



Baby, Baby

Excerpt

Book 1 of the Family Heirlooms Series

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Chapter 1

Tamara Wolfe was in the middle of folding her third load of laundry when the doorbell rang. Still holding a pair of jeans, she opened the front door, a smile of greeting naturally lifting the corners of her mouth. The woman who stood on the wraparound porch was a stranger.

"Good afternoon," Tamara said. "Can I help you?"

"Well..." The older lady started with just a touch of nervousness. "You don't know me, dear, but I was walking past your lovely home, and I saw the baskets in the window." The woman pointed to the curved bay window at the front of the house which was Tamara's office and sunroom in the lower-floor turret. The many gift baskets she was working on for family and friends were displayed on the sun-drenched window seat.

Tamara started to explain her hobby, but the woman's headshake stopped her. "How much are they?"

Surprised, Tamara laughed at the idea. "Oh, I don't sell them."

"Do you design them yourself?"

"Down to the basket itself. But I've never *sold* any. I give them away to

family and friends," Tamara told her. In all truth, she'd thought often about selling them and perhaps starting a small home business.

"That's so nice of you, dear, but, you see, my daughter is a corporate executive in Chicago. Her birthday is coming up in a few weeks...and, well, I saw your basket in the window. The one with all the loofahs and bath supplies. It's simply perfect for my daughter. Young women these days are so overworked. They make their own money so what do they need that they can't provide for themselves?"

Tamara nodded her understanding.

"I never know what my daughter will appreciate. But I think your basket is exactly the kind of gift she'd love and wouldn't purchase for herself. If it's not too presumptuous, my dear, would you allow me to see it?"

The woman's twinkling gray eyes and tentative, irresistible smile endeared Tamara. She ushered her inside the house.

"Mhm," the lady murmured on a deep inhale, "it smells simply delicious inside your home, dear."

Tamara smiled. "I make my own potpourri. Cinnamon this week."

She led her to her sunroom, where the lady pointed to the very basket that had caught her eye from the street. Tamara's relaxation basket, as she called it, had always been popular with friends and family. "That's it. That would be the *perfect* gift for my hard-to-buy-for daughter."

Spotlighted in the sunlight spilling in through the windows, Tamara admitted to herself that the basket looked even more irresistible. It hadn't been the first time someone suggested she sell the hand-woven gift baskets she designed, but never had anyone wanted one so adamantly. The woman wasn't interested in purchasing a *similar* gift basket from local shops or internet services. She wanted *that* particular basket, down to the color, the three-strand braided rim and the ribbon detail. Even when Tamara tried to offer one of the others she was working on, it was clear nothing else would do.

Even more astonished at having someone want one of her creations so aggressively, Tamara told her the final cost of the materials she put into the basket. Without hesitation, the woman pulled out her wallet and took out a hundred dollar bill.

"Can you duplicate that basket before next Monday, dear?"

Quickly, Tamara calculated the time she'd need to complete another basket. She didn't have another made exactly like that one, so she would have to start from scratch. Weaving the basket would take the most time, but she had many of the items to fill it on hand. If she weaved a few hours every day until Monday... "Yes, but I really couldn't accept—"

"I would pay twice as much. Please consider doing this. You'll save me so much distress." She handed over the money and a contact card, then turned on her heel and headed for the front door. "I'll be back on Monday for my basket!" she called out over her shoulder as she walked away down the

driveway.

Tamara stood leaning in the doorway, staring at the woman long after she'd disappeared from Queen Anne Street. She couldn't shake off the feeling of shock. Someone was willing to pay as much as a hundred dollars for something she'd put together as a gift. Sure, her family and friends enjoyed her creations, but their over-the-top praise amounted to nothing more than appreciation.

Distracted, Tamara closed the front door.

Is it wrong for me to accept this money, to do this for a stranger? It isn't as if I paid anywhere near a hundred dollars for the whole thing. This has always been my way of ministering to those I love. Somehow making a profit seems wrong now.

The woman had been so insistent. How could she not agree? Was she cheating if she accepted such a generous profit over her material costs?

"I would pay twice as much," the lady had said, and Tamara couldn't help smiling in satisfaction. She'd just finished the basket that morning, planning to give it to Helen for her birthday when she brought the girls home from preschool. She'd been extremely pleased when she finished it. After taking digital photos of her creation for her scrapbook, she'd filed a printout of the photo with her receipts for materials.

