

UNTO YOU

By
Katy Skinner

*For unto you
is born this day
in the city of David,
a Savior
which is Christ the Lord.*

Luke 2:11

Chapter 1

"Father in Heaven, we are thankful for this day. Please help us all to have a great day. Help Mason to get better and Lucas to be nice to me and Maya with help in her pregnancy. And please bless me that I can be the first to see Maya's baby. Amen."

Ten-year-old Everly smiled as she looked up from her folded arms. That had been a good prayer. Everly's dad stood up and leaned

over to kiss their mom goodbye before heading out to work.

Everly's twin, Lucas, jumped up. "I'm going to the creek with Reggie," he yelled as the screen door slammed behind him.

Her mom smiled as she looked down at Everly still on her knees. "You know, Sweetheart, you can still be happy to see Maya's baby even if you're not first. You could just pray for Maya to have a healthy baby. That would be good enough, wouldn't it?"

Everly turned to her mom, her eyebrows lowered. "Maya promised."

Her mom sighed. "I know, Sweetie. It's just that there are a lot of things to think of

when a baby comes. Maya might not think of it."

Everly froze. "You think she'll forget? I hardly ever get to see Maya anymore now that she's married."

When Everly had found out that Maya was having a baby, she had complained to Maya that she wouldn't need Everly anymore.

"How could I not need you anymore?" Maya had exclaimed. "I'll need you more than ever! Who's going to be my babysitter?"

The sun had risen in Everly's heart. "I could be your babysitter?"

"Of course! Who else would I trust so much with my babies? I tell you what. When I

have this baby, you'll get to be the first one to see it."

Everly had gasped. "Before Lucas and Dad and," she lowered her voice to a whisper, "even Mom?"

"That's right."

Maya couldn't forget. She just couldn't.

Mom smiled at Everly. "It's not that she'll forget. She'll remember later. It's just very busy when the baby arrives, and she'll be very tired. Bringing a baby into the world is hard work. That's why they call it labor."

Everly felt like someone put a bucket over her heart. "You think she'll forget."

A ringing sound came muffled from Mom's purse. "Oh my! That's my phone. Where did I put it?"

Everly grabbed the phone out of Mom's purse and handed it to her. Her mom was always losing her phone.

Everly sighed. Maybe she'd go find Lucas and Reggie. She headed for the door.

"Hi Maya, how're you doing?" her mom said into the phone.

Everly turned and ran back to her mom. "It's Maya! Let me talk to her," Everly pleaded, but her mom made a waving motion with her hand. Everly knew that meant she wanted less noise so she could hear.

Her mom was quiet for a while. Maya must have a lot to say. Everly kept her lips rolled together so she wouldn't say anything, but she jumped up and down in front of her mom because she was so excited.

"Yep," her mom said finally. "It sounds like labor. You should go to the hospital."

Everly stopped jumping and stared at her mom. Was it really going to happen?

"Keep us posted, Darling. We'll be praying for you." Her mom lowered the phone and looked down at Everly. "Well . . .," she started.

"Maya's going to have her baby!" Everly shouted. She grabbed her mom's purse off the counter and thrust it into her arms. "Let's

go!" she yelled and started pulling on her mom's other arm.

Everly's mom laughed but wouldn't let herself get pulled. "Ev, I know you're excited, but having a baby takes a long time--hours and hours. Maya will keep us posted, or Daniel will," she added looking away for a moment to consider. Daniel was Maya's husband.

"But I can't miss it," Everly wailed. "Maya promised I could be first!"

Her mom nodded. "I know, I know. You've told me and I'm sure it will all work out just how you want it."

Everly folded her arms and glared at her mom. That's not what she'd said a minute ago.

A small voice called from the back of the house, "Mom!"

Everly caught her breath and held it. Mason, her four-year-old brother, was awake. Everly watched her mom's face change to worry. Her face always looked like that when she was thinking of Mason.

"Do you want me to sit with him awhile? I'll go see what he wants," Everly offered.

"No," her mom shook her head. "I'll go, but I may need you later." She gave Everly a small smile. "For now, will you go over to Olivia's and pick up that bag of baby clothes that she got from her cousin?"

Everly made a face. "Why don't you send Lucas?"

"You know that Lucas just went to the creek with Reggie. If you want to go down to the creek and get him and then send him over to Olivia's I guess that's fine with me."

Everly considered this seriously. She knew her mom had been joking, but it might be better than seeing Olivia.

"Is something going on between you and Olivia?" her mom asked. "Did you get in an argument?"

"Mom!" Mason called again from his room.

"No," Everly said quickly. "We're fine. I'll go ask her for the clothes."

Chapter 2

Everly went out the kitchen letting the screen door slam behind her. Her stomach churned thinking about seeing Olivia. She had pushed what had happened last week out of her mind, but Olivia might bring it up. She didn't want to think about it. She wanted to think about Maya's baby.

She kicked a stone and watched it ricochet against other stones that stuck out in the street. Lately she'd felt like life was

rough and jarring just like that stone. She finished running across the rocky street and stepped into the cool grass of Olivia's yard. Thoughts of Maya's baby were more like this soft grass.

If Lucas had been home, she could have sent him to Olivia's house. Why did he always have to go off with Reggie? She hoped he fell from the creek bank and broke his leg.

No, she didn't. She had to stop thinking things like that.

Olivia had broken her leg last year. She said it hurt a lot. She didn't want to be the kind of person that wished pain on people. Olivia had fallen from a ladder. Everly's dad had just been telling them the day before it

happened that just like ladders could get you on top of any roof, the Bible could get you on top of any problem. When Olivia broke her leg, Everly asked her dad if he still thought ladders were like the Bible.

