



PRELUDE

CAROLINE CAPPEL PACED AND PACED. An inexperienced principal, she was out of ideas. For once, all of her effort and prayer had proved fruitless. As night fell outside her office, she couldn't even find comfort in her staple of strong black coffee. It was inevitable. She could not save St. Genevieve School.

During this 1970-71 term, she had given up the comfort of public school security to take command of a struggling Catholic school located in a blue-collar neighborhood nestled in the cane fields. And now, only a few months later, her tenure was about to crash to an end.

Earlier that day, Miss Cappel had held a meeting with the school's bookkeeper and secretary Marion Landry, who had peered up through glasses and had given her a concerned look. When Miss Cappel saw the red numbers on the ledger, she could feel her world starting to spin. There wasn't enough money in the bank accounts to make the next day's payroll. Her faculty had already given up better paying jobs at the public schools to teach at St. Genevieve, but they obviously couldn't afford to keep the school running for free.

Caroline Cappel thought about asking the parish for help. The school was literally connected to the church, but while this connection was physical and spiritual, it was currently only tenuously financial. The parish was so broke that someone had put a "For Sale" sign in front of the church. It was either a cruel joke or a warning. But the bottom line was the parish could not bail out the school.

She could not imagine what she would tell the teachers, much less the parents and the fresh-faced students. More than anything, she could not avoid probing the decisions she'd made in her own 34-year-old life. She

knew that few people fit her profile—a tall, slim, blonde-haired and blue-eyed intellectual, too free-thinking for the convent and too committed to God for marriage.

All of these traits had led her to the vocation of the single life. In this context, single did not mean bachelorette, certainly not anywhere near the later-day image of the socially acceptable, sexually liberated single nor one that even involved occasional dating. Sure, Caroline Cappel had enjoyed the dating scene. But her vocation had called her to God, who had led her to a mission without the distractions of romance, the time constraints of family or the unbending rules of a holy order. The question was whether she could handle forgoing these gifts in exchange for those of her unusual, difficult calling.

The forceful pull of the call was what took her away from the public schools, where she had achieved recognition as the state's Young Educator of the Year. She had also found time to pursue religious education by overseeing the seventh and eighth grades of the catechism program in St. Genevieve Parish. With her energy, she had no trouble balancing both positions, which included administering the student teaching program at the local university, plus teaching summertime college enrichment classes. It wasn't enough, though. She wanted to have a greater and more personal hand in shaping the path of the total child. She could not do this in a secular school system or during a few hours of CCD. But in a fairly new Catholic school linked by cement and bricks to a church in a unique community of faith, it was possible. This was why she welcomed the challenge of becoming a young, lay female principal at a time when parochial schools were being run almost exclusively by older nuns and when public school principals were mostly male. She was also undaunted by what would be a drop in her pay and retirement and was not the least bit worried about the school's small budget.

On the other side, she had great respect for the veil. Because of her admiration for the sisterhood, she had harbored some doubts about whether a committed single was worthy of being the principal. Now those questions were resurfacing. If she had accepted the job simply to break ground and to prove that she could do it, then she'd taken it for the wrong reasons.

In many ways, she didn't want to take her troubles to the man who was technically her boss, the pastor. She loved the fact that Father Roeten, known by his congregation as the fiery "Rootin Tootin," was full of evange-

lization, but she knew that all the huffing and puffing and positive thinking in the world could not put money into the school's checking account overnight. Father Roeten had himself inherited a debt-strapped parish that included an enormous church that was arguably too much building for a parish full of working class people. From its beginning in 1959, St. Genevieve lacked the core of wealthy donors needed to fund and maintain what had become an expensive physical plant. If there were any dollars to spare in the parish, Rootin Tootin would have to spend them keeping electricity coursing through his church.

Yet Caroline Cappel had nowhere else to go but the rectory door. As she walked there, she could not control her tears. She had developed an expertise in holding in this weakness—in her profession she had to learn emotional restraint when dealing with the professional manipulators known as elementary school children, particularly some of the rough ones she'd taught during a two-year stint in inner city Elizabeth, New Jersey. Tonight, though, Father Roeten would have to see her at her most vulnerable.

As she sobbed and knocked on Father's door, she knew full well that the parish accounts were not healthy enough to save the school, and she was not sure what the pastor could do for her. She needed more than mere prayer and comfort.

She had studied the phenomena of miracles her entire life and believed she'd experienced her share of small ones. Was it too much to ask for one now?