For years, Tamara had thought about a custom-made gift basket business—whenever anyone commented on her newest creations. She'd thought about it but never considered it with anything resembling seriousness—what with family, the house, church activities, Boy Scouts.

Would I even have time? But then I've had gobs of free time I honestly haven't known what to do with since the kids went back to school and Cora started preschool. I might have time now. And we sure could use a little extra income...

Lord, is this something I should even be thinking about? Lead me, guide me, show me what You want me to do.

Tamara went back to her laundry and other chores, but her mind never left the hundred dollar bill or her prayers for wisdom for long. What if her loved ones hadn't been humoring her? What if she really could sell her baskets for a small profit without taking time away from the rest of her life? A year ago, she'd been the one to insist the Lord would provide without Robert having to take a second job, but things had been so tight since then. Maybe this was God's provision and could ease some of their financial burdens. If she did sell her baskets, nothing would change for the family. She could make them during the day. She could handle everything she always did *and* this! It was the perfect solution.

Tamara flitted from chore to chore, too excited to concentrate on what she was doing. *What I wouldn't give to talk to Robert now!* After the Lord, her husband was always the first person she wanted to talk with about anything. But, given his work situation at the moment... He might balk just

because it was something new and unknown.

She let go of a sigh. She'd have to wait until after dinner tonight. How would she control herself until then? She was bursting to tell someone. Maybe once she talked to Robert, she could decide if selling her baskets qualified as insane or actually viable.



Robert Wolfe groaned inside his head. Would the months of agony, since the plant manager had announced his upcoming retirement, end tonight? After Wayne mentioned that Dave wanted them to join him at The Mill for a drink following work, Robert couldn't help wondering if the torment would ever abate.

Looking at Wayne's retreating back and his cocky swagger, Robert shook his head before moving in the direction of the disinfection building to get an effluent sample.

The wastewater treatment plant in Peaceful, Wisconsin was city-run and all decisions about the plant were made by the city council. Glen Hargrove had managed the plant for over forty years. Robert himself had worked at the plant part-time as a teenager in high school, then full-time after graduation. With over twenty years of experience, he felt he should be a shoo-in for the plant management position. After all, the other full-time employee—Wayne Schumaker—had only five years of experience. But Wayne's leg up was his degree in wastewater treatment. Robert had all the necessary certifications and credits but no degree. Although he and Wayne were both qualified to manage the plant, Robert's solid seniority should have given him the edge, should have made it a non-issue.

Unfortunately, the plant manager tended toward wishy-washiness, and the city manager was an opinionated guy who liked to throw his weight and power around. Glen didn't have the fortitude to make the right choice, and Dave Kowalski would do it with a glad heart for him. Dave didn't know the first thing about wastewater treatment, but he enjoyed pretending he did. Any decision he made would be based solely on who he *liked* better. The city council would go along with anything Dave decided.

When his break rolled around in the afternoon, Robert headed for the break room. He dialed his home, hoping to get a few minutes of privacy before Wayne ambled in and started his ribbing.

Feeling warm, he unzipped his uniform jacket while waiting.

"Hello?" Tamara's husky, sweet voice made a shiver go through him from ear to toes.

"Hey, sweetheart."

"Robert," she greeted him personally.

"I'm gonna be late tonight. Dave wants me and Wayne to come out for a

drink.”

Her reply, “Oh,” seemed slightly hesitant. Disappointment laced the simple word. Robert assumed it was because she didn’t like him going into taverns like The Mill. But there were far worse places in town they could go. He didn’t like it any more than she did. “I know. I’ll conduct myself the way the Lord directs. Dave likes to play his little games. But you know I wouldn’t cross that line, even for the promotion.”

“Of course I know you won’t, honey. I just wish you didn’t have to go through this nonsense.”

“Yeah.” Robert let out a sigh. For the most part, he’d enjoyed his job. Until Wayne Schumaker had been hired.

“How late do you think you’ll be?”

“I’m not sure. Probably six. Maybe seven, if he draws it out.”

“I’ll keep dinner warm for you.”

The sound of footsteps coming down the hall drew Robert’s attention, and he turned his back to the open door.

“I gotta go. Love you, Tammy.”