"Indeed, I do," her dad had said. "It's like a ladder that is not broken."

Everly looked up at Olivia's house and sighed, she hadn't figured out how the Bible could get her out of this problem. She started marching up the hill to Olivia's front door. The sooner she got this chore done, the sooner she could be back and wait by the phone so that her mom would not leave without her to the hospital.

Everly stepped from the grass to Olivia's driveway, marched to her door, and knocked. She heard Olivia's mom call from inside, "Olivia can you get that?"

A moment later the door creaked open. "Hey," said Olivia.

"Hey," said Everly. She looked down at her toes and while kicking one foot against the other, said, "My mom sent me to get those baby clothes that your cousin said we could have."

Everly looked back up at Olivia in time to see her look into the distance and nod her head. "I'll go get them," she said without meeting her eyes.

Everly sat down on the step. It was weird not to go inside Olivia's house. They usually played every day, but they hadn't since what happened last week.

The door creaked back open, and a large bag landed next to where Everly sat on the doorstep.

Olivia came out the door and shut it behind her with a soft click. "Did you tell your parents?" Olivia asked.

Everly closed her eyes. This was what she didn't want to talk about. "No," she said.

"Has Mason asked?"

"Mason's been too sick to go outside, but Mom asked once if I could bring the little dog

that he liked so much in for a visit to cheer him up."

Everly hadn't meant to say anything, but Olivia and Lucas were the only ones she could say these things to. They were the only ones who knew.

"What did you do?" Olivia asked.

"I just told her I couldn't find him. I couldn't find that dog."

Once, Lucas and Everly had been running races in their backyard. The day had been really hot and Everly had started seeing dark spots around the edge of her vision, like a dark frame on what should be a clear picture. She had to sit down in the shade until she felt better. Whenever she thought about the dog

or when anyone talked about it, she felt the same way.

Whistling came from the street. A young man was walking past Olivia's house whistling a peaceful, lilting song. Everly knew the song, but she couldn't think of the words. It made her think of happiness for the future and babies and love. The man waved kindly as he passed and Everly found herself wishing he wouldn't go. His song had made her feel better.

Everly picked up the bag and stood up. Surely, she could think of some nice things to say to Olivia. "My sister's going to have her baby today. I'm going to be the first to see it, and we're all going to be happy."

"I'd like to see it, too. Maybe I could hold it sometime," Olivia said.

Everly looked at Olivia. They had been playing dolls together since they were younger than she could remember. "It'll be so much better than a doll."

Olivia gave a little smile. "It will be. I'm excited for you, Ev. I hope everything goes the way you want it to."

"It will," said Everly.

It just had to. All the good things in life couldn't be over, could they?

Chapter 3

Everly lugged the bag of clothes up her own driveway and into the kitchen. The house was quiet, so Everly decided her mom was probably with Mason. She brought the clothes to the laundry room, flipped open the washing machine lid and added soap. When the machine was churning away with the tiny pink clothes, Everly shut the lid and went back outside.

Lucas and Reggie were standing over a large box on the picnic table.

"Lucas!" Everly cried, "Maya is going to have her baby!"

Lucas looked up at her, his dark eyebrows drawn together. "Wait, did she already have it?"

"No, she's going to have it. Probably today." Everly realized that she didn't know for sure that it would be today. How long was hours and hours? That was what her mom had said. "She went to the hospital."

"Why'd she go to the hospital?" Lucas demanded. "Is she sick or something?"

"No. She went to the hospital because that's where people go to have babies." Talking to Lucas could be very frustrating.

"Yeah," said Reggie, agreeing with Everly.
"Don't you remember when your mom went to the hospital to have Mason?"

"Oh yeah," said Lucas. Lucas always believed Reggie.

"Aren't you excited?" Everly demanded.

"Sure," said Lucas turning back to the box.
"But the baby's not here yet so why are you so excited?"

Everly ignored his question. If he didn't already understand, she didn't think she could explain. "What's in there anyway?" Everly asked instead. She came over to peek inside.

"It's Lucas's newest present for Mason," Reggie explained.

Lucas had been getting something for Mason every day. Yesterday had been some fireflies in a jar, and the day before that had been rocks that looked like gold.

"A turtle!" Everly exclaimed. "Is it a slider?" Their mom only let Lucas keep the sliders and then only for a few weeks. "Can I touch it? It's not a snapping turtle, is it?" Everly quickly brought her hand back. Everly and Olivia had once been down at the creek with Olivia's cousin, Amelia. Amelia had reached her hand out to a big turtle they'd found under the rocks and the next thing Everly knew Amelia was screaming, her finger caught in the jaws of the turtle. It's a good thing Lucas and Reggie had been there

because Reggie came running and told her to put her hand in the water. When she got it in a good, deep spot, the turtle let go and swam off. Amelia ran home and wouldn't come back to the creek. Since then, Everly had been very careful around turtles.

"It's a slider," Lucas told her. "I think Mason will like it. Red is his favorite color, and this slider has red on either side of its head. Will you go get one of the tanks? Get the big one that already has that good rock for sunning in it."

Everly walked toward the garage shaking her head. He was giving Mason his best tank.

When she got back to the picnic table, Lucas had the hose ready. Mom came out the

back door. "Listen kids, Maya just called, and I guess a lot of women are having babies today, so there are no rooms available for her. She's laboring in the emergency room right now, hoping a room will open up. She's feeling scared, so she asked if I'd come be with her."

Everly jumped up. "I've got to come with you. I can help." Her heart pounded wildly.

But mom was already shaking her head. "The hospital is already crazy and has too many people in it. When Maya gets a room and the baby gets here, then you can come. You'll still be one of the first people to see the baby, Ev, I promise."

