

*Have you ever had a dream so real you questioned whether it was really a dream or perhaps something more?*

It has been almost nineteen years since Matt Richard passed away. As hard as it was, life went on for his wife, Kate. She busied herself with raising her two daughters from her first marriage, Jenna and Mia, and Mattie, her child with Matt. Before she knew it, Jenna and Mia were all grown up and living on their own, and Mattie was graduating from high school. Life was going well when tragedy struck again. The family was torn apart by grief, and everything in their lives spiraled out of control until fate jumped in. Or, was it something more?

*How it all began . . .*

*And I Believe* began nineteen years ago in the small town of Versailles, Ohio when thirty-four-year old Kate Turner unexpectedly returned home early one cold, dreary Saturday morning in February to overhear her husband, Aaron, of eighteen years, talking on the phone with Angie Sims, his ex-girlfriend from high school. As the truth began to unravel, Kate found out that the two had been secretly talking to each other for a few months, and one night Angie came on to Aaron. Aaron kissed her in return but stopped before it went any further.

Distraught, Kate and her two young daughters, Jenna, who was ten years old, and Mia, almost four years old, went to stay with her parents while she tried to figure out what went wrong in their marriage to make something like this happen. Kate and Aaron had been together since she was fifteen years old and he was seventeen. Aaron was a fantastic husband and father, and he treated Kate wonderfully. To those who knew them, they were like the perfect couple. Aaron was an attorney at his family's law firm in town, and Kate was an art teacher in Russia, a neighboring town ten minutes from home. Aaron was around six feet tall, thin and very handsome. He had a head full of dark brown hair and the bluest eyes while Kate was a petite five-foot-three-inch blonde cutie.

The two dated for eight years and were married a little over a year when Kate gave birth to Jenna. A couple years later, Kate found out she was pregnant again. Her and Aaron's happiness

about the new pregnancy was quickly cut short when Kate suffered a miscarriage. Sadly, over the next four years, Kate suffered two more horrible miscarriages just like the first one.

Losing her babies took a toll on Kate, and she became depressed and withdrawn, and then she became, to a point, obsessed with getting pregnant again. Month after month turned into year after year, and still Kate couldn't become pregnant. Just when Kate finally accepted the fact that she would never be able to have another child, she found out she was pregnant. After a cautious pregnancy, she gave birth to Mia. Unfortunately, her doctor told her that due to scar tissue in her uterus, she would never be able to get pregnant again. While she had always dreamed of having more kids, she was ecstatic to finally have another baby and accepted the news.

Other than this, Kate always thought her marriage with Aaron was strong. Yes, they weren't as intimate as Aaron would like, but with two kids, who had time? She assumed this was normal for all married couples with children.

After a couple days staying at her parents' house, Kate thought for sure Aaron would beg her to come back home. But he never did. Instead, he told her he loved her more than anything in the world, but he couldn't *live like this* anymore. He accused her of falling out of love with him years ago and brought up how they only had sex twice a year, at the most, over the last three years of their marriage. He then hit her with something she didn't see coming - he wanted a divorce.

This devastated Kate and turned her world upside down. She became depressed and began shutting out everyone important in her life: her parents, her two sisters - Kellie and Kristie - and her lifelong best friend, Liz. They were all worried about her and didn't know what to do until early one cold, Friday morning in the middle of March, when a persistent Liz unexpectedly showed up at Kate's doorstep, insisting that the two were having girls' day. No "if, ands, or buts" about it. At first, Kate told her "no," but she soon realized Liz had her mind set, and she had no choice in the matter.

