

CHRISTMAS  

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J A R S  
*Reunion*

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*Christmas Jars*

*The Wednesday Letters*

*Recovering Charles*

*Penny's Christmas Jar Miracle*

*The Cross Gardener*

(Coming Spring 2010)

CHRISTMAS  
—  
J A R S  
*Reunion*

A NOVEL

JASON F. WRIGHT



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*For my brothers*  
*Sterling*  
*Jeff*  
*And for my favorite sister*  
*Terilynne*

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**L**ove, thanks, and chocolate to my wife and eternal companion, Kodi. Much appreciation also to my children: Oakli Shane, Jadi Thompson, Kason Samuel, and Koleson Ward. They fill my jar more than I could ever fill theirs.

Far too often I overlook an important group when the time comes to draft a pithy *thank you* for the very page you're reading. They are the wonderful booksellers across the country who embrace small books not necessarily on the national radar. The original *Christmas Jars* was just such a book, but because of the spirit and tenacity of booksellers, it eventually became a *New York Times* bestseller and the vehicle for a holiday tradition that has become far bigger and more important than the book itself. So to the booksellers at our cozy and beloved independents, chain bookstores large and small, big box retailers, and to the

Internet pioneers, I say *thank you*. Without you the *Christmas Jars* movement would still be just a flicker, and not the brush-fire of goodwill it has become since 2005.

Thank you to Chris Schoebinger, Sheri Dew, and their gifted colleagues at Shadow Mountain for carrying the torch so nobly and for so long.

A very special nod to those who have welcomed me with open arms into their homes, churches, schools, and community events to discuss the *Giving Gene* and to share in the *Spirit of the Jar*: You are also responsible for this movement becoming about much more than a simple book.

Finally, I remain in awe of the thousands of people who have read *Christmas Jars*, *Christmas Jars Reunion*, or *Penny's Christmas Jar Miracle* and, as a result, have started jars of their own. This year in a beautifully unorganized way, millions of dollars in spare change will be given away during the days leading up to Christmas. That is nothing less than a modern-day miracle.

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*A note about the chapter headings:*

The quotes at the beginning of each chapter are excerpts from actual e-mails received from readers across the country. They are identified by first name only to protect the magic of the *Spirit of the Jar*. They are used by permission.

Many other true stories of Christmas Jar miracles can be read online at <http://www.ChristmasJars.com>, where you are also invited to share your own miracle.

## PROLOGUE

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*From Christmas Jars*

**L**ouise Jensen was sitting alone, licking her fingers two at a time and paying serious attention to her greasy chicken-leg-and-thigh platter, when she heard muffled crying from the booth behind her at Chuck's Chicken 'n' Biscuits on U.S. Highway 4. It was early Friday afternoon. It was also New Year's Eve.

Although discovering an unattended, blue-eyed, newborn baby girl was not on her list of expectations, Louise was the faithful brand of woman who believed that everything happened for a reason. She reached down and lifted the pinkish baby into her arms. Tucked inside a stained elephant blanket, near the baby's neck, she found an unsigned, handwritten note:

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*To the next person to hold my baby girl,  
She is yours now. I'll miss her more than you know. But I love*

J A S O N F . W R I G H T

*her too much to raise her with a daddy that hits. Truth is, he didn't even want me to have her anyways, and her life will be better without a mommy that will always need to run. Please tell her I love her. And please tell her I will hold her again.*

*I cannot give her much, but this year I give her the life her daddy wouldnt. And a little bit of hope.*



*It was such magic in our lives. The gift left to us by someone restored something in my family and me. My troubles aren't gone, but MY HOPE is restored.*

—JBM

## ONE

### *Twenty-Five Years Later*

Chuck might be the only person ever to write his last will and testament on the back of a paper placemat.” Preacher Longhurst paused as soft laughter rolled across the crowd assembled under the mammoth green canopy erected in the field behind Chuck’s Chicken ‘n’ Biscuits. “But friends, who are we kidding, there were probably a lot of things Chuck was the first person to ever dream of.”

Hope Jensen smiled from her folding chair on the second row.

“And that’s why we loved him. It was not just for his secret recipe that produced fried chicken so tasty it could have been made by angels in hairnets, but also for his heavenly Three Musketeers pie, his Sing for a Wing talent nights, and his Cluck Truck that was a rolling landmark around town. Who here

hasn't been sitting at a stoplight when Chuck pulled up behind you and all you could see in the rearview mirror was a yellow beak? You'd smile, he'd wave, and if you were lucky, he'd honk the only horn ever manufactured that went 'buck-buck.'"

