



**MIRACLE  
WOMAN**

MARITA CONLON-MCKENNA

TRANSWORLD  
BOOKS

## About the Book

Martha McGill was an ordinary woman. Nothing extraordinary had ever happened to her, unless she counted her marriage to Mike and the birth of her three perfect, healthy children. Until the day of the accident, when she touched the Lucas boy as he lay dying on the tarmac, and they said she saved him. That was the start of it all . . .

As word of her healing spreads, Martha's life and the lives of those around her are radically altered. Hounded by the media and those in desperate search of hope and miracles, Martha is forced to decide what is most important in her life.

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About the Author  
Also by Marita Conlon-McKenna  
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# Miracle Woman

Marita Conlon-McKenna

*To James*

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## *Chapter One*

THE DOG DAYS of summer were upon them, New England sweltering in the late August heat as Martha, crab like, darted in and out of the shade of Easton's canopies and store-front porches, the air shimmying above the baked ground as she attended to the messages scrawled on a notepad in the bottom of her purse. Unhelpful, her daughter Mary Rose dawdled along behind her. Today was Martha's mother's birthday and already she was frazzled at the thought of ten of them sitting down to dinner, a meal she had offered to cook. Frances Kelly would sit at the the top of the table, resenting the thought of being another year older and admitting her true age, the rest of them trying to jolly her along. It didn't bear thinking about.

She needed lemons, and icing sugar and fresh cream, not to bake a cake, as one had already been ordered from Jesseps bakery, but to give the appearance of having baked one. She sighed to herself, remembering the dry cleaning to collect and the wine and bottle of Irish whiskey needed from the liquor store on the corner. The street was busy and the grocery store bustling with Saturday shoppers.

Finding the small purple ticket, Martha collected Mike's fawn-coloured summer jacket and taupe chinos, along with a linen shirt of her own which thankfully no longer bore the red wine stain from the barbecue at Kathleen and Jim's, the previous weekend.

Mary Rose and herself deposited the clothes in the back of her old Volvo and set off again. Ignoring the tempting smell of fresh brewed espresso and cappuccino and melt-in-your-mouth fudge browns that greeted entrants to the best home

bakery store in miles, Martha joined the queue at the counter to collect the cake. Jenny Jessep tilted it towards her for approval before ensuring that the walnut frosted cake sat snug in its gaily coloured pink box. Martha added a dozen donuts and an Italian tomato bread to her purchases. She passed her daughter the box along with the keys of the car.

‘Put it carefully on the back seat, honey. Mind you don’t squash it!’

Mary Rose sighed.

‘I want to listen to something on the radio, Mom, so I guess I’ll just wait in the car.’

Martha licked a line of perspiration off her top lip, annoyed that her daughter couldn’t even be bothered to help with the rest of the groceries.

She grabbed a small shopping cart as she entered the Easton Market and flew along the familiar aisles, mindful of the things she needed. She crossed off the list. Usually she hated people who made lists but knew in her heart there was nothing worse than setting to cook a meal for a large group and discovering that you had forgotten something. She added a peanut Hershey bar at the checkout as a reward for her endeavours.

Driving in the glaring sunlight Sarah Millen pushed the hair back off her face and adjusted her sunglasses; she was tired and could feel the familiar tension and start of a splitting headache as she passed along Commonwealth Avenue. Rachel her three-and-a-half-year-old had already managed to pour her cup of orange juice all over the floor of the car and was probably sticky as hell and Kevin the baby had scarcely stopped crying since she had put him in the car seat. The poor kid had been awake half the night teething and his gums were swollen and painful. He needed some more of that teething gel that numbed the pain and one of those plastic teething things you stick in the freezer to cool.

