

Pushing Up Daisies

Chapter 3

It was Jen's day off, and time to tackle the chores she'd been ignoring. Spring was already beginning to surrender to summer, and the days of open windows and cool breezes drifting through the kitchen would soon be gone. Before long, humid air would settle in like a perpetual sauna.

The thought of spending long hours waiting tables only to return to a hot, stuffy house made her sigh. She was used to Maine weather, where cool ocean breezes were part of everyday life. Some mornings she could close her eyes and remember the salty scent of the sea and the cry of gulls overhead.

Jen couldn't afford to live on the coast anymore, and she missed it more than she cared to admit. Still, God had blessed her with this quaint little house tucked away on a quiet street in central New Jersey. It wasn't near the ocean, but she could reach a beach in less than an hour. More importantly, the rent was affordable, assuming she didn't plan on eating.

That's where working at Dee's Diner came in handy.

Charlie had taken a liking to her the first day she wandered into the kitchen and offered to help. Most of the waitresses spent slow periods chatting by the coffee station or scrolling through their phones, but Jen needed to keep moving. Whenever business slowed, she found something to do, and Charlie appreciated the extra help. In return, he made sure she never left empty-handed.

The take-home containers weren't exactly filled with gourmet cuisine. Charlie believed every recipe could be improved with an extra scoop of gravy. Still, the food was hot, filling, and free.

Another blessing.

If she focused on the blessings, maybe she could avoid spending time complaining. It was too easy to dwell on everything she'd lost.

Jen set the basket full of cleaning supplies on the table and slid a step-stool up to the small side window. She needed to keep her mind off the past and on her cleaning, but that wasn't easy. She missed her childhood home. She missed the family she loved. She missed the life she'd once imagined for herself.

Circumstances had forced her into this existence. It wasn't fair, but it was the only way to keep everyone safe.

Jen grabbed a fresh rag from the cleaning basket and began wiping streaks of dirt from the windowpane. Sunlight filtered through the glass, illuminating tiny specks of dust dancing in the air. Somehow, cleaning always helped. When the house was clean, she felt a little cleaner herself.

At least on the outside. The inside was another matter.

She knew God's commands, but hadn't followed them. It was something she couldn't forget, or forgive. No matter how often she prayed, no matter how many times she read that God's grace was sufficient, she couldn't bring herself to accept it.

God might have forgiven her.

She wasn't sure she would ever forgive herself.

She closed her eyes. If she could only go back to that day. The memory of how she'd angrily faced Lilly surfaced with painful clarity.

"I can't believe you came here." Jen stood in the doorway of her apartment, wishing she'd never answered the knock. For a moment, she hadn't even recognized Lilly. The confident, stylish girl she'd known in high school was gone. Her oversized sweatshirt was stained and dirty, and her jeans were ripped in all the wrong places. They weren't the fashionable kind sold in expensive boutiques, but the kind that spoke of homelessness and neglect.

"I needed somewhere to go." She shifted from foot to foot, glancing nervously down the hallway as if expecting someone to appear at any moment.

Jen crossed her arms. "I don't want to be dragged into whatever you've gotten yourself into. You need to leave."

Lilly swallowed hard. Her hands trembled slightly. She didn't move from the door.

"Just one night, Jen. Please, just one night, and then I'll go."

"What difference is one night going to make?" Jen said.

"Please." Tears slipped down Lilly's cheeks as she brushed them away with the sleeve of her sweatshirt. "I promise, I'll be gone in the morning. I just need a little time to figure out what to do."

Despite herself, Jen hesitated. Lilly had been her best friend all through high school. They'd shared secrets and dreams for the future. They'd giggled over cute boys and helped each other dress for junior prom. Then Jen accepted the Lord, and little by little, Lilly drifted away.

The loss had hurt more than Jen ever admitted. Even now, years later, some of that ache remained.

Against her better judgment, she stepped aside and let Lilly enter.

She gave her a towel so she could shower, threw her clothes into the wash, and left a nightshirt outside the bathroom door. After making up the sofa, Jen went to her room and slammed the door.

The next morning, no amount of Lilly's pleading could convince Jen to let her stay another day.

Fear had replaced sympathy. There was something very not right with Lilly. Jen packed a duffel bag with some of her old clothes, added a few toiletries, and handed it over. She felt God's gentle nudge. There was something more important than a bag full of clothes that she had to offer Lilly.

"Can I pray with you before you go?"

"You're kidding, right?" Lilly looked at her with hard eyes. "I don't have time for your foolishness."

Jen swallowed the hurt, pulled the door open, and wished Lilly luck. She watched her walk down the hall, chiding herself for feeling the same old ache. Lilly hadn't even thanked her. Jen closed the door and locked it.

Afterward, she leaned against the wall and told herself she'd done the right thing.

Keeping Lilly at a distance was best for both of them.

Looking back, she realized that was the beginning of the end.

Jen opened her eyes and resumed scrubbing at the stubborn dirt clinging to the window. After a moment, she paused and leaned on the sill. Outside, the trees swayed gently in the warm breeze, their leaves bright green against a cloudless blue sky.