The congregation laughed, partly for the memory of Chuck's famous horn, but mostly for the silly sound effect Preacher Longhurst made with his lips pressed against the microphone.

Hope looked at Marianne's soft expression and squeezed her hand. Marianne had only known Chuck since she had been reunited with Hope three years earlier, but he'd become family to her, just as the Maxwells had. In fact, he became family to nearly everyone who'd ever had a meal at Chuck's Chicken 'n' Biscuits.

"Friends and neighbors, there was more to Chuck than his sense of humor, and he wasn't just about *customer* service. He was about *people* service. More often than not when you saw the Cluck Truck around the county it meant that Chuck was delivering free meals to schools, church functions, or the seniors' center. His sweetheart, Gayle, tells me he gave away as many meals as he sold during his many years in business."

Gayle nodded from the family section in the front row.

"Dear friends, I know that some among us find it ironic that a preacher from a church Chuck never attended is officiating his funeral. I have wondered the same thing. The truth is that Chuck rarely attended church. I invited him every time I saw him, usually on Sundays for lunch or when I was brave

enough to participate in Sing for a Wing night. But his answer never deviated. And these words will sound familiar to his family, I'm sure. He always told me, 'Preacher, just because I'm not in God's house doesn't mean he's not in mine.'"

He looked down at Gayle from the wobbly tabletop pulpit. "Chuck's church was here, wasn't it? Here at the diner, where he did more good for God than any of us will ever know." He reached down to the table and pulled something from a large envelope.

"Now I know this is rather unusual, but this whole day feels different, doesn't it? I've discussed this with Gayle and with her enthusiastic support I'm going to read Chuck's will for you."

Gayle smiled, reaffirming her blessing, and clutched her unopened package of Kleenex. With her eyes closed she saw herself sitting in a booth five years earlier with her husband late one evening. Chuck had suffered a very mild heart attack and was convinced it was time for a will. But instead of hiring an attorney and producing long, complicated lists of wishes, assets, and disclosures, he jotted down his thoughts in tiny letters on the back of a paper placemat. With one hand he wrote, with the other he ate a piece of pie and nursed a carton of chocolate milk.

Hope reached forward and tenderly rubbed Gayle's back.

Gayle's two grown sons, Joel and Mike, sat on her right and left and simultaneously looped their arms through hers.

Preacher Longhurst unfolded the placemat and held it high for the guests to see. Those in the first few rows laughed at the mustache Chuck had sketched on the diner's longtime logo: a cartoon chicken.

“The one and only will and testament of Charles ‘Chuck’ Quillon. If you’re reading this then I’ve kicked the chicken bucket.” Preacher Longhurst looked up and out at the crowd. “It says, ‘If read aloud, pause for laughter.’”

They laughed again.

“If I’m dead, I either choked on a chicken bone, had a heart attack worse than last month’s, or Gayle finally made good on her threat to smother me in my sleep and take my vast personal wealth. I hope for the sake of a good story that it was the latter.”

Hope whispered something in Marianne’s ear.

“You’re so bad.” Marianne poked her in the side.

“What to do with my stuff.” Preacher Longhurst looked up again. “You’ll have to excuse me, the writing is quite small here.” He held the placemat closer to his face. “My stuff. The restaurant to Gayle and the boys. The red Mustang to my brother, Derrick. The silver-and-black one to Randall, the best cook in America. The stuffed chicken by the register to Eva, the worst waitress in America.”

Eva laughed loudly and clapped her hands twice in delight.

“Last. My two certificates of deposit from Southern Family Credit Union. Gayle will cash in and divide equally with everyone who ever worked at Chuck’s. Be prepared to be surprised.” There were several gasps throughout the tent and someone actually clapped. Before long they were all applauding.

Preacher Longhurst continued. “Rules for my funeral. Number one. No crying. Number two. No church. Funeral

must be held at diner or outside in the meadow.” He smiled and gestured with one hand to the rented tent that sheltered some two hundred guests less than fifty yards from Chuck’s. “Number three. No sad and hokey two-for-one deaths. This isn’t some cheesy novel or chick flick. If I go first, Gayle must live for a minimum of twenty more years.”

The crowd laughed and Gayle rolled her eyes.