To Kate's surprise, it was exactly what she needed. After a day pampering themselves with manicures, pedicures, haircuts, shopping, and nonstop catching up and laughing, Kate felt unbelievably better. The day got even better when she and Liz went to Creekside, a local bar in town, and celebrated St. Patrick's Day with all of their friends. Kate was having so much fun, even forgetting about Aaron for the moment, when a tall, good looking guy with dark brown hair and big brown eyes walked into the bar. It was Matt Richard, a friend of hers from high school. Kate

had only seen Matt a handful of times since she graduated, but the two quickly picked up where they left off all those years ago. Matt was outgoing and funny, and the two reminisced the rest of the night about the good ol' days when she was a senior and he was a freshman in high school. He and his friends picked on her while they were in art class when she would also be in there working on her art portfolio for college. The more she and Matt talked, the more comfortable she felt to share with him the news about her and Aaron. The two ended the night with a hug and saying to each other "it was great to see you again." Kate left with Liz and went home.

The next morning, Kate was awakened by a knock at the door. There was nobody there, but on the mat at her doorstep was a self-help book with a note from Matt saying how the book helped him deal with the death of his Grandpa Gene who passed away from cancer, and his dad, John, who died a few years earlier from a heart attack. Matt hoped the book could help her with her loss too.

Cozying up on the couch, Kate began to read the book. She quickly realized that Aaron's accusations were true. In the beginning, she was madly in love with him, but over the years she had fallen out of love with him, which is why she had no desire to be with him intimately. Even though Aaron tried to talk to her about this many times, she never wanted to discuss it. Instead, she ignored and avoided the problem. She also realized she took advantage of Aaron being a wonderful and doting husband. And she realized she dominated their relationship. While this didn't excuse what Aaron did to her, it did make her realize she needed to take ownership for her part in their marriage falling apart.

Once Kate accepted this truth, her anger toward Aaron subsided, and she finally told him she was ready to proceed with the divorce. This is when things began to change for Kate. Instead of shutting out her family and friends, she began accepting invitations to do things with them. She even bought an old run down house that ironically was four houses away from Matt's mom's house, and she busied herself remodeling it. Turning the old house into a beautiful home was therapeutic and unleashed a new passion in her. Matt, who was now an engineer at a medical company in town, helped her with the remodeling. Soon, the two became even better friends. His love for life and happy disposition rubbed off on Kate, and in no time at all, she was back to her old self, but only better. This time she was truly happy and content.

A few months later and completely out of the blue, Matt confessed to Kate that he has been in love with her since high school. Kate was flabbergasted. Back then, all those years ago, Matt confided in her about a girl he really liked but would never reveal her name. He would only refer to this mystery girl as *the one*. Kate had no idea that all this time she was actually *the one*. Before, she played it off like she and Matt were only good friends, but after Matt's confession, she admitted to him that she was in love with him too.

For the next month, the two were inseparable. Kate became fast friends and close with Matt's family: his mom, Barb; brother, Luke; and sister, Jen. And they accepted Kate and her daughters openly and lovingly into their family. Kate and Matt's love for one another was undeniable. Everything was going perfect when they received devastating news – Matt had pancreatic cancer.

“Shocked” and “scared” didn't come close to describe the way they felt. Not wanting to waste any time, they immediately started fighting the disease. After surgery and two rounds of chemo, they received even worse news – Matt's cancer was terminal. Even though Kate and Matt had only been officially dating two months, Kate had no intention of leaving him. She loved him so much and was going to be by his side until the end. The two cherished their limited time together. Unfortunately, three months after his diagnosis, Matt lost his battle to the horrible disease.

Kate and all of Matt's family and friends were heartbroken. No words could describe their grief. His funeral was pure hell for all of them until the priest, Father Patrick – also a family friend and Matt's Godfather – read a letter from Matt...

“I was blessed to be there when that beautiful soul came into this world, and I feel even more blessed to have been here when he left this life to enter the gates of Heaven. Before Matt passed away, he asked me to read to all of you today a letter that he wrote,” Father Patrick said as he stood at the podium in front of the church at Matt's funeral mass.

He blinked away the tears as he pulled out a letter from his bible and looked up at the church full of grieving people, mourning the loss of Matt. He proceeded to put his glasses on, unfold the letter and read.

