



Sincerely, Mayla

By Virginia Smith

Excerpt courtesy of www.virginiasmith.org

CHAPTER ONE

I've always said if the Lord had intended His people to live in snow He would have put the Garden of Eden in the middle of the North Pole. And we know He didn't because Adam and Eve were wearing only fig leaves. If the first couple had lived in the frozen north, the Bible would have described them shivering around a bonfire for warmth, and surely one of the temptations offered by that snake would have been ankle-length wool coats. No, snow and the cold weather that goes along with it are a part of the curse.

In Kentucky, we live with that curse for four months every year, sometimes more. We hole up in our homes, paying outrageous prices for gas to run our heaters, and we bundle ourselves up like Arctic explorers just to run from the front door to the car. Don't even get me started about scraping ice off the windshield.

The cold makes us cranky. I have a theory that it's because of all the recycled air we breathe since we spend so much time inside during the winter, but when I voiced the idea to my roommate, Sylvia, she said that's just my excuse for being bad tempered. "Mayla Strong, you need to just get over it!" she hollered as she stomped out the door with the tail of her scarf flying.

She's probably right, but I still hate the cold.

I knew I was in for a bad day that February morning before I opened my eyes. The first sound I heard was the distinctive scrape of the snowplow on the street outside my apartment window.

Terrific. More snow.

“Lord,” I grumbled into my pillow, “why do You keep sending all this snow? Is there a kid praying for a snow day because he didn’t study for a test? I know You answer every prayer, but maybe You could answer this one with a big ol’ no. I say let the kid flunk, Lord. I am sick of snow.”

I don’t claim to have second sight, but that morning, I felt like a cloud had gathered above my head while I slept. I lay in bed, my face buried in my pillow, and wished I could stay there all day. Something bad was going to happen. I just knew it.

My pastor is fond of saying, “Don’t expect life to be perfect just because you’re a Christian. Becoming a child of God didn’t give you a magic shield. But it did give you the right to cry on the shoulder that the weight of the world rests on.”

I know for sure that’s true. Bad things do happen to Christians, me included. It’s like supper when I was a kid. Mama made me eat all my peas before I could have ice cream. Don’t ask me why she felt the need to force those nasty, slimy things down my throat; I sure won’t do it to my kids. But I suffered through it, grumbling and crying and gagging the whole time, so I could get the good stuff at the end.

I hate to admit it, but I’m pretty much the same at twenty-three as I was at six. I still grumble and complain while I’m going through the hard part, but I suffer through it because I know the blessing is coming.

And I still gag at peas.

Business at Clark and Hasna Building Company was not going well. The bosses lost an important bid, one they had worked hard on for months, and then we had a run of bad luck that made another job come in a couple of months late. The penalties ate into the company’s profits, and I knew from Mr. Clark’s voice carrying through the cardboard walls of his office that he blamed Mr. Hasna. The construction business slows to a crawl during Kentucky winters anyway, so we were lucky to have a couple of indoor remodels to keep at least some of the guys working. But most of our payroll was drawing unemployment, and we didn’t figure that would change for another month to six weeks, when spring finally moved into central Kentucky and the ground thawed.

So it made no sense at all for Mr. Clark to hire his niece to work in the office. Alison Harper, the company secretary, agreed with me. Between the two of us, we had things running as smooth as Mama’s roast beef gravy, and we didn’t take kindly to Miss Smarty Pants waltzing in with the ink still wet on her associate degree from Lexington Community College. Because I don’t have an associate degree, I don’t know what goes into getting one, but it seemed like she had learned enough to have an opinion on every subject that could come up in normal office

conversation and several more that nobody had ever heard of or cared about. Especially Alison and me.

Her name was Elizabeth Clark Payson, but she went by Clarkie. I mean, really! Clarkie? I had struggled with Mayla all my life because no one had ever heard it, but at least it sounded like a first name. Her nickname was almost enough to make me feel sorry for her . . . almost.

We heard her life story on her first day. Her entire life story, with nothing left out from the moment of her birth to her family Christmas in Hawaii two months before. And then she told us how Uncle Eric—that would be Mr. Clark—had been so interested in all these new ideas she'd learned at LCC that he hired her to modernize his office and how she expected to have things running shipshape in no time.