“Number four. No use of the words “mourners,” “grief,” or “beef.”” Preacher Longhurst shook his head. “I just got that,” he said sheepishly.

“Number five. Serve a free meal before or after. Leg-and-thigh platter with tots. But no free drinks.”

The crowd laughed even harder.

“Number six. Everyone gets a jar. Hope’s in charge.” Preacher Longhurst pointed at a row of banquet tables running along one side of the tent. Covering the tables were Mason jars bearing a black-and-gold label that read *Christmas Jar*.

Gayle turned around and winked at Hope.

Hope glanced at her best friend, Hannah Maxwell, on one side, Marianne on the other, and gave the preacher a thumbs-up.

“Lastly, number seven. Keep living. Because I’ll know if you’ve stopped.”

Preacher Longhurst held up the placemat once again and pointed out where Chuck had signed and dated it and reminded everyone that despite its uniqueness, it was, in fact, a legally binding document. He added a few more words of his own about the legacy of Chuck Quillon and closed with a scripture.

Both of Chuck's sons spoke briefly. Then his brother, Derrick, spoke until he began to lose composure. He finished, "I better sit down now before I cry and lose that Mustang."

Finally, Hope, Hannah, and Marianne stood and sang a closing hymn that could have been written by just about anyone in attendance: "Because I Have Been Given Much." There wasn't a dry eye in the tent.

After a benediction by one of Chuck's grandchildren, the pallbearers loaded the plain casket into the hearse and the guests made their way to a small cemetery ten miles south down U.S. Highway 4. There was no graveside service, just a moment or two of private reflection. Many stopped to touch the casket or whisper something kind into the wind.

A team of folks had stayed back at the diner to prepare for lunch so by the time the procession returned, the tent had been filled with tables and chairs and hot chicken and tots were being served on heavy-duty paper plates. Five-gallon coolers bearing Chuck's cartoon chicken logo poured lemonade.

"What a turnout," Hope said to Hannah Maxwell.

"Not surprising though, right? Who in the south hasn't eaten at Chuck's at least once? See that lady over there?" She pointed with her fork to an older woman sitting at the far side of the tent. "That's Terri Alexander. I think she's from Tampa. She heard from a friend of a friend that Chuck passed and wanted to be here."

Hannah repeated the point to her husband, Dustin, and the two began counting how many people in the crowd were unfamiliar to them.

Hope rested her head on Marianne's shoulder for a moment and relaxed. It had been a tiring four days. Chuck died on Thanksgiving evening, alone in the kitchen, after serving free meals to anyone who'd asked. It was an annual tradition at Chuck's, and it seemed natural that he'd leave the earth on the same day he gave several dozen others a full stomach and one more day of life. Gayle said that at age seventy-four, after all that Chuck had accomplished, no one could say that he'd left behind any unfinished songs.

This had been Hope's first funeral since Adam Maxwell's three years earlier when she'd sat shyly in the back. She'd not grown up with a traditional father of her own, but she'd certainly had two terrific dads. Between Adam and Chuck she'd had more love and fatherly guidance than most girls she knew.

Hope looked at Marianne and warmed at the thought that not only had she loved two fathers, but in a strange way, two mothers as well. Raised with such unconditional care by her late mother, Louise, she was now cherished by Marianne. The two were much more like sisters than mother and daughter. In fact, Hope reserved the title of *Mother* only for Louise, even though it was as crystal clear as their stunning eyes that Marianne was Hope's biological mother.

By now practically everyone in the county knew she'd been mentored by Adam for a short time, and by Chuck since birth. She surveyed the funeral scene and proudly wondered how many other people could make such a claim.

Adam's widow, Lauren, had adjusted well to the loss of her

husband. She volunteered at the hospital three days a week and at an elementary school the other two days. The weekends were spent with her grandchildren, recharging her battery, and keeping her mind off the loneliness of a king-sized bed. And because Christmas was just three weeks away, she enjoyed telling people she was “beyond busy” with the Christmas Jars Ministry.

Hope watched as the first wave of people finished lunch and began stopping by the tables to pick up their Christmas Jars. A few spotted Hope at her table, caught her eye, and proudly raised their jars for her to see. She blew them a kiss and waved good-bye.