*“September 16, 2007*

*It is the day after my 31st birthday, and soon I will be called to God's kingdom. Even though I am lying here dying, I wouldn't trade a single second of my life for anything. Things do not always turn out the way we*

want them to, but we need to take what we have been given and make the most out of it. That is what I did, and I am dying happy with no regrets.

I have something very special to share with all of you, something I asked Kate to keep a secret until now. A couple weeks ago when I was in the hospital, I received the most devastating news a person could get – I was going to die and soon. The second I heard this, I wanted to die right then and there. But God works in mysterious ways, and He didn't waste any time giving me hope to hold on just a little bit longer. It happened when Kate, who had just returned from having some tests run after she fainted, gave me the most incredible news I have ever received. By the grace of God, she was pregnant with our baby. All I ever wanted in life was to be a father and a husband, and God was giving me this chance before I died.

My wish was then completed late last night when I asked Kate to marry me, and she accepted. Marrying my best friend and being a father have completed me.

Having said that, I have been blessed with a wonderful, loving family, and one of the last things I want to do is let each of them know exactly how much they mean to me.

Mom: First, I want to thank you for being the best mom a son could have. I am who I am because of you and Dad and the way you two loved and raised me. You are the most amazing person I know. I have always looked up to you and am very proud to be your son. If you love your grandchild the way you love me, he or she will be the most blessed child in the world. Once again, I love you, Mom.

Luke: Thanks for being a great brother and my best friend. You have always been there for me, and I don't know what I would have done without you. Every time I was knocked down, you picked me up, and every time I accomplished a goal, you would be the first one to celebrate it with me. You would do anything for me, and that means the world to me. Although I am very saddened to know I will not be here to raise my child, I feel completely at peace knowing he or she will have the next best thing, which is you. I love you, Luke.

Jen: I fell in love with you the first moment I laid eyes on you in the hospital. I remember staring down at this beautiful baby with a head full of dark curls and privately telling God that I would protect my new baby sister until the day I die. You have grown up to be such a beautiful woman, and I was never prouder than the day I walked you down the aisle. Jared is a great guy and loves you very much. You two are going to be wonderful parents one day. When you do have children, please tell them all about their crazy uncle Matt.

My Leading Ladies, Jenna and Mia: I love you two girls as if you were my own flesh and blood. Your beautiful smiles and big hugs were the medicine that made me feel better every day.

*Jenna: Please take care of Mia and your new brother or sister for me. Please tuck them both in bed every night and tell them my goodnight prayer. Remember to give them a thousand butterfly kisses for me and tell remind them of my love. You are a very special young lady. Please always remember that and also how much I love you!*

*My unborn child: When God decided He wanted me to come to His kingdom, He created you to take my place here. I can't begin to describe how I felt when I learned I was going to be a father. You are truly a miracle from God and I thank Him every day for it. Always remember that Daddy loves you and will forever be looking over you and protecting you.*

*Kate: My best friend . . . my soul mate . . . my beloved wife. There are no words to describe how much I love you. I have loved you since the first day I saw you, and I will love you for the rest of eternity. Please don't ever feel alone because I will forever be above looking over and protecting you and our family. Thank you for loving me, especially through the hard times. Always remember how much I love you!*

*Last, but not least, Father: First, I want to thank you for reading this letter at my funeral. I know you had some hesitation because you feared it would be too hard to do emotionally, but you agreed to do it anyway, and that meant the world to me. These last three months have been the most challenging and hardest times of my life, and I want to thank you for being there with me every step of the way. I know I wouldn't have been able to get through any of this without you. I also want to thank you for marrying Kate and me last night and agreeing to be our baby's Godfather. I am now at peace knowing that my child will have the same love from God that you gave me. I was blessed to have you as my Godfather, and I was blessed to have you as a father figure, but I was even more blessed to have you in my life from the beginning to the very end. I love you.*

*I now want to end this by saying to everyone that nothing is set in stone, and it is never too late. If you have broken something, you can fix it. If you have hurt someone, you can mend it. And if you love someone who has hurt you, forgive and love them anyway. Life is short. Don't take it for granted and enjoy every second of it.*