She was mad as hell with her husband Ryan. It was meant to be equal partners with regards to caring for the kids, what with both of them working full time, but somehow it always ended up with her getting up in the night missing her sleep, not him. She was the one busy finalizing designs for the architect's office where she worked, which were due on the partner's desk on Monday and it meant her having to work most of the weekend. Yet, after lunch when she'd asked him to run to the drugstore and get what she needed for Kevin he told her he was already late for his tee-off time for golf and that she'd have to just go fetch it herself. Fetch it herself sounded nothing but she had hoped to crawl back into bed for the afternoon when the baby slept and now she had had to shower and dress, drag Rachel away from the cartoons and battle with a sleepy Kevin to get him strapped into that darned car seat.

Torturing her kids was not her idea of fun, and in the sweltering heat she turned the air conditioning on full blast, hoping to cool herself and the kids right down. The shops were busy and she needed to park right up close to the drugstore so she could get in quick and out and home as soon as possible. In the distance she spotted a student in a small red Chrysler pull out of a space. Pushing her foot on the accelerator, Sarah surged forward, turning the wheel sharply. The power steering of the Jeep made it extra easy to pull in.

Timmy pedalled as fast as he could, his skinny legs pumping the heavy pedals of his brother's old bike as he tried to keep up with the rest of them. Sweat clung to his head and behind his knees with the effort but his mom had told him to stay with Ralph and the other boys that afternoon. Hanging out with his big brother and his gang of friends was special, and made him feel way older.

Blinking, Martha McGill exited the store, the automatic door heralding her return to the sweltering heat and

sunlight. In the distance she could see her daughter, singing along to the car radio. Just as she stepped off the kerb a bunch of boys flew past her on shiny bicycles, a smaller boy bringing up the end, cycling past Mary Rose, trying to catch up on them.

A second! An instant! Martha couldn't believe it!

A black Jeep came out of nowhere and swung right across. The boy and his bike crashed against the enormous front grille and bumper, disappeared under the crushing weight of the car, heavy metal, tyres, plastic all screaming together in that frozen time when she realized the child was mangled somewhere underneath. There was a baby in front in a car seat and a toddler strapped safely in the back. The driver, distracted, couldn't have seen him, the flash of movement beside her vehicle unnoticed as she touched the accelerator, the trusty mountain bike folding under the huge wheels, the boy tumbling on to the ground, the thud and noise as the heavy vehicle moved over him, the aghast driver instantly slamming on the brakes.

Martha stood transfixed as people rushed by her. The driver's face blanched snow white at the realization of the small boy lying on the tarmac of the car park, underneath the weight of her car. The security guard pushed past her as a crowd gathered around the injured boy.

'He's bad! Real bad!'

'The kid's not breathing!'

'I think the boy's dead.'

Martha kept a firm grip on the recycled brown paper bag she was carrying. It couldn't be! It just couldn't be that on a bright summer's day she would witness the end of a life. That her child would see another child die. It just couldn't be!

She pushed through the crowd. Why, the boy was only about nine or so, just a kid, his bones and the bike frame mangled together, the spokes of the bike wheel sticking through the bones of his leg. The security guard knelt

beside him, his head bent down watching his chest. A young girl and an elderly man were already trying to help, searching frantically for a pulse, any sign of life.

‘Don’t move him!’ ordered, the guard. ‘And don’t move the Jeep. It could make things worse.’ The name Hal was written in large green embroidery on the badge on his shirt. ‘I’ve already called for an ambulance,’ he said.

Martha edged closer. Something about the boy was familiar. Dark hair, small for his age. Baggy navy shorts, a white Nike T-shirt, torn and tyre tracked and steeped in blood, his eyes closed, one side of his face almost embedded with dirt and gravel. It was the Lucas boy, the youngest. Timmy! That was his name. Why, he’d gone to the same pre-school as Alice, her youngest. The family lived down around the corner at the bottom of their street, she knew his mother.

‘Let me through. Let me through!’ she insisted. ‘I know the boy! He’s a neighbour’s child.’

Shoving and pushing, the crowd of onlookers was swelling. Curious, they were moving forward, ready to witness the tragedy of a small boy’s death.

Panic filled her voice as she knelt down beside him: the security guard was making a sign to her that the boy was already gone. The young girl kneeling beside her on the roasting tar admitted there was no pulse.