"But," Everly started in the quietest voice she'd used all day, "if she's scared, she said

we needed to stick together. Didn't she ask for me?"

Mom just looked at her with sad eyes. "I know this isn't how we'd hoped it would be. Dad is on his way home to sit with Mason. Can one of you sit with him until he gets here?"

"I'll do it," Everly said. "But Mom, you said it takes and hours and hours for the baby to get here. Will it be here soon?"

"I don't know, sweetie," she said putting her hand on Everly's head. "It might still be hours yet."

Everly felt a little light come into the dark of her heart. Maybe there would still be time for Maya to get a room and for her mom to come back and get her.

"Let's go inside and have a prayer for Maya and then I'll leave. Lucas?"

"I'll work on the tank and watch the turtle," Reggie said.

"Thanks," Lucas said handing the hose to Reggie, and he followed them into the house.

Chapter 4

After the prayer, Everly went down the hall and opened the door to Mason's room. The TV was on quietly across from the bed and the light changed the color of Mason's blanket in the dark room.

"Hey Mase," Everly called gently and walked over to the bed. Mason reached up and put his arms around her neck.

"Eberly," Mason said and climbed into her lap. He laid his head on her shoulder and kept

watching his show. Everly watched as vegetables tried to decorate a Christmas tree. A cucumber wearing a crown kept falling off the ladder.

Mason used to never sit still long enough for a TV show, Everly remembered as she tightened her arms around his waist. He had a scooter that he took all around the yard. He always wanted to go with her and Lucas to the woods or the creek or their friend's houses. They did take him a lot but sometimes they would complain. Everly felt horrible about that. She wished Mason still had the energy to go places. She would take him everywhere with her.

Everly cuddled Mason against her. He really was such a sweet kid.

He'd been going to preschool before he got sick and had started drawing people. He wanted to give each member of the family something, so he decided to make people. He had drawn heads and bodies and cut each one out and pasted them together. Everyone in the family got a drawing. Everly still had hers on her dresser.

"Where were you?" Mason asked. "Did you go to the creek today?"

"No," Everly told him. She and Lucas didn't usually bring Mason to the creek because of the steep bank you had to crawl down to get to the creek. They'd tried once. Everly'd had to

practically hand him down to Lucas. Then Mason'd gotten himself completely wet splashing in the water and because of that, on the way back up had gotten completely muddy as Everly'd pushed him up from behind and Lucas had dragged from the top.

Mom hadn't been too happy with the state of Mason's clothes, but Mason had had a great time.

"I didn't go to the creek. Maya is going to have her baby."

Mason sighed. "Mommy told me. I hope that Maya will bring her baby here for me to see. Do you think she will?"

"Oh, she will," Everly said, and her throat tightened up. How selfish of her that she

wanted to be the one to see the baby first and Mason laid here wondering if he would at all. "Of course, you'll see the baby," she assured him again. "Lucas went to the creek this morning, though. He brought you back a surprise."

"Really?" Mason asked softly.

Everly's heart squeezed. Usually at the sound of surprises, Mason would be jumping up and down. Now, all he could do was ask in a quiet voice. Now, everything he said was quiet. He didn't have enough energy to even get excited.

"Yes, it's a good surprise, but I can't tell you about it. I'll let Lucas do that."

Mason sighed. "Lucas brings me nice things."

They watched the show a bit longer in silence. "Everly?" Mason asked sitting up a little to look at her. "Have you seen Runner?"

Everly felt like her heart stopped. This was the question she did not want to be asked.

She took a deep breath. "No, I haven't."

Mason snuggled back down next to her. "I hope Runner's okay. I thought maybe Runner would stay close. I guess he's not missing me though."

The thought that Mason thought Runner didn't miss him made Everly feel really, really awful. "I'm sure Runner wishes he could be with you," she said.

"Then why didn't he stay around? Why did he run away?"

"Maybe he just had something else he needed to do." Everly wondered if she should tell him. If she told him what really happened, would it help or would it make him feel sadder?

She didn't think he could take any more sadness in his life. She knew she couldn't and if Mason stopped loving her and wanting her to be there with him, it would break her heart.

If only it hadn't happened. They really hadn't meant it to.

Last week, Everly, Lucas, and Olivia had been playing forts in the backyard. Runner had played with them for a while, but then he kept running to the back door and barking. It had

seemed like he wanted them to go get Mason. Even though the dog was a stray and it had just wandered into their lives a couple weeks ago, it had really formed a bond with Mason. Mason was the one who named the dog Runner.

Lucas had always wanted a dog and their parents had always said no. But now with Mason losing more and more energy, they had let this stray dog stay around. Lucas had been jealous that Mason got to have a dog and he never could. He had his turtles, but it wasn't the same.

Everly didn't really like dogs but tolerated this one for Mason's sake. She still wished it didn't have to be around and that day it had been barking so much.

It had been Olivia's idea to put Runner in the shed. Lucas had just picked him up since he didn't have a collar. Runner whined as he walked towards the shed. Everly had been irritated with the dog, too, so she didn't care about the whining and held the door open for Lucas.

He pushed Runner in and shut the door. He had whined for a bit and then was quiet.

"That's much better," Everly had said, and they'd gone back to their game.

They had been pretending that each tree in the yard belonged to each of them as a house. They lived in a neighborhood with pinecones for money.

They had gotten so involved in the game that they'd forgotten about the dog.

It was a hot day the next day. Their mom had asked about the dog because Mason wanted to see it. Olivia had been over that day, too. So, the three of them sneaked over to the shed to open the door and let the dog out.

But when they opened the door, Runner didn't move. He was dead. They'd killed him.