“I love you, too. I’ll see you later.”

Robert hung up and turned in time to see Wayne’s jeering grin as he feigned kisses. “Talkin’ to your mistress, Wolfe?” He punched one of the buttons on the soda machine with more macho power than necessary.

“Don’t have one, don’t need one,” Robert said on a shrug.

More times than he could count, Robert had endured Wayne’s bad-natured taunts about his happy marriage and loving family, not to mention his Christian principles. After cheating on his wife, Wayne had lost his family and now lived his life with the gusto of a gigolo, including a stint in jail for not paying child support. Robert bit back words resting on the tip of his tongue and pressed his lips together. He’d always forced himself to get along with everyone, whether he liked them or not.

Once Wayne sauntered away from the soda machine, Robert moved over to it.

“So how is that fine wife of yours, Wolfie?”

“Tamara’s fine.”

“Oh yeah, I’ve seen that.”

Robert ignored the lewd comment, complete with the leering smirk on Wayne’s boyish face. Instead of sitting with him at the table, Robert leaned next to the microwave counter.

“You s’pose Dave’s gonna put one of us outta our misery tonight?” Wayne’s tone made it clear Robert would be the one put out of the managerial position. Wayne took a long swig of his soda, then let out a loud belch followed by his usual cursing. Robert masked his disgust.

Robert had no illusions that Dave would use any excuse to give Wayne the position when Glen retired. He was looking for Robert to cross the line. But Dave couldn’t discount his long years of service and experience, even if

he wanted to. At least he continued telling himself that, and Tamara reassured him of it every time he faltered in his convictions.

He shrugged at Wayne, who finished off his drink in one gulp.

"Yeah. Probably just wants to buy us a beer," Wayne said with a smirk that turned to laughter. He stood and sent his crushed can soaring into the recycling bin before leaving the room.

Robert couldn't have been happier to see his retreating back. Grimacing, he opened the break room fridge and got the soda he'd brought with him.

Robert needed the promotion and the raise. Never mind that he deserved it. He *needed* it. At almost forty years old, he'd expected to be managing the plant long ago. Matt, his oldest son, would be going to college next year. Living paycheck to paycheck the way they did had never bothered Robert so much until Glen announced he would retire on October first.

The Lord had always provided for them, and Robert believed He always would as long as he remained steady in his obligations. But a raise—a true raise with a manager's salary instead of an annual increase of fifty cents or less an hour every paycheck—would keep them from feeling so stretched every month, especially after Matt went off to college next year.

After taking a deep breath, Robert let it out in a slow rush during his count to ten. He hated the games he had to play just to get what, by all rights, belonged to him.

Chapter 2

Tamara crossed the immaculate lawn between the DiFiero's property and hers. She inhaled the lingering scent of summer flowers and fruit trees on the light breeze. Another Indian summer day. She loved that she could still open the doors and windows wide in the morning without the furnace kicking in.

Helen got out of her older-model Chevy as Tamara approached. Having been friends—and neighbors—for over five years, Tamara and Helen had worked out a car-pooling agreement to get their daughters to and from the preschool they'd both entered this year. In exchange for Helen dropping off and picking up both girls each weekday, Tamara babysat Janie from two-thirty—when Helen left for work—until five-thirty. Janie's father got home from work at that time. Since Tamara's family had only one vehicle, the schedule worked well.

Tamara smiled at her friend, then opened the backseat door on her daughter's side. "Hey, sweetie. How did it go today?"

At five years old, Tamara and Robert's youngest child was as tiny as Tamara had been at that age, and was a non-stop bundle of energy and conversation. She had an adorable round face, her daddy's green eyes, and a space where her front teeth hadn't come in just yet. Tamara ran a hand through Cora's blond curls—the very same she struggled to get a brush through every morning.

From her booster seat, Cora pushed a piece of paper into her hands, saying, "Look what I made for you, Mommy." The word-find had been created on a sheet of construction paper and crammed with tons of letters, not necessarily in straight rows and columns. Along the bottom was a list of words within the puzzle. Since her daughter's Rs looked like both Ls and Vs, Tamara knew she'd have her work cut out for her. Nevertheless, she smiled at seeing it. "Oh, I love word-finds! You made this just for me, sweetie?"

Obviously pleased with herself, Cora nodded.