‘Timmy, don’t go! Don’t leave us!’ Martha ordered, touching the abnormally still figure crushed under the enormous wheels. ‘Can’t you try getting him to breathe again!’ she demanded angrily of the elderly grey-haired man crouched beside her. ‘You’ve *got* to try. Please!’

Hal was reluctant to move the boy but they all agreed they had to try something. The retired nursing home administrator took charge as in a haphazard way they took turns and began life support, trying to force air into his lungs, his chest moving up and down like a balloon as they inflated it.

‘Timmy! Please, Timmy, you’ve got to try and breathe!’

The old gentleman, defeated, shook his head and gave up. Martha touched the boy’s underdeveloped arms and stroked the good side of his face, the small dribble of freckles along his nose, aching to remember which part the small boy had played in the kindergarten Nativity play. She pictured him jumping through the water sprinkler with all the rest of the neighbourhood kids out on their front lawn, or hiding behind his big brothers when he came trick-or-treating. Pedalling furiously on his bike, playing snowballs, a myriad images of a childhood shared with her own children flashed before her eyes. Timmy couldn’t die – he just couldn’t! His mother should be here with him. He would listen to his mother’s voice.

Running her hands along the small chest and ribs she felt the pain his body had endured: unbearable. She gasped with it. It was too much for a child. She wanted to lift the pain from him, ease it, she wasn’t prepared to let him die, not here like this: she wasn’t going to let him go.

‘Timmy, you just got to stay with me,’ she ordered in that voice that all parents reserve for their children. ‘I know you can hear me,’ she insisted. ‘You *cannot* go! I won’t let you go. Your mommy and your daddy and your brothers need you! Do you hear me, Timmy, you have to stay right here. You have to stay.’

The pain was intolerable; as she laid her hands on him she could sense it. The searing sharp agony, the intense pressure on his organs.

‘Here, lady! Give us some space!’

The paramedics had arrived and were anxious to move the public out of their way. Martha refused to budge from Timmy’s side as they matter-of-factly checked him.

‘It’s too late,’ one of them said softly, looking over at the driver.

A murmur went around the crowd. Martha was conscious of Mary Rose’s pale scared face, and of the driver of the car

breaking down, hysterical, only a few feet away.

'I didn't see him! As God is my judge, I didn't see him! I had the air on to cool the car down for the kids.'

'We'll transfer him to Children's Hospital, but there's nothing more we can do,' declared the chief paramedic, a forty-year-old family man who tried to disguise his dismay at the death of a child.

Fury filled Martha as she realized they had already given up on Timmy and were just going through the motions for the sake of the shocked huddle of people standing around. God couldn't do this, shouldn't do this. Silently she prayed. *God, let him live. Come on, Timmy, hang on in there! Fight! Don't give up. Come on, Timmy, live! You've got to fight and not give up.*

There seemed no response.

'Please, lady, I have to ask you to move out of the way, we got to try and move him from under these wheels.'

She couldn't let go of him, there was such pain in his heart and chest and stomach, inescapable pain, Martha could feel it as her hands rested on him, she wanted to take the pain away from him, draw it out, release the fear of taking a breath or moving that was killing him, making him want to run away and hide from it and leave his small broken body behind.

'I'm here, Timmy,' she said slowly. 'The pain is going, I can feel it going, leaving you. You must be able to feel it too!'

The heat was burning through the palms of her hands, running up the bones and veins of her arms as she reached that hiding place; her own breath caught in her throat with the impact.

'Lady, I told you already. We've got to move him,' insisted the senior paramedic as he gestured for a few of the men to step forward and help raise the heavy vehicle. Hal was organizing them as the ambulance team tried to lift Timmy on to the gurney.

Martha kept her hands on him.

'You his mom?'

She shook her head.

'I'm a neighbour, that's all. His name's Timmy. Timmy Lucas. He lives down on Sycamore, just off Mill Street. I know him, know the family.'

