

VIGNETTES

Beginnings

- by Judith Nolan ©

"I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will."

- **Charlotte Brontë**

Mary...

Mary Beecher sat on the bench in the park and watched the children playing in the sunshine. The sound of their chattering laughter twisted like a knife in her heart, but she couldn't help herself. She still came here every day, sometimes staying all day when she was off work. Since her beloved family had been killed in a collision, her tiny rented apartment felt cold and empty. She hated being there. It had been more than two years now, but it still wasn't a home. She knew it never would be, but she had nowhere else to go.

She ached in every muscle and sinew. She knew she should be trying to snatch a couple of hours of much-needed sleep, but a strange sense of restlessness had drawn her into the park. It was as if she hoped something would distract her from the dreary emptiness of her life.

Heaven knows she could do with a miracle or two right about now. She smiled sadly at the fanciful thought, feeling tired and defeated beyond belief. She inhaled deeply as she scrubbed at her cheeks with both hands, trying to erase all traces of the tears that had tracked down her face. She felt embarrassed to be seen crying in public, but it was becoming a tiresome habit she found difficult to break.

So intent was she on regaining her composure, she barely noticed the little girl who approached quietly to sit down beside her until a small hand reached to pat her forearm.

"It's okay," a sweet, piping voice said.

"Is it?" Mary gasped, laying her own hand impulsively over the little girl's. Jenny used to say that all the time. If Mary closed her eyes, she could still see her six-year-old daughter's innocent face frowning with concern. *"It's okay, Mommy. It's okay..."*

But it wasn't okay. Not anymore. Not since Jenny had died...and Aaron and Ben... Mary's sobbing breath hitched in her throat, making it difficult to breathe. She turned to look down at the little girl beside her. She frowned, wondering about the child's mother. It was not safe to let such sweet, little ones wander off and talk to strangers.

Then she noticed a dark-haired young woman watching her from a short distance. There was a marked resemblance between her and the little girl sitting beside Mary. She smiled tentatively and the young

mother smiled back. Mary couldn't help noticing they were both dressed in an odd assortment of cast-offs, as if they were homeless. Her heart contracted with pity.

"So, what's your name?" she queried the child.

"Amelia." The little girl smiled brightly. "That's my mom." She indicated the young woman. "I asked her if I could sit here with you today. I wanted to tell you a secret. A big secret. Mommy said I could. I wanted to make you smile, because you always look so sad."

"Ah, you sweet, little thing." Mary stifled a fresh flood of tears. She wanted to hug Amelia, but she restrained herself. Then she frowned. "Always?" she questioned.

"Yes..." The word hissed through the gap caused by the child's missing front teeth. She smiled. "We come here a lot, to play in the sunshine. You've been here every day. I've seen you."

"You have?" Mary was astonished the little girl would even bother to notice.

"Father says we need to look out for everyone. Make sure they're okay." Amelia nodded wisely. "It's our job. It's important."

"Well, that's a nice thing to say," Mary approved. "Your father sounds like a very good man."

"Oh, he's not *my* father." Amelia's auburn curls danced vigorously with her head-shake of denial. "He's everyone's father. He takes care of everybody. You'll like him."

"I will?" Mary was becoming more confused by the minute with the odd trend of this conversation.

She glanced at her watch. She really should be getting back to her apartment. But its bleak silence was what often drove her to seek solace in the park. She desperately needed to sleep, even if she had to finally admit defeat and take an extra dose of the pills the doctor has prescribed. Her life was slowly spiralling out of control, and she felt unable to prevent it from happening.

The child's mother approached slowly and sat down beside her daughter. She surveyed Mary closely.

"You're a midwife over at the hospital, aren't you?"

"Yes I am." Mary considered the other woman's fresh loveliness, wondering how she knew. The two of them may be dressed in rags, but they both looked clean and healthy. The sweet scents of beeswax and candle-smoke clung to their clothing. Maybe not homeless then, just different. Hippies left over from the 60's perhaps. New York was full of alternative cultures and lifestyles. Mary felt Amelia's small hand creep into hers and grip it tightly.

"Where we live, we could use a good midwife." The child's mother sighed. "I lost my last baby because she was born too early. There were...complications." She held out her hand. "My name's Sara. Emma said we would find you here. We've been watching you for some time now and you always look so sad. We thought we might be able to help."

"Why would you be watching me?" Mary demanded to know, even as she returned the gesture, taking the other woman's hand briefly. "What did Emma tell you?" Emma was a good friend of hers, a nurse from the hospital. She'd tried her best to help when Mary's family had been killed by an out-of-control, drunk driver. But nothing eased the pain, which seemed to grow rather than diminish with time.

"That you lost your husband and children in a car crash and you've been questioning everything ever

since. You've been asking if you're really making any kind of difference in this world. And what's the point of it all anyway?" Sara's voice dropped, and she sighed. "That you have...contemplated suicide."

"Oh my dear..." Mary swallowed tightly then she nodded. "Yes, I did say that. And once, I did wonder about ending it all. But I fail to see why it's any of your concern. I'm a stranger to you."

"Because I care. Emma knows all about our circumstances and she's tries to help us where she can." Sara looked at her closely, holding her gaze. "As I said, where we live, we could use a good midwife. It's a place where you could make a difference; a really big difference, just by coming and helping us. It's a place where you could find a family again. Maybe even find a new love, in time."

She glanced down at Amelia. "There are lots of children there. We take in all those we can find room for, orphans and strays; the homeless. Many of them have been...hurt by those who should've cared for them, but didn't. One in particular is very special. They can get a bit wild sometimes, so they really need someone to look after them - love and care for them as if they were your own. Would you like to do that?"

More than anything in the world... Mary tightened her lips against the impulsive answer. She knew nothing about this woman, or where she lived. "Perhaps..." she allowed cautiously.

"Then met us here a week from today." Sara stood up, taking her daughter with her. "Bring only what you really need in the way of clothing and personal items. We will help you with anything else."

"Wait..." Mary put out a detaining hand. "Where is this place? Where are you taking me? I can't just leave everything behind on a whim."

"Why not?" Sara questioned directly. "Emma understands. She will help you get things sorted. What do you really have here? All you need to know, is that this is a place where the children really need you, where you will be safe and loved. You will never need to cry again and you will sleep like a baby every night. Does that sound like heaven to you?"

"Oh, yes..." Mary's face crumpled and the tears began to flow anew.

"I told you it was a big secret." Amelia came back to throw her small arms around Mary's neck and hug her tightly. "But it'll be okay. You'll see," she whispered into her ear and sorrowing heart. "I love it there. You will too. It's one big family. We look out for each other."

Mary pulled back to stare at her. "How can you be so sure?"

"Because I believe..." The little girl smiled. "It's a magic place. Just wait, you'll see. We're special."

"Until next Wednesday then?" Sara questioned.

"Next Wednesday." Mary nodded. *What did she have to lose but her aching loneliness? To watch over children and guide their steps...it truly sounded like heaven...*

She wiped away her tears as she watched them leave and her heart warmed with anticipation. She looked around and the park and somehow the colours seemed brighter now, and the children's chattering laughter no longer cut so deeply. Maybe it was going to be all right, after all. *Just maybe...*

END