

One Perfect Spring

A Novel

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To my parents, James and Dorothy Hannon,
as they celebrate sixty years of marriage.

Thank you for your example of faithfulness and devotion,
for your unwavering support and encouragement,
and for your unconditional love.

You are—and always have been—
the wind beneath my wings.

I love you more than words can say.

Prologue

Dear Mr. McMillan,

My name is Haley Summers. I'm 11 years old. I saw your picture in the paper from when you gave money to the childrens hospital. My mom said you do a lot of nice things for people. So I wanted to ask if you could do something nice for our friend next door.

A long time ago, she had a baby. But he got adopted and she never saw him again. Now she's sad and wishes she could find him. Her name is Doctor Chandler and her birthday is in May. She's going to be sixty and she's been real sick and this would cheer her up a lot.

She's a very nice lady. She teaches at a college and makes awesome cookies and gave me a present on my birthday last year. This year, I want to give her a present.

I hope you can help me. Thank you very much.

Haley

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It was going to be another late night at the office.

Keith Watson rotated the kinks out of his neck, leaned back in his chair, and grimaced at the intimidating stack of solicitations on the corner of his desk.

Donations from the McMillan Charitable Foundation might produce positive PR for the company, but press coverage for events like that check presentation at the children's hospital always stirred up a plethora of do-gooders—and good-for-nothing handout seekers. If past experience was any indication, there'd only be one or two appeals here worth passing on to David McMillan for consideration.

Keith tipped his coffee mug toward him. Nothing but dregs—and it was too late in the day to brew a new pot.

Too bad.

He could use a caffeine infusion.

Resigned, he set the mug aside. Why couldn't his boss have given this ongoing task to someone else eight months ago instead of dumping it on his desk? Sorting through pleas for money

wasn't the most productive use of an MBA/CPA's time—nor did it contribute to the construction company's bottom line. And David McMillan was all about the bottom line.

Or at least he used to be, back in the days when he took a hands-off approach to the foundation and delegated duties like this to the PR company they kept on retainer instead of to his executive assistant.

Who knew why he'd brought this job in-house?

Just one more thing that had changed in the past year.

Heaving a sigh, Keith tugged the stack toward him across the polished mahogany. If he wasn't heading out of town tomorrow, he could push the review off until the morning—but since he didn't have any big Friday night plans anyway, might as well wrap this up and be done with it.

Stomach growling, he checked his Rolex. Six o'clock. If he sped through the stack, he might be able to make it to his favorite Chinese takeout place before . . .

"I'm out of here." The administrative assistant he shared with David shrugged on her trench coat in the doorway to his office. "Do you need anything else?"

"I'm set—but why are you still hanging around? I thought Fridays were always date night with your husband?"

Robin made a face. "Not when you have two children who both decided to get the flu on the same day. John picked them up at school right after lunch. My evening will consist of forcing fluids and watching kids upchuck."

He winced. "That's almost worse than going through these solicitations. Almost."

"Trust me, it's worse. Besides, I spotted a couple of interesting requests in the stack that might keep you entertained."

"I'll bet." A bolt of lightning sliced through the dark clouds massed in the April sky outside his window, followed by a boom of thunder that rattled the glass. "But I doubt we'll ever top

the guy who claimed he'd inherited a map from the Middle Ages that would lead to a trove of never-discovered paintings by Michelangelo."

Robin grinned. "Yeah. As I recall, he wanted the foundation to fund his trip to Europe so he could scavenge around. What an angle. But he did offer to split the proceeds with us."

"Right."

She finished buttoning her coat. "So once you dig out from that pile of letters, any exciting plans for the weekend?"

"Other than going to the regional builders association dinner in Des Moines tomorrow night and visiting our office building project in Cedar Rapids on Sunday?"

"Whoops. Forgot about that. Maybe you could take a comp day next week."

"There's too much to do here."

She shook her head. "You need to get a life."

"I have a life. One I happen to like very much."

"More's the pity. Remember, all work . . ."

"Tell that to David."

"He's been a lot better about that since his wife died. Too bad it took a tragedy to make him see the light." She sent him a pointed look.

He waved her out the door. "Go home and take care of your sick kids. Once I get through this pile, I'm out of here."