She knew that everyone would find a rolled-up note, tied with green yarn, inside the jar which explained its purpose:

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*Thank you for honoring Chuck's wish and taking a Christmas Jar with you. The tradition may already be a familiar one, and if it is and you already have a jar at home, we thank you again and invite you to give this jar to someone who is not yet part of the magic. If this is your introduction to the tradition, we ask you to place this jar on your counter at home, or anywhere it can easily be seen and reached. Each day drop your spare change, coins only, into the jar. On or around Christmas Eve, give the jar away anonymously to someone in need. The need is yours to judge and the decision of who receives the jar is yours and yours alone to make. As soon as possible after Christmas, place a new jar on the counter and begin filling it for next year. The miracle begins with you!*



*Every time we put change in our jar we will be reminded of the importance of giving to others and to be thankful for what God has blessed us with.*

—Peggy

## TWO

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**I**t took ninety minutes for most of the guests to finish their lunches, say their good-byes, and filter out of the tent and back into the unseasonably warm afternoon. More than one person suggested to Gayle, “Chuck must have had something to do with the weather . . .”

Hope and a handful of volunteers began gathering trash and removing the disposable plastic tablecloths. Her eyes met Gayle’s across the tent, who was still unable to sit and eat because lingering well-wishers kept coming by to talk to her; it seemed everyone had a story to tell. Watching her, Hope was reminded that with Chuck now gone, Gayle was the only one alive who’d known her every single day of her life, beginning the night she was left by Marianne and discovered by Louise in a booth at the diner next door.

Marianne and her husband, Nick, sat at a table alone and played tic-tac-toe with tater tots on a board Marianne drew on a napkin. They were hardly newlyweds with thirteen years behind them, but they still had the glow of a couple just married and unable to keep their eyes—or hands—off each other. Nick said they still acted like newlyweds because they hadn't ever had a formal honeymoon, and Marianne held out hope one was coming.

If Marianne had been happy when she and Hope first had their tearful reunion, she was electrically ecstatic now. Marianne had easily persuaded Nick to move closer, and he'd come up with the idea to finance a small salon so Marianne could take control over her new career as a hairstylist. Those who knew them suspected Nick opened the salon so he and Marianne could sleep in longer and set their own hours without permission from Marianne's manager at the old salon where she'd learned the trade. Hope didn't care why; she simply loved having Marianne in her life. And after a failed first marriage to Hope's biological, deadbeat father, Marianne deserved all the happiness she and Nick could create.

As long planned, Hannah and Dustin had taken over the Maxwell family furniture restoration business. But Restored wasn't the same without Adam's energy and passion, and though it wasn't yet public knowledge, Hope was sure Hannah and Dustin wouldn't continue the struggle much longer.

What she wasn't as sure of was exactly how she felt about the prospect of Clark Maxwell taking over. Hannah had hinted

that Clark, a semipro baseball player and one of Adam's nephews, was considering moving to town to try his hand at keeping the business afloat and in the family.

Hope knew Clark very well. They'd met two years earlier at Sing for a Wing night at Chuck's. Clark and his dad—Adam's brother JJ—were in town visiting Lauren for the first time since Adam's funeral and Clark had created sparks with Hope—both good and bad—during that eight-day visit.

Subsequent visits were no different. Clark would swoop into town for a few days here, a week there, and the chemistry would pop, bubble, and boil over the edge until Clark vanished for a tryout for some minor league baseball team in a town no one but Clark had ever heard of.

He was rumored to arrive for a trial run as the future of Restored any day now.

Hope didn't sit down until all that was left to deal with was the empty rented tent, a few chairs that belonged to Chuck's and not the funeral home, and the table and podium Preacher Longhurst had used. She pulled two chairs together, sat in one and propped her feet on the other.

"Hope, you coming to the cemetery?" Clara and Julie, the Maxwell twins, appeared under the tent. "Some of us that stayed back to help with lunch are going over now to pay our respects."

"I think I'll stay for now, thanks though. I'll go later."

"You sure?" Clara asked.

"Yeah—" Hope started.

“Come on.” Julie took Hope’s right hand and tried to pull her to her feet. “Come with us. There’s nothing more to clean up and they’re coming soon to take this thing down anyway.”

Hope resisted the pull and remained planted firmly in the chair.

In the three years since their father’s death, the Maxwell twins had met and married Braden and Tyson Wright, two brothers who had swept into town selling home security systems and never left. The twins were happily married to the Wright brothers and wanted the same joy for Hope. So when they weren’t creating trouble or on a double date with their husbands, they were playing matchmaker. They’d set her up on at least a dozen blind dates just that year. Half of them ended awkwardly at the front door, a few ended between dinner and the planned movie, and one infamous date ended after a thirty-seven-minute trip to and from Chick-fil-A. Second dates were unusual.