*The days and weeks to come are going to be filled with lots of pain and tears, but as long as you believe, you will always have me.*

*I love you all very much and remember I am only a prayer away!*

*Love, Matt"*

And this, my friends, is where *And I Believe* ends but where *Mattie* begins. I hope you enjoy!  
Jodie

## MATTIE

By Jodie Richard Bohman

# PART I

## CHAPTER 1

Sitting in the school gym bleachers at Mattie's high school graduation on the Sunday of Memorial Day, I beam with pride. I can't get over how much Mattie looks just like Matt sitting down there among his classmates, waiting to receive his high school diploma. His eyes and hair are dark brown, just like Matt's was, and he definitely has Matt's fun and outgoing personality. He is the same height as Matt, around six feet three inches, and excels at football, basketball, and track. Just like Matt, Mattie is going to The Ohio State University, but he is going there to play basketball, instead of football, and he is studying to be a physical therapist.

Thinking of Matt made me remember when I told him I was pregnant with Mattie. It was the day in the hospital when Matt's doctor, Dr. Sharp, basically told us Matt was going to die, and we should call Hospice. The news was so devastating that I fainted right there on the hospital floor. With a goose-egg knot on my head and one heck of a headache, they ran tests to make sure I didn't have a concussion.

The test results showed there was no concussion, but they did reveal something else. Something I definitely was not expecting. I was pregnant. The word *shocked* doesn't even come close to describing what I felt when I learned this, considering I was told I could never have any more kids after Mia's birth. But it all made sense why I had been so sick lately. I thought it was nerves over Matt's sickness, but instead, it was because I had a little baby growing in my belly. Matt's little baby.

During the drive home that day from the hospital, I wondered how I was going to tell Matt I was pregnant. He just found out he was dying and the end was near. Would the news make him feel bitter because he wouldn't be around to see his baby grow up? Or, would he be beyond ecstatic because he was finally going to be a father?

We had just finished a prayer session with Father and the rest of Matt's family when Matt and I laid down together in his bedroom for a nap. My mind was preoccupied, and I couldn't

sleep. All I could think about was how was I going to tell him. I thought of every way imaginable. Do I surprise him? Do I come up with some cute and creative way? I had all of these ideas, but none of them felt right. Then, without giving it any thought, I leaned over and softly whispered in his ear...

*"I'm pregnant."*

*Matt, who was lying on his side facing me, instantly opened his eyes and stared at me. There was a long moment of silence.*

*"What did you just say?" he finally asked.*

*"Matt, I'm pregnant."*

*He sat straight up, his brown eyes wide. "Are you serious?"*

*"Yes."*

*He continued to sit there staring at me as if he didn't believe me. "Really?"*

*"Yes!" I laughed.*

*"Oh my goodness!" He grabbed me in a tight hug and then began planting kisses all over my face and stomach. The kisses tickled, and I giggled, but I didn't stop him because I was ecstatic he was so happy.*

*"I can't believe this is happening. I can't believe I'm going to be a dad! You have given me the best gift ever. I love you so much."*

*He looked so happy and beamed with pride.*

*"How are you feeling? What are we going to name it? I wonder if it will be a boy or girl. If it's a little girl, I hope she looks just like you," he said, pinching my cheeks.*

*As he rambled on, one cute question and remark after another, I thanked God for putting someone as special as him in my life and for making him the father of my unborn child.*

Now, eighteen years later, I still smile thinking about his reaction that day. Thinking about Matt, period, makes me smile. I love him as much today as I did the day he passed away. No amount of time can ever take that away. And even though Matt isn't here with us today, I know he is up above smiling down proudly as he watches Mattie. He would be proud of all three kids, for that matter.

I look over to my right at Jenna and wonder where the years went. She is now twenty nine years old, married with a two-year old daughter named Savannah and a baby on the way. She went

to college to become a physical therapist, and she and her husband, Tyler, live here in Versailles in the house Aaron and I lived in when we were married all those years ago. She is such a beautiful girl with her long brown hair, dark blue eyes and dimples in her pretty smile. She grew up to not only be a great daughter, but also a great friend, and I love her dearly.