She held her breath as the front end of the Jeep was lifted, the grimacing faces of the lifters testament to the enormous weight of metal and rubber that had crushed the boy. There was such pain in his heart and chest! It was unbearable.

She had to untangle it, ease it. The energy was passing between them, pulsing from her to the child, like jump-starting a flat battery; she could feel the shudder of response, the faint flicker of life. There it was! A breath, so slight you would barely notice it, a breath!

'Timmy!' It was Timmy. The real Timmy, she could feel him. 'He's breathing.'

'Oxygen, get the mask on him quick!' ordered the driver, pushing her aside as he slipped it over the boy's nose and mouth. 'He's back.'

A low gasp went up from the swelling crowd of onlookers, and Martha noticed Hal, the security officer, wipe tears from his eyes.

'You want to ride with him to the hospital?' offered the attendant.

'Is he going to be all right?'

'He's got a lot of injuries . . . who can say. It looks pretty bad.'

Martha scanned the crowd, looking for Mary Rose. She noticed the older boys who'd been with him standing silent, holding their bikes at the back.

'I think that's his brother.' She motioned to a tall gangly fourteen-year-old standing just a few feet away, misery and guilt etched all over his skinny face. Ralph Lucas clambered into the back of the ambulance at the paramedic's request and hunched worriedly over Timmy.

'You next of kin?' asked the driver.

Martha shook her head. She wasn't family, and besides she wanted to go fetch his mother quickly and bring her to the hospital. That's what Timmy needed most, to see his mom and hear her voice. Tearful and shocked, Mary Rose stood in the sunlight waiting for her. Martha hugged her daughter close.

The crowd did not move: silent, as if waiting for something else to happen. One or two people patted her on the back.

'Hey, lady, you saved that boy!'

'Only for you he was a goner!'

'I ain't never seen anything like it, never.'

Two cops were taking a statement from the driver and some witnesses. Martha gave them her name and number. She looked over, pitying the traumatized driver with her two small kids, her hands still shaking. One of the girls from the store was bringing her out a glass of water as Hal began to take charge and clear that part of the front lot. The ambulance turned and headed out of the slip road and the shoppers returned to their tasks, while the young mother sat stunned in the front seat of her Jeep as her baby roared and a police officer made notes.

She and Mary Rose were both still upset when they got into the car, but Martha was filled with a deep sense of gratitude and immense relief that the boy had survived.

'Mom! If it wasn't for you that kid would have died.'

'Hush, Mary Rose, don't say such a thing.'

'But I was there, I saw how you touched him. We all thought he was dead and then you just laid your hands on him and he began to breathe again.'

Martha didn't know what to say. It was the strangest thing. She remembered touching Timmy, wanting to take the pain away from him and praying to God not to do this, not to rob this child of his life, and feeling the immense heat and power come into her hands and the knowledge that somehow or other she was able to help lift some of the pain from him.

'I don't know, Mary Rose.'

'Mom, I saw it! You just put your hands on him and I don't know what happened but you saved him. Everyone around saw it.'

'I prayed, Mary Rose.'

'Prayed?'

'That's all I did. I prayed and asked God to help and I don't know but I could feel my hands get hot, tingly, the strangest feeling, like there was electricity or something in them, and I was just sure and certain that Timmy was meant to live.'

This seemed to silence her daughter as they drove, both lost in thoughts of the boy and crazy explanations of what had happened. Turning into the bottom of Sycamore Street, Martha pulled up outside the Lucas house, noting the neatly mowed lawn and the tub of creeping roses in the porch and wondering what she should say to his mother. She jumped out of the car and quickly ran up towards the front porch.

'She ain't there,' the old man from next door informed her, busy tying up a cascade of magenta petunias that tumbled from a basket on his front step. 'Had to go to the hospital in a hurry as one of her boys got hurt.'

Martha turned around, relieved at being spared the onerous duty of being the bearer of such bad news.

'Shall I give her a message?'

'No thanks, it's fine.'