By the time we left work that first day, Alison and I had decided if anyone deserved a name like Clarkie, it was her. Actually, it was nicer than some we would have given her if we weren't Christian women.

So that morning in late February when I sledded to work in my little Honda, praying the whole way as I slipped over the icy Lexington roads like a moose on ice skates, I was not happy to walk in and find Clarkie sitting at my desk. I was twenty minutes late because of the weather, and Alison had not arrived yet.

“What's up?” I asked, allowing a hint of irritation to seep into my voice when I saw her fingers poised over my keyboard.

“Oh hi, Mayla! Awful morning, isn't it? The radio said we got three inches and black ice everywhere. I got a ride this morning with Uncle Eric.”

“Yeah, so now you're doing what?”

“Oh.” She had the decency to look embarrassed. “Uncle Eric asked me to pull up some payroll figures for him, but I'm having trouble getting into the database.”

“That's because the database is password protected.” I gave her a tight smile. “Payroll is pretty sensitive stuff, you know. Can't leave it sitting there for just anybody to hack into.”

She ran a finger down the edge of her straight, honey-colored hair, giving it a flip at the end to toss it over her shoulder in a perfect Jennifer Aniston imitation. “Of course not. But I'm not just anybody, you know, and Uncle Eric did ask me.”

I stood staring at her for a moment, trying to decide if I should give her the password or grab the back of the chair and dump her on the floor. I used to be a lot more menacing when I had purple hair and a stud beneath my lower lip. Though I still wore a tiny diamond in my left

nostril, my slim, five-five frame and milk chocolate brown hair didn't intimidate anyone, especially Miss Associate-Degree-Whose-Uncle-Owns-the-Company. She sat there in my chair, smiling sweetly at me with a glint of something in her brown eyes that I didn't like one bit. A secret lurked around in there, and I didn't even want to think what kind of secrets the boss's niece might know.

At that moment, Mr. Clark stuck his head out from his office behind Alison's empty desk.

"Mayla, would you give her the password, please?" He posed it like a question, but he was not asking.

My back to Clarkie, I didn't bother hiding my discomfort from him. "If you need some payroll numbers, I can pull them for you."

His smile moved his lips but nothing else. "I'm sure you can, but then Clarkie will never learn how, will she?"

I wanted to say she seemed to think she knew everything that needed knowing anyway, but I clamped my jaw shut and wrote the password on a sticky note—JOY4LIFE. Clarkie read it, gave a tight smile, and typed it in. The payroll system opened.

I pointed to the top of the screen. "So now you click on Week Ending, and then—"

"Thanks, I can figure it out from here."

She grabbed the mouse and clicked with authority while Mr. Clark disappeared back into his office. She did know her way around a computer; I had to give her that. I didn't have to like it, though.

Alison arrived at that moment, bringing an icy blast of wind through the door with her.

"It's snowing again," she announced, collapsing a purple umbrella and shaking the flakes onto the dirty welcome mat. "Can you believe all the snow we're getting this winter? The roads are awful. I almost wrecked my car three times between home and here."

As usual, Alison managed to look elegant even dressed for snowy weather. A pink wool scarf knotted loosely under her chin protected her hair from the wind and painted a splash of color on her full length black coat. Her gloves matched the scarf, her boots matched the coat, and she looked like she had stepped off the cover of a winter fashion catalog.

Seeing Clarkie seated at my desk, her eyelids narrowed for a moment, and then she arched her brows in my direction. I shrugged and nodded toward Mr. Clark's office. Rolling her eyes, she hung her coat on a peg on the wall and took her seat.

I didn't want to hover, and given that my seat was occupied, I sat in Clarkie's. She had shared a corner of my L-shaped desk since she'd arrived at our happy little family three weeks before, and Mr. Clark had promised to get her a desk of her own soon. It would mean rearranging the office and giving me a smaller desk, but that was okay. The sooner Clarkie moved into her own space and out of mine, the better.