They hadn't meant to do it. They hadn't thought of the heat or the lack of water.

Everly tried to push the image out of her mind. She pulled Mason close and said again, "I'm sure Runner would be here if he could."

Everly didn't know how she could ever make this right. She couldn't, and so no one could ever know. That was all there was to it.

No one would ever like her again if they knew. If they knew that she had done something that bad, they wouldn't want to be with her, they couldn't love her anymore.

Half the time she wasn't sure they liked her in the first place. She was just the little sister still at home after her big sister got married. Maybe it wasn't important that Maya remembered and showed her the baby first. Maybe she wasn't very important at all.

Chapter 5

Mason's show ended and Everly realized that he had fallen asleep against her shoulder.

She scooted over and laid him down.

She heard the kitchen door close that connected to the garage. Everly could tell because the screen squeaked shut first and then the door swooshed after it. The door to the backyard just swooshed and nobody ever used the front door. Everly hoped the sound meant Dad was home.

With one more glance at Mason, she walked out of the room and closed the door quietly behind her.

She found her dad pouring himself a glass of milk in the kitchen.

"Hey, Pumpkin," he said. "Exciting day, isn't it? How's Mason doing?"

"All right." Everly said. "He just fell asleep. Have you heard anything from Mom? How is Maya doing? Is the baby here yet?"

Dad laughed at all her questions. "Not yet and the hospital is still super busy. There's still not a room available for them."

"How is Maya? Is she still scared?"

"Scared?" her dad asked, setting his milk down. "Why should she be scared?"

"Mom said she was feeling scared."

Dad nodded, picking his cup back up. "Well, your mom can always tell how you kids are feeling."

That made Everly pause. Could her mom tell how she was feeling? For the first time, she hoped not.

"I just know I could help if I could be there, Dad."

Dad shook his head. "There are so many people there. Just think of it. Not a room to be had in the whole hospital." He looked out the window at the dogwood tree in the backyard.

"But I could help Maya. She needs me there. Us girls need to stick together."

"But your mom said no."

"She was just worried about Mason. Now that you're here, couldn't I go?"

Dad studied her. Everly could tell he was melting. She put her hands under her chin like she was praying and whispered, "please, please, please."

He finally laughed. All right, Pumpkin. If you can get Lucas back here to sit with Mason for a while, I'll drive you over to the hospital."

Everly jumped up and down. "Thank you! Thank you!"

Dad held up a finger. "But I'll have to check with your mom first."

"Dad, you're the best. I'll go find Lucas right now."

Everly ran out the door letting the screen bang shut behind her. The last place she'd seen Lucas was in their backyard with the turtle. She changed direction and went to their backyard. The turtle was bobbing up and down in its new aquarium in the shade, but the boys weren't anywhere to be seen.

"He's probably at Reggie's house," Everly thought and took off across the neighboring backyard. She ran around Mr. Michael's pine trees and up the hill. Reggie's house had a chain link fence around the backyard. It made a clanging noise as Everly let herself run into it and yelled Lucas's name. No one answered, so Everly ran around to the front door. She

knocked excitedly, the sound echoing around their front porch.

"I'm coming. I'm coming," said a voice from inside.

Mrs. Walker answered the door. "What's all the pounding about?" Everly didn't realize she had been pounding, but she also knew that Reggie's mom was just pretending to be angry. She was always doing that and then offering her and Lucas some peach pie. She made terrific peach pie.

But she didn't have time to think about that now. "Are Lucas and Reggie here? I need to talk to Lucas."

"Nope. Sorry, Hon. Haven't seen them in a while. Would you like a piece of peach pie while you're here?"

"Sorry, no time," said Everly. "Maya is going to have her baby."

"Oh, well, that's great news. She's so young to be having a baby. I hope she knows what she's getting into."

Everly didn't know what that meant, but she turned and ran from the door, then stood at the street with her hands on her hips. Where could he be? Would he have gone to the park? Maybe he went to the creek. Maybe he wanted some real creek water and some mud and plants. He did that sometimes. Everly

switched directions and ran back toward their own house and back into the backyard.

Yep, the bucket was gone. He'd probably gone to the creek for a bucket of real creek water. She ran toward the back of their yard. She knew she wasn't supposed to go to the creek alone. But Lucas would be there, so she wasn't really going to be alone at the creek. She'd just be alone on the path.

She wasn't a rule breaker. She always tried to be good. She was good. She pushed thoughts of the shed and the motionless dog out of her head. Maybe no one knowing was the same as it never having happened.

Everly found the path that led through the trees. It went straight for a little way and

then forked. She took the right fork. That was the one that would lead to the creek. Her feet pounded down the path. She jumped over roots and dodged rocks. "Lucas," she called. "Lucas!"

She was getting close. She'd have to slow down to go down the embankment any minute. A branch jutted out in front of her. She pushed it aside and it sprang back. It almost hit the back of her head. She could feel the breeze from it, but she was running so fast that she was faster than the branch.

She almost laughed but she shrieked instead as she realized she was falling. There was nothing under her legs and her arms spun against empty air. She hadn't realized she had

gotten to the creek already. Instead of climbing down the embankment, she was falling, she hit the bottom with a heavy crack that felt like thunder.

Chapter 6

Everly grabbed her leg and rolled back and forth. Her leg felt like someone had taken a burning hot pan from off the stove and placed it against her ankle. She screamed, then sobbed. Tears were running down her face. She screamed again. She couldn't breathe.

She continued to rock back and forth. The dirt underneath her shifted, and she fell into the water. The water was only a few inches deep at the edge, but her mouth went in. She

sputtered before she was able to get her face back out.