"Until some new, urgent email comes in. But hey . . . it's your life." Another crash of thunder boomed through the building, and she cringed, surveying the pelting rain. "Looks like I'll be taking my evening shower en route to my car."

"No umbrella?"

"Plenty of them. All in the coat closet in my foyer."

Keith pulled out the bottom drawer of his desk and retrieved a collapsible version. "Take mine. The rain may let up before I'm ready to leave."

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Hesitating, she squinted out the window again. “I doubt this storm will end any time soon. You may need it.”

“I’m parked near the door—and I can run fast.”

“Sold.” She took the umbrella. Tapped it against her hand. “Are you ever caught unprepared?”

“Not if I can help it.”

“I wish some of your planning ability would rub off on me. Thanks for this”—she waved the umbrella at him—“and have a good trip to Iowa.”

As she disappeared out the door, the office fell silent. The rest of the staff had probably headed out closer to five, anxious to prepare for family events or primp for dates or gather with friends at a happy hour after a long week of work.

For one tiny second, Keith felt a touch of jealousy—but he quashed it before it could take hold. He’d chosen to focus on his career instead of a social life, and he had no regrets.

Jobs were a lot more predictable than people.

Psyching himself up for the task at hand, he picked up the first solicitation and dug in.

Forty minutes later, surrendering to a yawn, he set a plea from a funds-strapped sailing club on top of the large reject pile and turned his attention to the last appeal. Handwritten by an eleven-year-old girl, it had a certain childish charm. But help a woman find a son she’d tossed aside years ago? That didn’t even come close to meeting the parameters of the McMillan Charitable Foundation. While some of the requests had required a bit of thought, this was a no-brainer.

He added it to the reject pile, straightened the stack, then stood and stretched. A heaping plate of chicken broccoli with a side of egg rolls was sounding better by the minute.

Another crash of thunder shook the building, and he swiveled toward the window. Day had given way to night, and torrents of rain were slamming against the glass. So much for any hope

the storm would let up. Par for the course this time of year in St. Louis, though.

His stomach growled again, spurring him into action. He picked up the large stack of rejects in one hand. With the other, he snagged the only two requests worthy of further evaluation. After depositing them on Robin's desk with a note to send the usual form letter to the rejects and pass the two possibilities on to David, he grabbed his computer and briefcase and headed for the exit.

At the main door, he paused to survey the sheets of rain pummeling the asphalt. Who would have guessed this morning's blue skies would turn gray? Strange how unsettled weather could sneak up on you. Might as well plunge in—and hope for the best.

What else could you do when you found yourself in the middle of a storm?



At the discreet knock on his half-closed door Monday morning, David McMillan tucked the sheet of paper in his hand under a report on the side of his desk. “Come in.”

His executive assistant took a step into the office. “Robin said you wanted to see me as soon as I got in. Sorry I'm running a little late. My flight from Cedar Rapids had a weather delay last night and ended up being rescheduled until—”

“Keith.” David held up his hand. “You've been with this company for eight years, and my assistant for the past three. I know your work ethic. Have a seat.” He waved the younger man into the chair across from his desk. “How did the trip go?”

“Fine. The rubber-chicken dinner wasn't too exciting, but I made the circuit and spoke with the key players. I also took a quick look at the books in Cedar Rapids while I was there. Everything appears to be in order.”

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David studied the thirty-three-year-old go-getter across the expanse of burnished wood. Once upon a time—and for a very long time—that had been him. He’d wanted to get ahead, make a mark, create a security net for his family. And he’d succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. His wife and daughter had never lacked for any of the creature comforts.

But if he had it to do over . . . ?

He brushed that thought aside. It was too late for regrets. What was done was done. But perhaps he could keep another young man from making some of the same mistakes.

And the perfect opportunity had just dropped into his lap.

“Sounds like a worthwhile trip. I’m sorry it infringed on your weekend.”

Keith shrugged. “I didn’t have any plans that couldn’t be changed.”

“I bet your mother was disappointed when you didn’t make it for Sunday dinner.”

The other man shifted in his seat. “She understands my work can be demanding.”

“Maybe you can drop in on her some night during the week.”

David watched Keith squirm. Right about now, he was probably wishing he’d never mentioned his standing Sunday date with his widowed mother. When it came to his personal life, the man was as closemouthed as a savvy bass on a bad fishing day.

“Maybe.”