Pulling into her own driveway minutes later, she felt sapped of energy, depleted. She couldn't take this heat and promised herself the luxury of a cool shower before the evening, as she and Mary Rose carried in the things from the car.

## *Chapter Two*

THE MCGILLS AND the Kellys gathered around the table that night and Martha's mind was still haunted by the thought of the injured child as she crushed garlic and juiced lemons, automatically going through the motions as she prepared the chicken dish.

Mike and the children had made a great fuss of her seventy-two-year-old mother when she arrived. Frances Kelly passed her overnight bag to Patrick, their eldest, to carry up to the guest room. Her brother Jack and his wife Annie and their eight- and five-year-old boys were making themselves comfortable as they first presented their grandmother with her birthday gifts.

'You shouldn't have! You just shouldn't have gone and spent money on gifts! You all know I've got everything I need already,' she protested.

Annie's eyes met Martha's. Both of them knew how hard it was to buy for the ageing Irish matriarch, who was now unwrapping the fine knitted lamb's-wool cardigan in a delicate heather colour that would show off her eyes and skin tone perfectly, and a bottle of lavender perfume.

Frances sprayed a mist of it across the room.

'It's beautiful, Annie. You know I don't hold with those fancy expensive French perfumes at all. The simple fragrances of nature are much better.'

Martha could see Annie blush almost as if her mother-in-law had been at the counter of Neiman Marcus when she had chosen the inexpensive bottle over the classic French Nina Ricci one. Frances Kelly still had her wicked way with words.

Alice was hopping up and down with excitement and Martha watched as she clambered on to her grandmother's lap with their gifts. The specially wrapped and matched paper with its Celtic motif was torn and tossed unnoticed to the wooden floor.

'I'll help you to open them, Granny,' offered their eight-year-old daughter with her green eyes and winning ways.

Martha had bought a new Anglepoise reading lamp for her mother.

'It'll go beside your bed, Granny, and help your tired old eyes,' said Alice.

Martha bit her lip trying not to laugh as Jack winked at her.

Then there was the new housecoat in a soft pink, which would be snug and warm in the winter, and a hell of a lot better than the tattered tartan one her mother had worn for about ten years.

'And I suppose this is if I have to go to the hospital or suchlike. Between you all I'm gathering up a fine collection of night attire, a fine one!'

Lastly was a book of *Irish Country Dwellings*, which Martha had managed to unearth in a small bookstore the last time she'd been to Cambridge. Her mother turned it over appreciatively, glancing at the photo spreads.

'Look here, Alice, there's an old farmhouse like the one where I lived with my mammy and daddy before we came to live in Boston.'

Frances Kelly slowly flipped through the book filled with images of stone cottages and whitewashed farmhouses, and simple dwellings with thatched roofs, and slates and tiles. There were kitchen gardens, straggling floral borders, hen-houses and gateposts and warm pine dressers. All a reminder of her girlhood, spent watching out those tiny squared windowpanes, wanting to see the world.

'Thank you, Martha love, and all of you for such a thoughtful present.'

Martha busied herself in the warmth of the kitchen as Mike served drinks. Uncomplainingly he'd run out and gotten the remainder of what they needed. Now Jack and he were busy discussing the Boston Wolfhounds' coming rugby season. Checking that all was ready, Martha smoothed down her pale blue Liz Claiborne soft denim skirt and co-ordinating round-necked shirt, before getting them all sitting down around the old cherrywood table talking. Lemon chicken and baby roast potatoes, a big dish of mixed salad and minted peas - even the kids were happy with the meal.

The temperature had dropped outside and she'd been tempted to move the party to the wooden table and chairs out back, but knew instinctively her mother wouldn't hear of it. Barbecues and insects were all very fine for Fourth of July, Labor Day and beachside gatherings but not for her mother's birthday. Frances Kelly, if she was to sit and enjoy a birthday meal, wanted to sip her chilled wine from Waterford Crystal, and fold an Irish linen napkin on her lap and feel the weight of traditional Newbridge cutlery between her fingers. 'Small things, but a part of who we are,' she'd insist.