The water shocked her enough that she sat up and hauled herself backwards out of the water and onto the narrow part of dry ground between the bank and the water. She couldn't seem to get enough air. She gasped and tried to catch her breath while the sobs kept coming.

Her ankle hurt. It was already starting to swell. Her back hurt too, and she had scratches along her arms and legs.

She looked around through tear-filled eyes. But there was no Lucas.

Lucas would have been at her side by now if he were at the creek. Everly could hear only

the gurgle of water over rocks and her own sobs. She was alone in the deep creek bed.

Everly laid her forehead down on her good knee and cried some more. The pain was so bad. She finally got her breathing under control and got her crying down to just the water leaking from her eyes--no more sobs or gasping. She focused on breathing in and breathing out.

She knew what she had to do. In a shaky voice she prayed to her Father in Heaven. "I fell," she told Him. "I need some help. Please help me to feel better and help my dad and Lucas find me," and then because it was all she might be able to do now, she prayed, "And please help Maya and Mom with the new baby."

She raised her head. She realized her breaths were coming a lot easier. That helped a lot. She felt like after you throw a rock in the water and at first the water splashes up, but then it smooths itself calm.

The pain in her ankle throbbed horribly, but her heartbeat had slowed. She knew God would answer her prayer. Now she'd just have to wait.

She leaned her head back against the earth and thought about breathing evenly. She realized she was shaking. She breathed in and breathed out. She tried singing a little song.

Away in a manger, no crib for His bed

She was surprised when it was a Christmas song. She smiled a little. Mason had been watching a Christmas show. Silly Mason watching a Christmas show in the summer. Still, it brought her peace. Maybe Mason wasn't so silly after all. Then she gave a little, pained laugh. It was the song the man had been whistling when she talked with Olivia. Every day was a good day for Christmas, it seemed.

So, she sang a little more.

The little Lord Jesus lay down his sweet head.

The stars in the heavens looked down where he lay.

The little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay.

She and Lucas had been at Reggie's house last week and Reggie's mom, Mrs. Walker, had been thinking about Christmas too. She had been tying up some Dogwood branches she would use as decorations in December. Even though they already knew the story, she had insisted on telling them again. She gave them peach pie so they would stay in the kitchen and listen.

"Long, long ago the Jewish people were waiting for their Messiah. They knew that he had promised to come and save them from captivity. The Jewish people at that time were in captivity to the Romans. Most of the Jewish people thought that their Messiah would save

them from the Romans, and so they prayed for Him to come.

"Around this time, a young Jewish girl was at the well getting water for her family. She was engaged to a man named Joseph. An angel appeared to Mary and told her she would have a baby and the baby would be the Messiah.

"Mary asked, 'How can this be since I'm not married yet?'

"The angel told her that the child would be the Son of God and Mary said,"

Everly had broken into the story here and given the answer, "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord."

Mrs. Walker had said, "That's right. She was willing to do whatever God needed from

her because she believed in his purposes and trusted Him that He knew how to make everything wonderful.

"So, Joseph took care of Mary, but they needed to go to Bethlehem."

"To be taxed," Lucas had said.

"They traveled on a donkey," said Reggie.

"Well, maybe," said Mrs. Walker.

"Probably. It was a three- or four-day journey and that's how they traveled back then."

"And when they got there, there was no room in the inn," Everly said.

"Right," said Mrs. Walker, "because everyone had come to be taxed, but that was all right, because the innkeeper gave them a place."

"In a stable where the sheep and oxen lay," said Lucas finishing this last part in song.

"That's right. The birth of their baby probably wasn't like they imagined. But it still worked out exactly how God wanted it to. You can always be sure of that.

"Later that night angels appeared to the shepherds watching over the lambs that were prepared for the temple and told them about Jesus being born. So, the shepherds went and found the baby in the manger.

"Not all the Jewish people knew that baby was born and that their Messiah had come-- very few in fact. The shepherds knew and Mary and Joseph knew, and boy did the heavens know and all they that knew were so

grateful, they couldn't be stopped from singing and overwhelming the heavens with their joy."

Everly wished she were with Mrs. Walker right now eating peach pie, but thinking about her helped, too. She closed her eyes and tried not to think about the throbbing in her leg. All the heavens saw that little baby even when no one else did. All the heavens could see her, too, and her broken ankle, and her need to be found.

Her sister was going to have a baby. It was going to bring them joy. She hoped they would find room in the Inn.

Everly might not be there.

Grief wrapped its stinging pain around her heart. She choked on a new sob and more tears leaked from her eyes.

She was so tired. Sleep promised to take her from the pain. She laid down on her little piece of Earth and fell asleep hoping they would find her soon.

Chapter 7

"Everly! Everly!"

Everly raised her head where it had been cradled in her arms. Had someone called her name? She pushed herself to a sitting position.

"Everly!" she heard the voice again. It sounded like Lucas.

"Over here!" Everly cried. "I'm at the creek!"

Small bits of dirt and rock tumbled down next to her and then Lucas was by her side.

"What happened?" he gasped.

"I was running, and I didn't stop soon enough. I fell over the bank."

"Oh man," Lucas said, looking at her leg. More dirt and rocks fell beside them.

"Everly, are you okay?"

Everly's tears started to fall again. It was her dad. Seeing her dad was like having someone flip on the light right when she needed it, like when she was having nightmares about monsters.

"Oh, Dad," she said. "I was so scared."

"It's going to be all right, pumpkin. We're here now. And we were pretty scared too."

"We couldn't find you anywhere," Lucas said.

"I had a feeling that I needed to look for you," Dad said. "You must have said a prayer."

She nodded through the tears in her eyes.