Julie grabbed Hope’s left hand as well and tried again. “Come, come, come. Gayle’s gone home for a nap, the brothers are inside the restaurant talking, and most of the grandkids went with Hannah and Dustin to their place.”

“Really, I appreciate it,” Hope said, “but I’ll wait here for the guys to take down the tent. I’m spent. My feet hurt. I’ll drive down to the cemetery with Marianne later tonight.”

The twins relented, hugged her good-bye, and joined the small group in the parking lot waiting for their turn to visit Chuck’s grave.

Hope looked around the empty tent and noticed for the first time how badly they'd trampled the early winter grass. She wondered if Chuck had ever imagined such a showing for his funeral. He would have approved, she decided, of every detail, including his gorgeous seventeen-year-old granddaughter, Lili, with her model-long legs directing funeral traffic while wearing a chicken costume. "Grandpa would want me to," she'd told Gayle that morning. She was right.

Hope stood and walked to the lone remaining table. She gingerly sat on it, holding her breath and testing its weight. Then she tried to slide the portable wooden pulpit away but noticed Preacher Longhurst had left his Bible behind it. She picked up the book, swung her legs around and laid flat on the table. Again she marveled at the warm spell that made December first feel like September first and she pulled at the sides of her black dress, straightening it across her legs. The dress was an expensive luxury she'd bought for herself in New York that summer with Marianne. *I didn't buy this for a funeral*, she thought. Above her heart on the dress she'd pinned a broach Chuck had given her on her twelfth birthday, celebrated like so many of her other birthdays inside the diner.

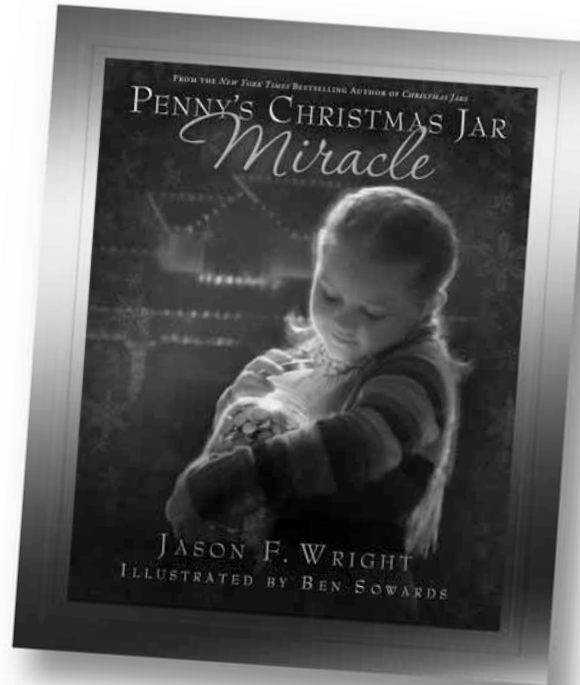
Staring at the underside of the tent's dirty roof, Hope mentally counted how many people had taken jars. *I think we labeled two hundred and twenty jars*, she thought. *Have we ever placed that many in one day? No chance. I wonder how many people will start filling a jar for this year. It's kinda late, I guess. Still though, maybe a hundred start now? Sure they will. That's less than half*

*that took 'em. So a hundred start today and save . . . how much? Fifty dollars by Christmas? No, too much. That's two dollars a day. No. Maybe a dollar. That's twenty-five dollars in each jar. Twenty-five hundred dollars total saved in jars by Christmas Eve. Not bad at all. And next year? Two hundred jars times . . . hmmm, two hundred dollars maybe? What's that, twenty grand? No . . .*

Hope was much too tired for math. Instead she opened the Bible and began reading from the first verse she saw. Romans 1:4. But the Bible, a warm afternoon, late nights, and grief were enough. By verse eighteen Hope had dozed into a light nap.

Ten minutes later Clark Maxwell pulled into the parking lot at Chuck's Chicken 'n' Biscuits, walked into the funeral tent, and saw what certainly looked like a dead woman in a black dress, lying face up on a table, clutching a Bible with her eyes closed.

THE MAGIC OF THE  
CHRISTMAS JAR—NOW  
ESPECIALLY FOR CHILDREN



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