Sitting next to Jenna is Mia.

*My little baby girl is all grown up!* I thought to myself as I watched her.

She was such an adorable little girl, but now at the age of twenty three, she is even more striking with her long brown hair with natural blonde highlights, her suntanned skin, and beautiful blue eyes. Just like I predicted, Jenna played every sport imaginable in high school while Mia was a cheerleader and had a part in every school play and musical.

After high school, Mia went to college to become a graphic art designer. She now lives and works in Indianapolis, which is a city about two hours away from home. She isn't dating anyone serious, at the moment, but is enjoying life as a young, single girl in the big city. She often talks about moving to New York City, but I know she won't. Living two hours away from us now is too far for her, and I know once she finds that right man and decides to start a family of her own, she will be back. There is something about this town. Kids want to leave as soon as they finish high school, but when it comes time to settling down and raising a family, there is no place like home.

Also here today are Matt and Aaron's families. Among our three families, there are close to fifty of us. No matter what the girls or Mattie participate in, they always have the largest cheering section of all.

I glance over at Aaron. He hasn't changed a bit and still looks like the same guy I started dating when I was only fifteen years old and he was seventeen. Aging has been kind to him, and he is still as handsome today as he was back then, with only a few gray streaks in his head full of dark, brown hair, a couple laugh lines around his blue eyes, and a cute dimpled smile. He still has the goatee he grew when we divorced nineteen years ago, and I have to say, I like it. I tease and tell him it makes him look rugged - like an older version of the country singer Josh Turner.

And then there is me. In a week, I am going to be fifty four years old (*yikes!*), but I can't complain about the aging process. I thank my parents all of the time for giving me their good genes. I have the normal laugh lines (not wrinkles...I forbid myself from calling any lines on my face wrinkles), but I still feel and, for the most part, look like I did when I was in my late thirties.

This is largely due to my grandma's homemade anti-laugh line cream made with coconut oil and other secret ingredients she will never reveal. Yes, I do have some gray in my shoulder-length blonde hair, but nobody will ever see them thanks to my wonderful hairstylist, Tiffany.

Sitting here among my family, watching my baby boy graduating from high school, I can't help but think how time, along with great family, friends and faith, really can heal all things. Broken hearts included. Thinking back almost nineteen years ago to the time when Matt passed away, I remember wanting to die. Matt was such a positive and upbeat person, and I was addicted to him. Like an alcoholic to beer. When he died, life had no meaning for me, and there were days I wanted lie beside his grave and hope God would take me too. But when a person has two children and a baby on the way, dying isn't an option. Matt made sure to remind me of this one night in a dream. At least, I think it was a dream.

## CHAPTER 2 (19 Years Earlier)

The days and weeks after Matt passed away were really rough. I felt so alone, as if part of me was gone. Physically and mentally, I was a mess. When I wanted to cry, I couldn't, and when I didn't want to, I would. People constantly stopped to see how the girls and I were doing, which I deeply appreciated. But sometimes, I just wanted time to myself to grieve the loss of this wonderful man, a man whom I loved with all of my heart. But moments like this made me realize he was really gone, and I would freak out because I was all alone. Mia asked about him constantly, and Jenna was quiet and withdrawn. Everything in our lives was out of control, and I didn't know how to handle it.

It was late one Saturday night in November, and it had only been a month and half since Matt passed away. I had fallen asleep on the couch in the living room with a picture of Matt clenched tightly in my arms. The girls had long been in bed, and the only light was from the television playing an old sitcom.

"Did you feel me at the cemetery?"

The male's voice startled me, making me sit straight up. I was instantly scared.

*Oh my goodness! Someone broke into my house!* I thought.

I grabbed the candlestick on my end table and pulled my hand back, ready to swing. But then I stopped. I blinked and rubbed my eyes to make sure I wasn't seeing things because sitting right next to me on the couch was Matt, looking as real as real can be.

