serve her company.

“Why thank you, Jane.” Florence reached for one of the warm buns on the plate Jane offered to her.

As Florence took a bite, a gentle breeze through an open window stirred the white curtains. They complemented the warm paprika paint on the cupboards, which, along with the rows of colorful tile on the backsplash, gave the room a welcoming feel to balance the professional look of the stainless-steel appliances and the black-and-white floor tiles.

“What brings you here today?” Louise asked. She smiled but was eager to get on with the conversation. She wanted a minute before a mirror to make sure that her beige skirt and matching sweater set as well as her hair were still neat before she checked out their latest guests, the Olsens and the McQuaids.

“I got a really great idea last night. Something I’m certain will attract guests to your inn for the Memorial Day weekend.”

Jane smiled as she poured Florence a cup of coffee. “We’re already booked for the Memorial Day weekend.”

Florence’s penciled eyebrows drooped when she frowned. “Really?”

“The bit of advertising we do and word of mouth worked very well to bring in guests for the holiday,” Louise responded politely.

“That’s great,” Florence said, but her frown deepened.

Though Jane was sliding the breakfast dishes into slots in the dishwasher, she noticed Florence's unhappy expression and asked, "What's your idea?"

"Well..." Florence hesitated.

That brief pause confused Louise. She could only speculate that Florence had expected a much more enthusiastic reaction to the fact that her plan could potentially bring business to Grace Chapel Inn.

"I would like the residents of Acorn Hill to put on a talent show."

Jane turned from the dishwasher. "A talent show?"

"It could be something we do for free to entertain people who are visiting relatives here for the weekend."

Louise said nothing as she thought through the idea. Memorial Day weekend was only four weeks away, which didn't leave much time for practice. Also, a talent show required music. Louise was an accomplished pianist who had accompanied college students, mainly vocalists, while she lived in Philadelphia. Here in Acorn Hill she played organ for Grace Chapel and taught piano. Florence could want Louise to provide the music.

Jane lifted two cups from the counter and set them in the dishwasher tray. "But people who are visiting relatives don't need to be entertained. They'll be occupied with catching up."

Florence sat up straighter in her chair. "That's exactly my point. We always think we need an entire weekend for catching up, but by Sunday night everybody's all talked out. If we had a talent show, then everybody could bring their company to the

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elementary school auditorium and not have to be bored for three hours.”

Louise’s mouth fell open. “*Three hours?*”

Florence’s hand fluttered to the collar of her white cotton blouse. “Well, yes. The town has plenty of people with talent. And I’m sure some of the acts, such as the singers, should perform two numbers.”

Florence’s “show” would run much longer than their community productions typically ran. That meant extended practice sessions. With only four weeks until Memorial Day weekend, they might be able to pull off a two-hour show if they rushed. A three-hour show would be a nightmare. To have any hope of success, they would have to get started right away.

Florence patted Louise’s hand before she rose from her seat. “Just think about it. If three hours doesn’t work for you, we could consider a two-hour show,” she said as she headed for the kitchen door. “I’ll be back tomorrow.”

As Florence pushed open the screen door, Jane said, “See you tomorrow, Florence.”

Louise watched their guest walk across the porch, down the steps and out of her line of vision, which also meant she was out of hearing range.

Jane turned from the dishwasher and faced Louise. “Why on earth does she want to put on a talent show?” she asked with a giggle.

“I have no idea.”

“Well, *you* better believe she wants you to accompany the acts.”

Louise nodded. "I realized that."

"Wonder why she didn't ask?"

"She probably didn't want me to say no," Louise said, rising from her seat at the table. "She's giving me twenty-four hours to warm up to the idea of how much fun it could be."

Jane's face puckered with confusion. "She thinks that after twenty-four hours you're going to think it will be so much fun to have a talent show that you'll agree?"

Louise shrugged. "Who knows what Florence Simpson thinks? We'll just have to wait until tomorrow to find out."



Alice Howard walked into the reception area of the Potterston Hospital dialysis unit, where she was filling in for a nurse who was on an extended vacation. Alice closed the door behind her, but as she turned toward the desk to pick up a chart, something slammed into her, knocking her back a step. She blinked to adjust her focus and saw a little boy.

"Jeff!" a voice called out.

Alice heard a woman's cry at the same time that she saw a man catch the little boy's arm and pull him away.

"Jeff, I've told you a thousand times—no running!" scolded the man who Alice assumed was Jeff's father. Tall and husky with dark brown hair, he smiled apologetically at Alice. "I'm sorry about Jeff."