"Good girl," Dad said. "Come on. Let's get you home. Can you stand?"

"I don't think so." Everly shook her head, staring at her leg which was now swollen over the edge of her shoe.

Dad scooped her up in his arms. "Is there an easier way out of here, Lucas?"

"Not really," Lucas said, "but if you come over here, and you run you can get up before the rocks fall too much."

Dad went where Lucas pointed. With his long legs, he was up with much less difficulty than Lucas and Everly had with Mason that one day. Dad only jostled her around a little. She blew out her breath in relief. Dad made that so simple, and it would have been impossible for her.

Lucas scrambled up and they started down the path. Everly tightened her hands around her dad's neck. "What about Mason?" she asked. "Who's with him?"

Lucas spoke up. "Reggie's sitting with him for a minute. I didn't think you'd go to the creek alone. So, it was the last place we needed to check."

"I'm sorry Dad. I didn't mean to break that rule," Everly said. "I just thought Lucas would be there."

"Sometimes rules are like that," Dad said. "We intend to follow them. We just can't seem to always avoid breaking them. We're not perfect. That's why we have Jesus. Same is true for me," he laughed, holding her close.

"But where were you, Lucas?" Everly asked. "I looked everywhere for you."

"Reggie and I were just digging for worms for the turtle in the backyard."

That made sense, Everly thought as they broke through the trees into the backyard.

"I'm putting you straight in the car," Dad said. "We need to get that leg looked at by a doctor."

"I'll watch Mason," Lucas said.

Dad frowned. "I just don't know how long I'll be gone. Everly might need a cast and your mom might need support with Maya and who knows when she'll have her baby."

Everly's heart sped up. "We're going to the hospital? Yay! Maybe I will get to see Maya have her baby."

Dad laughed. "Yes. We're going to the hospital, but now it's because of you."

Everly's leg still throbbed. At least she would be closer to Maya and her baby. She leaned her head back against the seat of the

car and tried not to think of the pain in her body or the wish in her heart.

"I think you and Mason should come with us," Dad said to Lucas as he looked up at him sharply. "How do you feel about that?"

"I thought nobody really cared if I saw the baby or not."

Everly's eyes flew open. How horrible that Lucas had felt that way. "Of course, we care," she said.

Lucas shrugged. "You seemed to only be thinking about you seeing it. I am gonna be its uncle."

Everly's heart warmed. "Of course, you are. I'm glad Dad said you can come, and I know Mason wants to see the baby."

Dad turned toward the kitchen door. "I'll be right back with Mason. Lucas, why don't you go grab some water and snacks and tell Reggie he can go home."

"Will do, said Lucas.

In no time at all, Dad was back out with Mason. He settled him next to Everly, and she put her arms gingerly around him after buckling his seat belt. A bit of color had returned to his cheeks.

"I get to go for a car ride," said Mason. "I get to see the baby."

"Yes, little brother you do," said Everly.

"I'm sorry, you hurt your leg," Mason said.

Everly swallowed to keep the tears from coming again.

"Does it hurt?" he asked.

Everly nodded.

Dad and Lucas got in and slammed their car doors, and they were off to the hospital.

They pulled into a round driveway in front of some sliding glass doors. Dad carried Everly to a wheelchair and then asked Lucas to stay with her while he parked the car. He came back carrying Mason.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea," Dad said. "It's hard to take care of all of you."

Just then another car pulled into the parking lot and out came Reggie and Mrs. Walker. They shut their doors.

"What are you doing here?" Lucas called.

"I told my mom about your plan to go to the hospital, and she said, 'Oh that man is going to need some help.'" Reggie put his hands on his hips imitating his mom.

Mrs. Walker laughed. "I sure did. What are you thinking Brian? Don't you know you've got neighbors?"

Everly's dad smiled. "Thank you, Wanda. Will you sit with Lucas and Mason while I get Everly checked in?"

"I sure will," she said.

Everly's shaking had come back and her dad rushed her quickly into the hospital doors.

Chapter 8

Dad pushed Everly's chair through the sliding doors. On the left was a waiting room with about 10 people in it and on their right was a small desk. The person at the desk motioned for Dad to take Everly into the room behind her. The sign over the door said Triage Nurse.

"What's that mean?" Everly asked the nurse.

"Triage means I'm the one who decides who gets to be seen first. Because some things are more dangerous than others and may need to go to the front of the line."

"That's a good idea," Everly said, her shaking was working its way up to her head and making it hard to talk.

The nurse stood, opened a cabinet, and pulled out a blanket. She put it around Everly. The blanket was so warm.

"Oh, that feels nice," said Everly.

"I also give out heated blankets," said the triage nurse. She turned to Everly's dad.

"What seems to be the problem?"

Dad looked at her with his eyebrows drawn low. "She fell and we think she may have broken her leg."

The nurse came around to look at her leg. She pushed on it a little and Everly gasped.

"Okay," she said. "We're going to get her in for some X-rays."

"Am I the most important one?" Everly asked.

"You're lucky we're not too backed up today, so you get to be seen."

Everly's shaking calmed to small vibrations because of the warm blanket. "My sister said she's in the emergency room because there's no room for her to have her baby. Can't she get a room?"

The nurse shook her head. "Babies are a whole other story."

The triage nurse picked up her phone and, in a moment, another nurse came into the room. "Will you take these two to X-ray and then to Room 5?"

"I sure will," said the nurse. She wheeled Everly out of the room with her dad following.

Everly looked for Maya in all the rooms but didn't see her. For the x-rays, Everly's dad had to lift her up on the table. It hurt to have her leg stretched out, but Everly folded her lips under her teeth and tried to be brave.