"After Mrs. DiFiero and I talk and everyone's had their snack, I'll do this. Thank you, sweetheart."

Tamara helped her out of her seatbelt, then Cora jumped out and into her arms, telling her every detail since the moment she'd left that morning with Helen and her best friend Janie. Cora harbored none of her older sister's insecurities. She'd been excited about starting preschool all through summer and loved it from her first day. Tamara considered it one less concern that she wouldn't have to worry about her baby being miserable away from her all day.

"I wish we had school on weekends!" Cora ended her day-recap, and Tamara straightened out her daughter's dress that'd been wrinkle-free

before she left that morning. Of their five children, Cora looked most like her father, while the older children had Tamara's mahogany brown hair and brown eyes. Only Matthew, the eldest, had received a mix from both of them with green eyes and brown hair.

"Well, God thinks we need to rest and play at least one day a week, sweetie, especially when we're young."

"I know!" Cora moaned in dramatic agony.

"Come in. I made blueberry strudel," Tamara said over the top of the car, to where Helen had eased Janie out of her booster seat.

"My favorite, but not my waistline's." Helen glanced down at her still-slim figure. Along with her blue uniform, she'd pulled her shoulder-length, kinky black hair back for working the nightshift at the truck stop in Peaceful.

Tamara shook her head in light-hearted scolding. "It's your birthday. You can splurge one day. I promise I won't keep you too long."

Helen worked the night shift waitressing while her husband worked days at a car dealership. Five years before, Helen and Ed had moved into the neighborhood with their newborn. Three days after the new family arrived, Tamara had welcomed them, with newborn Cora asleep against her chest, to the neighborhood with one of her baskets. She and Helen had been friends ever since, seeing each other most days in that time.

Tamara set Cora on the ground, and Janie hugged Tamara, then the two little girls raced toward the house, screeching "Stru-dilll!" at the top of their lungs. Tamara and Helen laughed and linked arms before following the girls.

Inside her Queen Anne home, Tamara led the way toward the sprawling kitchen that sported wide alcoves for the dining room and a breakfast nook overlooking Tamara's multiple flower gardens in the backyard. Daily, she thanked God for blessing them with the home she and Robert had restored over the past twenty years. Helen moaned in bliss at the scents of warm, fruity strudel and freshly brewed coffee that seemed to beckon them.

The girls already sat at opposite sides of the island in the center of the sunny room, their upper bodies inclined in longing toward the dessert. "Can we have some, Mommy?" Cora begged, her tone anxious.

"With a glass of milk, you certainly may," Tamara said on a laugh, opening the fridge for the jug. Earlier, she'd laid out plates, glasses and utensils on the island. "Do you girls know whose birthday it is today?"

Cries of "Mama" and "Mrs. DiFiero" came, followed by birthday wishes and hugs. She served the dessert to the girls on the island, then motioned Helen toward the cozy nook in another rounded turret of the house.

Like Tamara, Helen was thirty-seven, but her caramel-colored face had become lined with worry from a hard life. Crow's feet surrounded her dark eyes and her once wary-to-smile mouth.

Seeing the relaxation basket Tamara had designed before she reached the table, Helen glanced back at her. "You didn't!"

"I did. It's all yours. Go ahead and take a look."

Watching her friend croon in excitement over the basket, a feeling of joy and confidence washed over Tamara. It was for this reason that she labored over every basket. She loved seeing the recipient's pleasure derived from her handmade gift. If she could give a little bit of herself to those she loved, what harm did it do?

Having learned the craft as a teenager, Tamara adored designing the baskets. She loved the actual basket weaving in many sizes, shapes, colors and materials, filling the completed basket with goodies from local businesses she had relationships with, and carefully placing all the materials inside the basket. In general, she took her time with each one—custom-making and designing them with love—and she always had a dozen going at once.

"You know me so well," Helen exclaimed as she caressed the plush towels, sponges, bath beads and oils, powders and lotions. Her eagerness was evident in the glow lighting her face. "It's almost too pretty to take apart and use."

"I'm so glad you like it, Helen. You deserve to pamper yourself occasionally."

Helen hugged her in a tight grip around the shoulders. Tamara couldn't help noticing the tears in her friend's eyes, and she felt a sting behind her own. Helen had enjoyed very few pleasures in life, both when she was a child and now with her emotionally reserved husband.