"No problem," Alice said, smoothing her uniform. "No harm done."

Jeff's father nestled him against his side. "Jeff still hasn't learned the difference between outside manners and inside manners. We're getting there, but it's been slow going."

A blond woman stepped from behind Jeff's father and took the boy's free hand. "If he doesn't soon learn to be more careful around the patients and staff, we won't be able to bring him to any more of my dialysis sessions. I'm Myra Swanson, by the way." The woman offered her hand to Alice. "And this is my husband, Brett."

"I'm Alice Howard," Alice said, shaking Myra's hand, then her husband's. "I think it's a great idea to have your kids come with you so they can see there's nothing mysterious or frightening about dialysis."

"That was our thought," Brett agreed. "We don't bring them every time, but we like to have them attend once a month to see that everything's still fine."

Alice nodded. "Sounds like you're old pros at this."

Myra laughed. "I've been having dialysis for three years now."

Alice couldn't stop herself from looking at the three children behind Brett. Two teenagers, a pretty blond girl who looked like her mother and a lanky brown-haired boy, appeared laid-back about the situation. But hyperactive Jeff couldn't be any older than six, and Alice wondered if his inability to sit still might mean he wasn't as accepting or understanding of his mother's situation.

"Okay, let's get going," Brett said to the children. He smiled at Alice. "Sorry again about Jeff crashing into you."

"Just an accident." Alice patted the little boy's head.

Brett pushed open the glass door and held it for his family as they exited. When they arrived at their red minivan, Alice waved goodbye, but as they drove out of the parking lot, her smile faded. As a nurse, she knew dialysis wasn't a cure for kidney disease; only a transplant was. She also knew there were about three times as many people waiting for transplants as there were kidneys available. But even more important, Alice knew that people on dialysis didn't lead easy lives. Immediately after their treatments, most were full of energy, but as their next session neared, they became tired and listless.

A woman with a little boy who couldn't sit still probably had a very challenging routine.



When Alice returned home that night, she was exhausted. The regular dialysis-unit nurses had told her that Mondays were their busiest day, and now she had no reason to doubt them.

She stepped into the kitchen of Grace Chapel Inn, and the scent of beef and something fruity awakened her senses. Her mouth watered.

"I'm starving," she said to her sister Jane, who was setting dishes on the kitchen table. The sisters ate most of their meals together in the kitchen, as a family, rather than in the beautiful formal dining room.

"You only have about ten minutes before dinner," Jane said with a laugh. "Just enough time to freshen up."

"Great!" Alice said. She walked to the wide staircase of the front hall and up the steps to her room.

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Her private space was a haven of peace and tranquility with walls painted buttery yellow. An antique patchwork quilt of pastel yellow, green and violet covered the bed. The rug of the same colors Alice had braided herself.

She quickly washed her face and hands, then changed out of her uniform and into jeans and a simple yellow blouse that accented her reddish-brown hair.

When she returned to the kitchen, Jane was setting plates of apricot beef with sesame noodles onto the table.

“I thought we were eating low fat,” Alice teased as she took her usual seat.

“This isn’t exactly low fat, but it’s better fat. I used olive oil. It contains omega fats, which help with everything from brain function to maintaining healthy cells. I found a great recipe, then trimmed the beef and switched from regular vegetable oil to olive oil. We’ll see if you can taste the difference.”

Louise pushed through the swinging door into the kitchen. Wearing a simple cotton skirt with a sweater set, she looked proper and dignified, but comfortable. “The difference in what?”

“Jane made apricot beef with sesame noodles,” Alice said. “But she made it with better fat.”

“Better fat?” Louise questioned as she took her seat. “All I can say is if it tastes as good as it smells, we will be in luck.”

Jane brought vegetables and a basket of fresh bread to the table, then sat. Louise said grace, after which Alice took a piece of the beef and passed the serving platter to Louise.

“How was your day, little sister?” Alice asked, reaching for the basket Jane handed to her.

Jane laughed. “My day was fine, but I think Louise is being hoodwinked into one of Florence Simpson’s schemes.”

Louise rolled her eyes, and Alice glanced from one sister to the other. The oldest, Louise always looked picture-perfect in her cardigan and pearls. On the other side of the table, baby-sister Jane wore an orange T-shirt over trendy jeans. It wasn’t unusual for Jane to find humor in things that Louise considered disastrous.

“So what’s Florence’s scheme?” Alice asked when neither sister said anything further.

“She wants to put on a talent show,” Louise said resignedly.

Alice thought about that for a second, then said, “Why?”