There were buzzing sounds when they left the room. They had to move her leg a couple of

times, and do the buzzing some more, but then they were done.

Her dad brought her into another room. He scooped her out of the wheelchair and laid her on the bed. It was kind of more like a chair because instead of laying down flat, it bent in the middle so she could sit up straight and have her legs out in front of her. Another nurse came in and gave her some pills.

"These will help with the pain, sweetie."
Being called sweetie reminded her of her mom.
"Would you like something to drink or eat?
Maybe some soda and some cookies?"

Everly nodded. That sounded great. She took the pills with her drink and as the medicine started to work, the pain in her leg

dulled to almost nothing. Her shaking went away, too. She suddenly felt very tired. Maybe she would just take a little nap.

"Feeling better?" her dad asked.

"So much."

Her dad's phone buzzed. It was her mom. Everly listened sleepily while her dad told her mom the whole story. When he finished, he handed the phone to Everly.

"Are you okay, Sweetie?" Mom asked.

"Yeah Mom. I'm sorry. I'm feeling better. I just was trying to find Lucas, and I was trying to go fast so that I could get to the hospital and be with you and Maya."

Her mom laughed. "I know you wanted to come so badly. I should have just brought you.

As it is, I don't like your method of getting to the hospital."

Everly looked down at her swollen ankle. "I don't really like it either."

Her mom laughed again. "Well, you get bandaged up and then come visit us."

Everly's half-closed eyes shot open. "I will. Thanks, Mom." She had to see that baby.

A doctor then came. He had the x-rays. He put them onto a thin box hanging on the wall and flipped a light so that the box lit up behind the pictures. Everly saw her leg in the picture as a ghostlike outline with her bone a bright white shape through the middle.

"Looks good," the doctor said. "You didn't break your leg. The pain is coming from your

twisted ankle. It might take a couple of weeks to heal."

He put her in what he called a boot which looked like a boot, but it was bigger and tougher. Once her foot was in it, she couldn't move her foot anymore, which was good because her ankle hurt worse when her foot moved.

"I'm going to give your dad some medicine to help with the pain and I want to see you in my office in a week."

"Thank you," Everly said. "Can we go now? My sister is having her baby. I need to be there for her."

"I'm sure your sister will be fine, and you can still hold that baby even with a twisted ankle."

But could she still see the baby first? Everly tried to smile. She hoped.

Her dad had to sign some papers. They could have gone home, but he said instead, "How about we go find Maya?"

"Yes. I want to see Maya," Everly said excitedly.

"That, Everly, I know."

Mrs. Walker and Reggie and Mason and Lucas were in the waiting room when Dad wheeled Everly out in the wheelchair.

"Hey y'all," dad said as they looked up, "It looks like Everly is going to survive."

"Yay!" Lucas and Reggie cheered.

Mrs. Walker smiled and gave them a thumbs-up. Mason looked like he had fallen asleep leaning against her arm.

"I found out where Maya is. They've said I can bring Everly to visit. Are you boys okay waiting with Reggie's mom for a little longer?"

Mason opened his eyes and sat up. "I want to come, Daddy!"

"I'll be okay waiting here with Reggie and his mom," Lucas said. "But maybe since you have a wheelchair, you could put Mason on Everly's lap."

"Great idea."

"You cheer on that daughter of yours," Mrs. Walker said. The boys and I will be just fine.

"Thanks, Wanda. We'll just check in with Maya and be right back."

Chapter 9

Dad put Mason on Everly's lap. Mason snuggled down deeper, and she put her arms around him. The flush that had been on his cheeks originally was gone now and he looked tired. Everly squeezed him and hoped he could fall asleep.

Dad pushed Everly back through the doors that said "Emergency." They turned down a hallway and there was Mom peeking anxiously

out of a room. "Everly! Brian!" she said rushing over.

She squatted down next to the wheelchair and gently smoothed Mason's hair, but she was looking at Everly. "How are you, dear?"

"I'm feeling a lot better," said Everly.

"I bet that was sure scary for you."

Everly nodded. It had been scary. But now she only cared about Maya.

Mom moved out of the way and Dad wheeled Everly into the doorway of Maya's room. The lights were dim, and something was beeping a steady beat. A screen showed a line that made triangles before going flat again. In the middle of the tiny room, Maya was on one of those beds that you can sit up in.

Dad wheeled Everly over to the bed and Maya reached down and took her hand. It was warm. Maya's hair was wet on the edges from sweat on her face. Maya's hand squeezed Everly's harder and her eyes closed. Everly knew that baby was trying to come, and it was hurting her sister.

"Maya, I'm here for you," said Everly.

In a minute, Maya's hand relaxed on hers.

"We girls need to stick together," said Everly.

Maya smiled weakly and whispered, "Thank you."

A nurse came into the room and looked at the screen. "She's getting very close. I'm going

to have to ask everyone except the new dad, to wait in the waiting room."

Everly felt like her heart broke as she squeezed Maya's hand one last time and let her dad wheel her back toward the door. If only a bigger room had been available.

Mom stepped into the hallway, but Dad paused in the doorway as a doctor walked past. The doctor stopped suddenly. "Carrie? Brian? Is that you?" the doctor asked.

"Hello, Dr. Brown," said Mom.

"Oh, my," the doctor said. "It looks like Mason's here, too. What are you all doing here? Did I miss a phone call?"

"No," Dad said. "Our daughter, Maya, is having a baby and then our daughter Everly

twisted her ankle, and since most of us were at the hospital, anyway, we decided all of us would come, including Lucas and Mason."

"Mason's sister is having a baby?" the doctor asked, ignoring all the other information.

"Yep," said Mom while Dad nodded.