But not likely. Keith always stayed at the office until seven or eight, and his mother lived in South County, a good forty minutes away.

David pulled the sheet of paper from beneath the report. “I found this on the floor next to Robin’s chair this morning. One of the cleaning people must have knocked it off over the weekend. From the height of the stack on her desk, it appears

quite a few people noticed that check-presentation photo in the paper.” He handed the letter over. “Including a little girl.”

His assistant spared the note no more than a quick glance. “I’ll take care of this.”

“That’s exactly what I was going to suggest.”

Keith sent him a wary look. “What I meant was, I’ll make sure Robin sends the standard rejection letter.”

“And what I meant was that you should follow up on it.”

A couple of beats of silence passed before Keith responded. “This request is from an eleven-year-old. And it doesn’t meet any of the foundation’s parameters.”

“I agree it’s outside our charity’s normal scope of activities. So it will require some personal involvement—and perhaps a private donation. But it sounds worthwhile. An ailing woman, a long-lost son, a little girl with a compassionate heart—a touching scenario, don’t you think?”

A muscle twitched in Keith’s jaw, but he remained silent.

David waited him out.

“I could make a phone call. Get a little more information.” His tone was grudging, at best.

And David knew why.

Keith didn’t consider this kind of assignment to be productive work.

But productivity was measured by goals—and while following up on the little girl’s letter might not be productive in terms of Keith’s goals, it dovetailed nicely with his own.

“An excellent start. Let me know what you find out and we’ll go from there.” He leaned forward and drew a pile of reports toward him. “I’d like to get a roundtable together this week with some of the foremen to vet the draft of our bid for that apartment complex rec center. Can you set it up, call in the right people?”

“Of course.” Keith rose, scanned the girl’s letter . . . hesitated.

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The muscle flexed in his jaw again, but after a moment he continued toward the door.

Leaning back in his chair, David tapped a finger on the arm and watched his assistant exit. Keith was a good man—smart, capable, stellar work ethic, single-minded focus on the job at hand—all qualities that added up to a promising future. When Tom retired next year, it would be easy to slide Keith into the job of controller with nary a blip in operations.

In fact, that had been his plan for almost two years.

Now . . . he wasn't as certain.

David swiveled toward the credenza behind him. As always, Carol smiled back at him from the photo he'd snapped on their Mediterranean cruise three years ago. The one she'd insisted they take for their thirtieth anniversary, overriding his protests that things were too busy at work. They were always too busy, she'd claimed—and she'd been right. How many times through the years had he begged off family events with that excuse?

Too many.

Yet the light of love shone steady in her eyes despite her years of playing second fiddle to his work. Leaning against the railing of the ship, the blue sea behind her, she looked the picture of health and far younger than her fifty-seven summers.

Who could have guessed that one year later, she'd be dead?

His throat tightened, and a film of moisture blurred his vision.

So many missed opportunities to spend time with the woman he loved.

So many missed opportunities to attend Debbie's dance recitals and school plays and volleyball games.

So many missed chances to say "I love you" with attention and time as well as with words and material things.

He shifted his gaze toward the scene outside his window. After the long, cold winter, the tulips and forsythia bushes were finally in bloom. Carol had always called spring the season of

hope; for him, it had always been the season of headaches, often filled with costly rain and mud delays.

But these days he chose hope over headaches.

If only Carol had been around to witness his transformation.

And if only Debbie had been receptive to it—not that he blamed her for her coolness. Why should she be grateful for the attention he lavished on his grandchildren when he'd had so little time for her during her own childhood?

He wasn't giving up, though—even if that meant he had to spend more time from now on building bridges instead of pouring concrete.

And along the way, perhaps he could help another young man learn that no matter what drives a person's ambition, in the end the only success that really matters can't be measured by a balance sheet.



Hefting two plastic sacks of groceries in one hand and her overstuffed tote bag in the other, Claire Summers limped from the driveway toward her front door.

What a day.

The odds had to be astronomical that two of her second graders would throw up, the class's pet gerbil would die, and she'd slip and twist her ankle in the grocery store parking lot—all in the space of eight hours.

Then again, when had the odds ever been in her favor?

"This smells really good, Mom."

She looked down at Haley prancing along beside her, the sack with golden arches cradled in her arms—and her spirits lifted.