"Matt, is that really you?" I slowly asked.

"Yes," he smiled.

My heart was beating hard and fast, and I was freaking out on the inside. Was this real, or was this just a dream? Hesitantly, I reached over to touch him, scared if I moved, he would disappear. When my hand reached his chest, he didn't disappear. Instead, I felt the warmth of his presence.

"Oh my goodness! You're really here!" I cried, throwing myself into his arms.

The candlestick dropped to the floor.

Our chests were touching, and I could feel his heartbeat and smell his wonderful cologne. Tears streamed out of my eyes one by one. I never wanted to let him go.

"I miss you so much! Please tell me everything was a dream, and you never died," I said as I kept my head buried in his neck.

"Kate, I love you so much," was all he would say.

I pulled back and took in his presence.

He looked great - young, healthy, and just plain perfect. He was smiling and looked so happy.

"How are you feeling? Has the baby moved yet?" he asked, touching my stomach.

Feeling the warmth of his touch was wonderful.

"Just the other day, I felt a little flutter. Almost like a tickle," I said with excitement.

His smile got bigger.

"I can't wait until you have it. You have no idea how happy and excited I am that we're having a baby," he said, squeezing my hand.

"Matt, is this real? Are you really here?"

"Did you feel me at the cemetery?" he asked, again, ignoring my question.

I nodded my head "yes," remembering back to the day I went to the cemetery. It was a cold and chilly day, and I was sick to my stomach over seeing his grave for the first time. As I stared down at his beautiful stone, with a picture of him, me, and the girls etched in it, I began to cry and

didn't want to be there anymore. I hurriedly went to walk away when, out of the blue, the sun came out. A warm wind began dancing around me, making me stop dead in my tracks. And then there, right in front of me on the grass, was a bright yellow rose tipped in pink. Our flower.

"So you really were there that day?"

"Yes," he smiled.

"I knew it! Oh, Matt, you have no idea how much I needed you that day. I seriously wanted to die."

"I know, and that's why I came," he said, gently caressing my face.

"It's still really hard, and some days I don't think I can go another day without you," I said, tears burning my eyes.

"I'm so sorry for leaving you like this. I know it hurts and will for a long time, but you have to start living life again, especially for the girls and the baby's sake. We'll get through this, Kate. Remember, I'm always here. You just need to believe."

"I miss you so much!" I once again grabbed him in a tight embrace.

"It will be okay," he soothed. "Here, lie down with me."

He took his picture from my hand and laid it face up on the end table. He then gently brought me down on the couch and cuddled up close to me. I laid my head on his chest and wrapped my arms around him. It felt so good to be in his arms again.

"I love you, Kate," he softly said, kissing my forehead.

"I love you so much, Matt. Promise you'll never leave me."

The next thing I remember is waking up lying on the couch with my arms wrapped around a pillow. I sat straight up.

"No!" I cried out loud.

The warm and loving feeling was instantly gone when I realized he wasn't here, and the feeling of death and loneliness returned. I began to cry even harder.

"Why God? Why are You doing this to me?" I cried, burying my head into the pillow.

But how could it only be a dream? My arms still tingled from our embrace, and the smell of his cologne was everywhere.

*Wait a minute! His cologne!*

I stood up and stared around the dark living room. I began sniffing around like a hound dog. Matt always wore the cologne Drakar, and my entire living room smelled of nothing but it. I brought my arm up to my nose and smelled my sleeve.

*Oh my goodness!* I thought as the sweet smell of his cologne filled my nostrils.

And that is when I noticed it – the candlestick that was lying on the floor where I dropped it. And the picture of him was lying face up on the end table where he placed it in my dream. Or, was it really a dream?

### **CHAPTER 3**

It was a couple days before Christmas, and the girls and I were visiting with my parents. It had been over a month since my dream with Matt, or whatever it was, and I hadn't had another one since. Seeing and talking to him, or so I thought, did help dull my pain. But it also made me miss him that much more. I still couldn't shake the feeling that it was more than a dream, that he was actually here with me.