Though Helen hadn't accepted the Lord and her husband was nowhere near a decision of that sort, Helen came closer to a commitment with each passing day. Helen struggled with forgiving her parents for the years of abuse she and her siblings had endured. Getting her to see God the Father as gentle and kind, her best interests at heart with His discipline, had been a slow road. In the past few months, despite her hesitation, Helen had been attending Tamara and Robert's church with Janie.

After Tamara served her an extra-large slice of strudel with fresh cream, she poured the coffee. Then she joined her in the nook.

"You really should do this for a living, Tamara," Helen said on a sigh, savoring a bite of the dessert. "I mean the basket, although you make the most sinful—or should I say *heavenly*?—confections I've ever eaten. This basket is so gorgeous."

Tamara took a deep breath, unable to contain her excitement. "I'm...well, I'm thinking about it."

Helen's soft ebony eyes opened in surprise. "Really? You've never said that before!"

Chuckling, Tamara set her fork back down next to her untouched strudel. "The strangest thing happened to me today, Helen. I still can't believe it. I'm just dying to tell someone!"

"Well, tell me! I can't stand secrets."

After summarizing the unexpected visit, Tamara pointed to Helen's

birthday basket. "It was this one she wanted."

A wrinkle formed between Helen's pencil-thin eyebrows. "Does a hundred dollars cover all this? Even the materials to weave the basket?"

"Actually, it does. I have a source so I get the reeds and spokes and other materials at a major discount. I shouldn't tell you this because you might think I'm cheap, but I have bulk sources for all of the materials and for most of the products I put inside the baskets, too. The money allows for a decent profit."

Helen giggled. "I've always wondered how much you were spending—or overspending, I assumed—on these elaborate baskets for everyone. I hated to think you were parting with hard-earned dollars just for me."

"Do you think I could do this, Helen?" Tamara asked, unable to focus on anything but the thoughts that had carried her on clouds through her chores that afternoon. "I mean, I've been doing these baskets since I was a teenager." The scrapbook of her most recent basket designs rested on the table across from them. She pulled it closer to show Helen. "I've only done it for family and friends, never for profit. But maybe I could do a combination internet custom-designed, gift basket business with a local one—right from my sunroom. I must be crazy, but I've been thinking and praying about this since the woman left."

While Helen flipped through the book, Tamara put her hands on her heated cheeks. "My twin brother Peter might be willing to display one of my baskets in his bookstore in town and put out some information on how to order a custom-made one. And my sister-in-law Justine might put a basket in her law office."

Helen shook her head with an expression of awe, her attention on the basket designs. "Oh, Tamara, these are some of the most beautiful, professional baskets I've ever seen. The themes are so varied! You could offer just about anything. I can't help thinking, though..." She looked up from the book. "When would you have time? As your schedule is now, even without a job outside the house and all the kids in school now, I can't imagine how you actually manage to do all the stuff you already do. Wouldn't this be a lot of work for you?"

Tamara waved her hand, dismissing her friend's concern. "That's what I've been thinking about. Now that Cora's in preschool, I have *hours* to myself in the morning and a small part of the afternoon to finish all my chores and errands and anything else. But for the past few weeks, I've had at least three hours each day that I've been unsure what to do with myself. This basket business seems so perfect for filling that void. And, in the beginning at least, I can't imagine having to do more than one basket a week."

"It does sound perfect, Tamara. I imagine everyone will want one of these beauties."

"Really?"

"Most definitely!"

Tamara smiled, more distracted now that she had some encouragement. She didn't think Helen was humoring her. "We could use a little extra money. Between Lucas and Jonathan outgrowing clothes and shoes every month, Cora's preschool, and Matthew going off to college next year... Well, I doubt I'll make gobs extra, but anything would be helpful so Robert won't have to take a second job if he doesn't get the promotion. And I absolutely adore every minute of doing this kind of thing anyway."

"I bet you're bursting to talk to Robert about it."

Tamara laughed. "You know me so well, Helen."

She couldn't wait to talk to her husband. He'd be relieved at having a few extra dollars to keep their budget from becoming stretched too thin by the end of every month. Even if her little business venture didn't work out as well as she wanted it to, she knew the Lord would provide for them always. Just maybe this was the way He'd do it.