“That’s a very good question,” Louise said.

“Yes,” Jane agreed, “but the real problem is that she’s probably going to ask Louise to accompany the acts.”

“Oh,” Alice said. She took a bite of her dinner and sighed in ecstasy. “This is scrumptious, Jane.”

Jane grinned. “I knew it would be. Plus, the feeling of being full that olive oil gives you lasts longer.”

“The meal is wonderful, Jane,” Louise complimented.

“Much better than being forced to accompany a bunch of questionably talented people?” Jane teased.

“It isn’t their talent that’s the problem,” Louise said. She took another bite of her dinner, savoring it, then said, “The real problem is that this could take a great deal of my time, depending upon how much practice each person needs.”

“That’s true,” Jane agreed.

Louise sighed. “But I also feel that I should participate in the community. If this is something everyone in town wants to do, I should be involved.”

Jane frowned. “That’s true too.”

Louise turned to Alice. “What do you think?”

Alice glanced up from her dinner. “I’m sorry. I didn’t hear what you said.”

“I asked if you think I should be a part of Florence Simpson’s talent show.”

Alice opened her mouth to say something, but no words came out. As Jane and Louise were discussing the talent show, her mind drifted to Myra Swanson. Alice couldn’t shake her concern over the poor woman’s having to keep up with a young son. She had also remembered that the survival rate for patients with kidney disease dropped dramatically after five years of dialysis. The possibility existed that Myra could die from her condition and leave her little boy motherless.

She took a quick breath. “I’m sorry. My mind is wandering. I met a patient today who has been having dialysis for over three years.”

Louise’s expression turned sympathetic. “And how serious is that?”

Alice shrugged. “Everybody’s different. Some people live great lives for decades on dialysis, but other people don’t.”

“And you think this woman is one of the ones who will have trouble?” Jane asked.

Alice shook her head. "I don't know. I never saw her chart. I only met her because her little boy bumped into me when I went into the reception area."

Louise perceptively said, "Her *little* boy?"

"*Very* little boy," Alice said. "He's only about six."

"I see why you're concerned," Jane said.

Louise took a long breath. "Alice, I think it's wonderful that you have such a big heart. But in this instance you may be looking on the dark side. As you said, this woman could be healthy for decades on dialysis."

Alice nodded. "I know. She could be doing very well. And she's only in her forties. Nine chances out of ten, she's healthy."

"Still," Jane said, "her son is awfully young. If he's six, I'll bet he's a bundle of energy. Worse, she has twelve years until he's eighteen. She must worry that she might leave her child without a mother."

Alice closed her eyes. She hadn't forgotten that Jane had been raised without a mother. It was more that she was so preoccupied with Myra Swanson that she hadn't made the connection sooner. "I'm sorry, Jane. I didn't mean to bring up something that would hit you so close to home."

Jane shrugged. "Actually, it feels sort of good to be the one who can comment the most knowledgeably on a situation for once." She grinned. "You two are so smart about people and life that I sometimes feel like a true baby sister."

"So, Jane, what *do* you think?" Louise asked.

"I think that Alice is 'looking on the dark side.'"

Louise groaned. Alice laughed. “You’re teasing is just what I need to pull me out of this gloomy mood.”

“I understand your mood, Alice,” Jane said. “I would be concerned about that little boy growing up without a mom too. But I think Louise is correct. This is one time when you would be worrying for nothing if you fretted over this before you knew more of her story.”

“You’re right,” Alice agreed. Then she burst out laughing. “So do you want to go back to talking about Florence Simpson’s talent show?”

Louise sighed again. “You know what? After cautioning Alice about pessimism, I think I might be worrying for nothing too. After all, Florence hasn’t even asked me to be an accompanist.”



But that night when she was in bed, Louise knew Florence was going to ask her to provide the accompaniment for the talent show. There really wasn’t anybody else in town who could spare the time for practices, and she inclined toward accepting the task if asked. Alice’s news about the dialysis patient added a new dimension to Louise’s decision. With so many people in the world having real problems, it seemed petty for Louise to refuse to help, particularly since she enjoyed being part of the small community.

Of course, Florence hadn’t really given a good reason for her talent show. Providing something for visitors to do on Sunday night of a holiday weekend didn’t seem like a realistic motivation,

considering all the work necessary for a production like a talent show. Louise couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to this situation than met the eye.

Though she wouldn't say anything to her sisters, she had a suspicion there was a hidden agenda behind Florence's grand idea.

And Louise would bet her bottom dollar it benefited Florence.