Either way, I caught myself purposely trying to sleep as often as I could in hopes he would come back to me. Even though he never did, I did get some much-needed rest and began feeling better. Well, my peace of mind, that is, was getting better. My stomach, on the other hand, not so much.

We had just finished eating supper and were all in the living room. Mom and the girls were on the floor wrapping gifts, Dad was sitting in his recliner reading the newspaper, and I was buried under a big soft black blanket on their couch.

"Do you feel okay?" Dad asked me.

I shrugged my shoulders from under the blanket. I was now four and a half months pregnant. Unlike my sick-free pregnancies with the girls, I was very sick with this one. Like clockwork, every night after I would eat, my stomach would turn sour, which usually ended with me making a trip to the bathroom. This time, though, I was fighting it.

"I bet you're having a boy," Mom said.

"I would love to have a baby brother!" Jenna said.

"A little grandson would be nice. Maybe I wouldn't be so outnumbered around here," Dad chimed in.

The thought of a little boy did warm my heart, especially if he looked and acted like Matt.

"I don't know what 'it' is, but I really hope 'it' quits torturing me," I said.

*Oh, no! Here it comes,* I thought to myself. Quickly getting up from the couch, I ran straight to the bathroom.

*Shoot! "It" won again.*

## CHAPTER 4

"Mommy, Mommy, Santa Claus came!"

A couple days later, I was sound asleep in my warm and cozy bed when a very excited four-year-old Mia woke me up. Rolling over, I squinted to get a better look at the alarm clock.

*Six-thirty in the morning. Are you kidding me?! I thought.*

Even though getting up this early was the last thing I wanted to do, I did it anyways. She ran down the hallway straight into the living room, happily squealing the entire way.

Eleven-year old Jenna was already by the tree scouting out the gifts. All of the lights were off in the living room, except for the Christmas tree. It was cozy-looking and made me think back to the Thanksgiving and Christmas celebration with Matt, just a few months earlier. I touched the silver heart necklace he gave me that day and tried not to show on my face how much I wished he was here with us now.

"Oh my gosh, Mommy! Look at this big present!" Mia grunted as she picked up a huge box wrapped in bright red wrapping paper.

"That's a big one!" I told her. "Why don't you two keep sorting the gifts. I'm going to make some hot chocolate."

I went into the kitchen and poured some skim milk into a pan.

*Christmas music would be nice,* I thought to myself.

The milk was still lukewarm, so I hurried into the garage to get a Christmas CD out of my car. The garage floor felt like ice cubes on my bare feet when I ran across it. I grabbed the CD out of the console, and on my way back into the house, something out of the corner of my eye caught

my attention. It was a light coming from outside my garage door windows. The ice cold garage floor didn't faze me as I practically ran to see what it was. My hand covered my mouth when I saw it. I ran straight back in the house.

"What's wrong?" Jenna asked as I shoved my bare feet into my snow boots that were in the hallway closet and grabbed my winter coat.

"I'll be right back. Please turn the milk down on low and keep an eye on Mia for a minute."

I went out my front door, through the high piles of snow and straight to this little tree close to my mailbox. It was no taller than four feet. One by one, tears strolled down my cheek when I realized what it was.

Running back into the house, I told Jenna to get her boots and coat on while I dressed Mia.

"What is it, Mom?" Jenna asked.

"You're never going to believe this," was all I would tell her.

The three of us then trudged our way back thru the snow to the little tree.

Jenna's eyes widened. "Is this for real?"

I nodded my head. "I think so."

In front of us was this little tree that I had barely even noticed, decorated with nothing but white lights and white ornaments. There were four different sized boxes wrapped in white paper. One was addressed to me, one to Jenna, another to Mia, and one for "Baby Richard." They were all signed in his handwriting, "Love, Matt," except for the baby's gift. This one was signed "Love, Dad."