Thank you, Lord, for a daughter whose sunny disposition and kind heart are a constant reminder that not all of my luck has been bad.

“Don’t get used to it. You know how I feel about fast food.” That last-resort meal option was reserved for only the toughest days—and today certainly qualified.

“I know, I know. Home cooked is healthier and more nutritious.” Haley parroted her standard words back to her. “But I love French fries!”

Of course she did. What eleven-year-old didn’t?

Claire stepped onto the porch of their bungalow, set her tote bag down, and rummaged in her pocket for her key. As soon as they finished dinner, she was going to have to check out the garage door that had refused to budge this morning. “I like them too—in moderation. A little bit goes a long way . . . like with Hershey kisses.”

Haley scrunched up her face as she followed her through the door. “Yeah. I’ll never eat a whole bag at once again. Throwing up all night was no fun.”

“For me, either.” Claire plunked the grocery bags on the kitchen counter and dropped her tote on the floor next to the small island. “Why don’t you pour yourself a glass of milk while I get a—”

The phone rang, and she huffed out a breath. A survey or solicitation, most likely. Those calls always seemed to come at dinnertime.

She crossed to the counter. When an unfamiliar name blinked back at her from the digital display, she let the call roll to the answering machine.

While she filled a glass with ice and water from the fridge, the answering machine kicked in. “Please leave a message.” A beep sounded.

Silence.

The corners of her lips tipped up. Her pithy greeting surprised a lot of people . . . but why say more? Everyone knew the drill by now. If a phone went unanswered, either no one was home or the machine was being used to screen calls. As for the ubiq-

uitous beep—there wasn't a soul in the developed world who needed instructions for that.

In this case, either the person on the other end was still too taken aback to speak, or it had been an automated call that had disconnected when the machine answered.

As Claire slid into her chair at the table and picked up a fry, a male voice finally spoke.

“Good afternoon. This is Keith Watson with McMillan Construction. David McMillan received a letter from a Haley Summers at this address, and I'm trying to reach one of her parents. I'd appreciate a call at your earliest convenience.”

As the man recited his number, Claire looked at her daughter.

The little girl's eyes were wide, her fries forgotten. “Wow! I wasn't even sure the letter would get to him.”

“What letter?”

“The one I sent about Dr. Chandler.” Her face lit up. “I bet he's going to help me!”

Claire pushed aside her burger and folded her hands on the table. “Haley . . . let's start at the beginning. Why did you write a letter to this company—and what does it have to do with Dr. Chandler?”

At her serious tone, the little girl's smile faded. “Am I in trouble?”

“I have no idea until you tell me what you did.”

“I was just trying to give Dr. Chandler a really awesome birthday present.”

“Her birthday isn't until May.”

“I know, but it could take awhile to find her little boy.”

Claire's heart stumbled. How in the world did her daughter know about Maureen's son? She'd only found out herself three weeks ago. Unless . . .

“Were you eavesdropping on our conversation?”

“No.” Haley gave a vehement shake of her head. “But I heard

you talking about it when I got up to get a drink of water that night after we had pizza for dinner. Remember how pepperoni always makes me thirsty?”

“Yes. But you aren’t supposed to listen in on private conversations.”

“I didn’t mean to. I was coming down the stairs, but I stopped when I heard Dr. Chandler crying. I’ve never heard her cry before.” She poked a French fry into the ketchup but didn’t eat it. “She sounded so sad about her lost baby. I went back upstairs without my water, but I couldn’t go to sleep for a long time. I thought it might cheer her up if I could find him for her. Was that wrong?”

At the anxious question, Claire took a deep breath. Since the day she’d found an abandoned baby bird as a toddler, Haley had shown remarkable compassion for anyone—or anything—in need. It was a trait to be encouraged, not criticized . . . even if Claire still had no idea what the phone call from a construction company was all about. “It’s never wrong to want to help people. But why did you send a letter to this David McMillan?”

“Remember that picture of him in the paper, at the children’s hospital? You said he was giving them money because he liked to help people. I thought maybe he’d help me too. I wanted it to be a surprise, so I looked up the address of the company on your computer and asked Dr. Chandler for a stamp and sent him a letter.”

Claire could conjure up only a vague recollection of their exchange about the newspaper photo. No surprise there, since her inquisitive daughter asked dozens of questions every day.

“Did I do a bad thing?”