Every branch reaches up toward you, Lord. Living perfectly, as you planned. Unlike me.

Movement in the side yard caught her eye. Millie practically skipped across the grass, charged up Jen's back steps, and pounded on the door.

Oh, no. Millie must have snuck out again.

It had been two weeks since the first time, and Jen prayed Millie wasn't arriving with another stack of cash. She still had no idea what to do about the money, but at least it wasn't sitting in the onion basket anymore.

Lord, I never thought I'd be happy for a hole in the wall, but you provided the perfect hiding place.

The previous tenants had left behind a faded picture of the Eiffel Tower hanging oddly high on a wall. At first, it made no sense. Then she'd tried to take it down and discovered a neatly boxed-in square opening hidden behind it. Someone had designed it for storing secrets.

She couldn't remove the hole, but she could replace the picture. A print of the Holy Spirit now covered the hole, guarding the money tucked safely behind it.

"Hey. You in there?" Millie's high-pitched voice shattered the silence. The door swung open. "There you are. How come you didn't answer?"

"Sorry, Millie. I was cleaning, and I..."

"Well, next time me and Maisie Daisy will bang harder."

She marched into the kitchen and dropped into a chair, planting her elbows on the table and resting her chin in her hands. Fine white hair framed her deeply creased face. She was clearly dressed for an outing. Her favorite pink hat, trimmed with flowers around the brim, sat crooked on her head. Large pearl-and-rhinestone earrings sparkled against her sagging earlobes, and white gloves completed the ensemble. According to Millie, a lady wasn't properly dressed to face the world without a hat, a good pair of gloves, and earrings.

“Did you sneak out again?”

Millie’s mouth puckered into a disapproving pout.

“I can’t do nothin’ without somebody watching. I thought you were my friend. I thought you were different.” She pushed herself to her feet. “You gonna’ snitch on me?”

Jen quickly climbed down from the stool and dropped the rag at her feet.

“Oh, Millie, I am your friend. Why don’t we have some lemonade? We can sit and talk about all the wonderful blessings God has given us.”

Jen reminded herself not to mention Millie’s husband.

“I ain’t sure about blessings. Can’t remember one.”

Jen feared even talking about blessings might send the conversation in the wrong direction.

“I’m blessed,” she said, steering the conversation toward herself. “I have a new friend who wears the most beautiful earrings and likes my lemonade.”

Millie’s expression softened into a grin. “I just say it’s good cause I like you. It needs more sugar.”

Jen laughed and carried the sugar bowl to the table. Millie added three heaping spoonfuls, stirred carefully, then took a sip.

“That’s more like it.” She lifted her hand and toyed with one of her earrings. “Do you really like my earrings?”

“They’re beautiful, and they look lovely with your hat.”

Millie’s gaze drifted toward the half-cleaned window.

“A hat, a hat. The cat in the hat. It’s never this. It’s always that.”

Jen wasn’t entirely sure what that meant, but with Millie, it was usually best not to ask.

“It’s hot in here,” Millie said, peeling off her gloves finger by finger. “You need an air conditioner.”

Jen laughed. A faint breeze drifted through the open window, carrying the scent of freshly cut grass, but it did little to cool the kitchen. “Yeah, well, that takes money, something I have very little of.”

“What’d ya do with it?” Millie’s eyes widened with innocent curiosity.

Jen took a deep breath. “It’s your money. I’m just holding it for you.”

A pleased smile spread across Millie’s face. “See, I knew you were a good person. I can trust you.” Then her expression changed. Her eyes narrowed. “There’s more.”

“More?”

Millie sat up straighter and glanced over her shoulder, focusing on something only she could see. She nodded and waved her hand dismissively. “I wish you’d stay home and quit following me everywhere. I know what I’m doin’.”

Jen froze, waiting. The silence stretched for several seconds. Finally, Millie turned back around as if nothing unusual had happened.

“You been cleaning stuff?” she asked.

Good. A safe subject. No more talk of money. At least for now.

Sooner or later, Jen knew she’d have to ask where the cash was coming from. But first she needed Millie’s trust. Real trust that might eventually persuade her to talk about the money and, hopefully, what had happened to her husband. It would take time to get her talking about money and, hopefully, what had happened to her husband.

“I like cleaning.” Millie grabbed the bottle of glass cleaner and a rag. With surprising determination, she spritzed the window beside her chair and began wiping at the glass.

For a few seconds, she worked furiously. Then she stopped.

“Millie?” Is everything okay?”

Millie stared at her hand. “I got dirt on my gloves.” She rubbed at the thumb, her forehead creasing with concern.

“Not good. Not good. Only got two pairs of gloves, and I ain’t wearin’ dirty gloves.” She dropped the rag onto the table and headed for the back door.

Before Jen could respond, Millie was halfway across the porch.

Her singing drifted back.

“Where is Thumkin? Where is Thumkin? Here I am. Here I am. How are you today, sir? Got a dirty face, sir. Run away. Run away.”