From where I sat, I couldn't see the computer monitor, but since she was writing neat figures in a spiral notebook, I assumed she had figured out how to get what she wanted. I couldn't see what she wrote, though I did strain my neck in the attempt. After a few minutes, she tore the page out of the notebook and got up from my desk.

"There you go." She vacated my chair and flashed a bright, fake smile.

She ignored Alison on the way into her uncle's office. When Clarkie closed the door behind her, Alison and I looked at each other.

"What was that all about?" Alison whispered.

I shrugged, uneasy. "Whatever it was, I don't like it."

Alison glared at the door. "If it involves Clarkie and closed doors, it can't be good."

I felt exactly the same. I was trying not to feel paranoid, but I had sensed bad feelings from the little brat all week. She had been secretive and not nearly as chirpy as before.

"It's probably nothing," I said trying to convince myself as much as Alison.

"Hmmm." She gave the door one final glare, then turned away to boot up her computer.

We both spent the rest of the morning trying to avoid Clarkie. Not an easy task, because she not only shared a desk with me, but Mr. Clark had asked me early in the week to show her the company's books. Supposedly, she learned some great new things about bookkeeping at LCC and had ideas about ways we could be more efficient in ours. I couldn't imagine what new advancements could have come about in bookkeeping in the past few years, but I kept my opinions to myself. I learned by working with the woman who hired me to take her place, so what did I know? But if Clarkie had new ideas, she wasn't sharing them. She spent her time listening to me and making notes in her spiral notebook.

The day dragged. During the summer, the office was as active as a playground at recess, but that winter day was long and boring. Finally, just before three thirty, Mr. Clark came out of his office and said, "Mayla, could you come in here for a minute?"

Clarkie had suddenly become absorbed with whatever she was writing in that notebook and didn't look at me as I passed her chair.

Alison's eyes asked a silent question, and I shrugged. As I stepped past Mr. Clark, Mr. Hasna came out of his office and followed me.

Mr. Clark closed his door and sat behind his desk. "Have a seat, Mayla. Jack and I want to talk to you about something."

I sat in one of the two chairs in front of the desk. Mr. Hasna took the other. He didn't look at me, keeping his gaze fixed on Mr. Clark. His jaw was clenched shut, his lips tight, and I got the impression he wasn't too happy about whatever Mr. Clark was getting ready to tell me. I knew right then that I wasn't going to be happy about it, either.

"As you know," Mr. Clark continued, "business has been slow lately. We've got some things in the works, but we don't see any improvement in the financial situation for at least another few months." He paused, waiting for me to say something, but I just nodded. "When times are tight, as they are now, we're required to make difficult decisions. Sometimes those decisions impact people, and I'm afraid this time our decision has impacted you."

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "Are you firing me?"

"Laying you off," Mr. Hasna responded quickly. "Not firing you. There's a difference."

"I understand the difference." I struggled to keep my voice level. "We lay off the crew when a construction job ends, but they know when we land another one we'll bring them back on the payroll. So are you saying you intend to bring me back on the payroll when business picks up again?"

Mr. Hasna looked away, and Mr. Clark answered. "We would certainly hire you in the future if we have another opening for which you are qualified."

"For which I'm qualified," I repeated. "What does that mean?"

He gave a small, embarrassed cough. "We've decided to upgrade your position. It will include several new responsibilities and will now require a minimum of an associate degree."

White, hot anger rose up inside me as the light dawned. This was Clarkie's doing, the little brat.

“I see,” I said levelly, pinning Mr. Clark with a direct stare to let him know I really did see.

He looked down at the paper in the center of his desk. I saw it had been torn from a spiral notebook, and the sight of the figures written in Clarkie’s neat handwriting set my teeth together.

“Of course, we’ve prepared a generous severance package for you in appreciation of the excellent job you’ve done for us. One full month’s pay—one week for every year you’ve worked for us—and after that, you will be eligible to draw unemployment. I wanted to have your checks here for you to take, but the weather prevented the payroll service from delivering them. They will be mailed to your home instead, and you should have them within a few days. Your health-insurance deductions will be taken so your coverage continues through the end of next month.”