"This is wonderful," said Dr. Brown. "Why didn't you tell me that Mason's sister was going to have a baby? I'll go get you a room," he said as he moved quickly away from them down the hallway.

Mom and Dad looked at each other with raised eyebrows. "What was that all about?" Dad asked Mom.

"I have no idea," she said.

Two men in green hospital clothes came down the hall. Dad moved Everly into the hall and out of the way. The men entered the small room. "Alright, Maya," they said amid clacking and shuffling noises. "We're taking you upstairs."

They wheeled her entire bed toward the elevators. Daniel held Maya's hand while they walked. Mom, and Dad with Everly and Mason followed behind. They got on a giant elevator that Maya's bed fit inside. They went up another floor and the doors opened to a wall that said "Pathology."

They wheeled Maya into a room large enough for two beds. A nurse was waiting to help Maya. They put her in the space closest

to the wall and pulled the curtain around her. On the other bed, the doctor picked up Mason and laid him there.

"How are you feeling buddy?" Dr. Brown asked.

"I'm gonna see my sister's new baby," Mason said with his eyes only half open.

"Yes, you are and that baby's going to help you."

Maya let out a cry and the doctor went through the curtain. "I'm calling your doctor now, Maya. Hold on. You're doing great."

Mom and Dad took up positions next to Mason's head. Mom continued to brush his hair back as they listened to Maya behind the curtain.

A doctor rushed into the room and through the curtain. The nurse on the other side said, "She's ready to push."

"I'm glad you're here," they heard Dr. Brown say to the new doctor. "I could deliver the baby, but I haven't done that for a while."

Maya let out a long yell. Everly closed her eyes and gripped the handles of her wheelchair.

"Great job, Maya," said the other doctor. "Give me another good push like that one and we're going to be almost done."

Maya yelled again for even longer and then Everly heard a tiny baby cry.

Mom and Dad and Everly all looked at each other with their eyes wide and smiles starting

on their faces. They stayed quiet so they could hear everything.

"It's a girl," said the doctor.

Everyone on Everly's side of the curtain let out a breath and clapped their hands.

More nurses came through the room and behind the curtain. Dad went downstairs to get Lucas and let Mrs. Walker and Reggie go home.

Everly stared at the curtain until her eyes ached.

Finally, the nurse asked Maya, "Want me to open this curtain so your family can see the baby?"

Everly held her breath.

"Wait," said Maya. "I promised Everly she could be first."

Chapter 10

Everly took in a big gulp of air and pushed her wheelchair quickly over to the curtain. She peeked around. Her sister was sitting up in bed with a blanket over her legs.

She looked even more tired than before with circles under her eyes and the front of her hair wet, but even more noticeable than all that was the smile on her face. She had the biggest smile on her face that Everly had ever seen. Her husband Daniel had that same look

as he stood by the bed looking down at the bundle in his wife's arms.

Everly pushed her wheelchair to the side of the bed. The baby was wrapped in a blanket like a cocoon with just its head sticking out and a little hat on top. The baby's eyes were swollen, and it looked a little scrunched up. Everly thought it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

"Oh, Maya," she breathed. "She's beautiful."

"Thanks, Everly. I think so too."

"What are you going to name her?"

Maya looked down at the new little person who already seemed so much a part of her, "Issa."

"Hello, Issa," Everly said. She looked back at Maya. "Are you so glad that you got a room?"

Maya laughed. "I am glad I got a room, but I wouldn't care if this baby were born at the side of a road, or in a barn, or even a hallway. I'm so happy to have her here."

A tear ran down Maya's cheek, and yet she was still smiling. That was a smile that nobody could put out, Everly realized. It was like those trick candles on a birthday cake that you could blow out, and they just popped right back into flame again.

Everly touched Issa's cheek. "Things don't need to go the way you think they should go in order to result in something wonderful."

Daniel smiled at her. "My thoughts exactly, Ev."

The nurse opened the curtain and Everly's mom and dad came to see the baby. Mom took the baby out of her arms and Everly moved her chair. "Here, Lucas. You need a turn," she said as she moved out of the way.

In the next bed, Dr. Brown had nurses hook up an IV to Mason. This was a needle attached to a long tube that went straight into Mason's blood vessels. Everly had seen them do this to him before. Giving Mason new blood gave him new energy for a while. He had to go to the hospital every two weeks. She wondered what was different this time.

Dr. Brown, as if sensing her thoughts, gave her a quick smile. "There's something almost magical about the blood a mom creates for her baby. We call those magical blood cells, stem blood cells. Once the baby is born, there's a whole lot left over in the cord and the placenta."

Dr. Brown said this as he continued to work with some bags on the table between Maya and Mason. "Usually, those left-over cells just get thrown away, but those super-charged blood cells might be just what Mason needs. And since Maya is Mason's sister, everything is just that much easier."

The doctor couldn't seem to stop smiling either. "You may never need to come back here."

Everly looked quickly over at her brother, a lump forming in her throat. "Really?" she asked, choking out the words because she suddenly felt like she would cry.

"Really," said, Dr. Brown. "God must be looking out for you and your family. It's a miracle that I found you today."

Everly thought that there had been a lot of miracles that day, counting being found and getting a new person in their family and then that maybe Mason could run and play again. Everly swallowed again. She didn't deserve any of this.

Maya did, though, and Mason did.

As she sat in her chair, she bowed her head for a quick prayer.

"Thank you, God, for looking out for me today. Thank you for bringing Maya's baby here safely. Thank you also that the birth helped Mason. Thank you for the way you look out for us. Amen."

Music quoted: *Away in a Manger*, William Kirkpatrick, 1895

Art by Cari Grosland

Twins of Truth



CAPI

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