At Haley’s timid question, she reached across the table and patted her hand. “Your intentions were good, and I’m proud of you for wanting to help Dr. Chandler. But I’m sure Mr. McMillan won’t have time for a project like this. People in big companies

are very busy, and usually they do things that help a whole lot of people, not just one. Like the hospital donation.”

“Then why would a man from that company call us?”

Because he had a soft heart? A nice thought—but she wasn’t going to hold her breath. Most of the businesspeople she’d met weren’t the softhearted type.

Especially one.

“Mom? Why would he call us?”

Forcing her taut lips to relax, she refocused on her daughter. “I don’t know, but no matter what, Dr. Chandler shared that information with me in private—like a secret. I don’t think she wants a lot of people to know about her son.”

“Why not? And why did she give her baby to someone else, anyway?”

There were days when motherhood was easy and fun and the best job in the world.

This wasn’t one of them.

How did you explain to an eleven-year-old who still went to bed with her Raggedy Ann doll that their single, fifty-nine-year-old art professor neighbor had had a one-night stand twenty-two years ago that resulted in a baby?

Claire smoothed out a paper napkin and chose her words with care. “She wasn’t married, honey, and she wanted her baby to have a mother and a father.”

Haley poked at another fry. “I don’t have a father, and you kept me.”

A steady ache began to throb in her temples. “I was married when you were born, and you were already five when we got divorced. So your dad was part of your life.”

“Then how come I don’t remember him?”

Because once the marriage ended, he high-tailed it to the West Coast as fast as he could and never looked back. And he wasn’t home much before that, either.

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But she couldn't say that. *Wouldn't* say that. She wasn't going to demonize her ex-husband to their child—even if he deserved it.

“Like I've told you before, he had a busy job, and after he moved all the way across the country it was very hard for him to visit.” Lightening her tone, she slid the fries closer to her daughter. “Now we better eat up or our dinner is going to get cold.”

Haley opened her chicken nuggets. “So are you going to call that man back?”

“Yes. First thing tomorrow. But this is personal business for Dr. Chandler, so we have to let her handle it her own way and not interfere. Besides, her son is all grown up now. This happened a long time ago.”

Haley issued a protracted sigh. “Okay.” She popped a fry in her mouth and winced. “Eww! This is already cold.”

“I'll put everything in the microwave for a minute.” Claire gathered up the cardboard boxes, dispersed the food to plates, and set about rewarming their dinner.

“I wish I could remember my daddy.”

Better that you don't.

But again, her spoken words were different. “You have pictures.”

“That's not the same. And you never talk about him.”

“We got divorced, honey. I don't have very happy memories.”

“But you must have loved him in the beginning. You know, like in my storybooks.”

Had she? Those early days seemed long ago now. She'd been young and foolish and far too susceptible to flattery and a roguish eye. Only in hindsight had she recognized the truth of her parents' assessment—her romance had been more about lust than love.

Another subject she wasn't ready to discuss with her daughter.

Hoping to divert further questions, she pulled Haley's dinner out of the microwave and set it in front of her. “Dive in.”

Haley picked up a fry and took a tentative bite. “This is much better.” The youngster began to eat with gusto.

A minute later, the microwave pinged again. Claire removed her own plate and joined Haley at the small table against the wall. In general, this one-on-one time with her daughter was a favorite part of her day.

Yet all at once, she found herself wishing things had worked out better for her in the romance department. That she’d had the kind of ending found in Haley’s storybooks, where a couple rode off into the sunset and lived happily ever after. That she could warm up her disillusioned heart as easily as she’d warmed up their dinner.

A microwave for the heart.

Now there was a fanciful thought.

Pushing aside such whimsy, she picked up a fry, took a bite—and let out a yelp.

“What’s wrong?” Haley sent her a startled look.

“Hot.” She waved her hand in front of her mouth, then took a long swallow of cold water.

“Ouch.” Haley gave her arm a commiserating pat. “I burned my tongue on one of those chocolate chip cookies you made last week, remember? You told me to let them cool, but they smelled so good I didn’t want to wait.”

“Uh-huh.” She took another drink of water, every thought about microwaves for the heart vanishing.

Because when food—or hearts—got too warm, people could get burned.

Been there, done that, never going down that road again.

Love was a gamble . . . and she’d had her fill of losing.