One part of my mind realized that the deal wasn’t bad. Construction workers never got severance pay at the end of a job. But the other part of my mind was fuming, so the offer didn’t make me feel better.

Lord, I need Your help right now, or I’m going to say something I’ll regret.

Mr. Clark went on. “And of course if you need a reference, we will give you an excellent one. We are very happy with your work here at Clark and Hasna, Mayla.” He paused, obviously waiting for me to say something. When I didn’t, he asked, “Do you have any questions?”

I looked him directly in the eye. “No, I think I understand everything.”

He had the grace to look away. Then he stood, and Mr. Hasna and I stood, too. He handed me the paper.

“Here are the figures for your final check, so you’ll know what to expect.”

I took the paper without a word and turned toward the door. As I reached for the handle, Mr. Hasna’s hand stopped mine. Glancing up at him, I realized he looked more miserable than I felt.

“I’m really sorry, Mayla.” From the look in his eyes, I believed him. He probably didn’t like Clarkie any better than I did. “When you need a reference, give them my name. And if I hear of any jobs you might be interested in, I’ll let you know.”

For the first time, I felt something other than anger. Mr. Hasna was a nice man, and I liked working for him. I would miss him, and it made me sad. A lump formed in my throat.

“Thanks,” I told him. “I appreciate it.”

He opened the door for me, and I stepped through to see Alison waiting with teary eyes. She caught me in a hug while Mr. Hasna stood watching, wringing his hands.

“She told me,” Alison said, meaning Clarkie. “I got a box and started packing for you.”

Clarkie had made herself scarce, which was probably a good thing. A box sat on my desk, and most of my personal things had been piled inside. I opened the desk drawers and got one or two things Alison had missed, like my favorite gel pen I had bought myself and my letter opener shaped like King Arthur’s sword Excalibur that Mama had put in my Christmas stocking one year. Then we both put on our coats, and Alison opened the door for me and walked with me out to my car. The snow had stopped falling, thank goodness, but the air was still bitterly cold. I was actually kind of grateful, because the chill would make our good-byes short. Alison grabbed me in a hug, and when she clung to me, I felt tears start to build up in my eyes.

“I’m going to quit,” she told me, sniffing. “I can’t work with that little snot one more day if you’re not here.”

“Don’t you dare. That’s just what she wants—to get rid of both of us. Besides, they gave me enough severance pay to last until I find another job. You wouldn’t have that, and then I’d feel responsible when you got kicked out of your apartment because you couldn’t make the rent.”

She sniffed. “I’m glad they did that, anyway. But I’m still going to look around for another job. I don’t like the way things are shaping up here.”

I thought that was probably a good idea, but I didn’t say so. “Listen, you’ve got my number, so keep in touch. Say a prayer for me, but don’t worry. God will take care of me.”

“I will, Mayla,” she promised. “And you call me, too, okay?”

“Sure, Alison. Good luck.”

“Bye, Mayla.”

She stood shivering in the cold and waving as I backed out of the parking place. I thought sadly that today would probably be the last time I saw Alison. She had renewed her relationship with Jesus nine months ago, shortly after I began mine, and it had been good to work with someone who was as excited about her new life in Christ as I was. We weren’t really close friends, just friendly co-workers. Still, I would miss her.

Wiping a tear from the corner of my eye, I fixed my gaze straight ahead. The roads had been scraped, but snow and patches of ice still covered them. I focused on driving, my hands clutching the steering wheel in the ten-and-two position. A feeling started growing inside me, an

empty sort of feeling. That was the only job I'd ever had, outside of waiting tables. I had joined Clark and Hasna as a temporary summer clerk when I was nineteen. I never left.

Until now.

Where would I work? My stomach tightened into a knot of anxiety. My night job as a waitress would help, but I couldn't make the rent on tips alone. I didn't know anything except bookkeeping at Clark and Hasna. I wasn't qualified to do anything else. And I didn't have a college degree. Would any company want to hire me?

"Lord," I said, swallowing past the tightness in my throat, "I know the Bible says You'll take care of me. I guess now's Your chance to prove it. And I sure would appreciate it if You don't wait too long, okay?"

For more info about Sincerely, Mayla, visit www.viriniasmith.org