Martha could remember a few glasses with a mishmash of patterns that had been called 'the crystal', when she was a girl, as well as a tablecloth and a few off-white almost beige starched napkins which her mother produced at Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter and other festive days, but otherwise she had no idea where her mother got her notions from. Fiercely proud of their heritage, Martha and her brothers had been raised to celebrate their Irish roots, not in a shamrock and shillelagh way, but in the quiet knowledge of who they were and the people they had come from. Her mother had been more delighted by the news that her new son-in-law Mike McGill had some Irish in him than that he was an honours graduate from Boston College.

'Go and get your granny's birthday cake,' Martha said to the children.

Alice and Mary Rose were up in a flash. That was one thing that kids never outgrew - putting the candles on the cake and carrying it in. She hoped they wouldn't overdo the candles.

'Mom, you look great! Annie and I were just saying you'd never guess you were seventy-two - never!'

Only her eldest brother Jack could get away with it. Her sister-in-law cast her a despairing glance.

The candlelight highlighted her mother's good complexion and softly tinted fair hair which made her look years younger than she actually was. Frances Kelly had always taken a pride in her appearance. Mike passed her mother a measure of Bushmills whiskey - only the best - adding water from a small crystal jug.

'Easy, Mike, easy! There's no point in drowning a good drop of whiskey.'

Martha laughed aloud. Her husband should know by now that his mother-in-law's glass of whiskey was sacred. One glass only, except on very special occasions.

'Brian and that Lisa one sent me flowers. They were delivered this morning.'

'That's nice,' murmured Martha, who had sympathy for her brother and his new wife. No matter what he said or did, Brian could not appease his mother, who still believed marriage was for life and divorce was a sin. She had virtually ignored his partner of two years and had refused to attend his re-marriage in California. They lived in San Jose in California.

'And I didn't even get a card from Sean,' sighed her mother.

'They must be having a good time then,' joked Jack. Her brother Sean and his wife Carrie had gone to Maine with their children for a well-earned break. Her mother was put out at not having been invited to join them for a weekend, even.

‘Mom, you know he’ll be in touch the minute they get back!’

‘Aye, I suppose so.’

‘You know so.’

Her nephews Liam and Tommy and the girls all arrived with the cake almost aflame with candles. Every bit of frosting was covered. Patrick, their fifteen-year-old son, who considered himself beyond such childish things was commandeered to photograph the family occasion.

Her mother’s vague annoyance was overruled by her love of her grandchildren. She made a great to-do of huffing and puffing and trying to blow each and every candle out, little Liam giddy with the excitement of trying to help her.

Martha had just finished slicing the cake and passing it around the table when the doorbell went. Mike automatically rose to answer it.

When he ushered Paul Lucas into the room, Martha rushed over to greet young Timmy’s father. ‘How is he?’ she asked, keeping her arm around the dark-haired middle-aged man who looked exhausted.

‘They think he’s going to make it. But he’s on one of those breathing machines and from what they can tell he’s got a broken pelvis and they had to remove his spleen. He’s got cracked ribs, a tear in his lung and some internal bleeding.’

‘Oh my God!’

‘His right leg’s busted real bad too but at least he’s come through it.’

‘Oh thank heaven,’ moaned Martha, relief flooding over her.

‘Sue stayed with him. I’m on my way home from the hospital to check on the boys and to get some fresh clothes so we can stay the night. I felt I just had to drop in and let you know how my son is and thank you for helping to save his life.’

Martha demurred, embarrassed. Her mother and the rest of the family gazed at her with curiosity.

'I was there, that's all, and only tried to help.'

'You did more than that, much more. My older boy Ralph told me how they all thought he was dead but that you held Timmy and laid your hands on him, and all but brought him back to life.'

'Paul . . . it wasn't quite like that. I just couldn't bear to see him in pain.'

'Ralph said he never saw anything like it. Never. He said even the paramedics thought my Timmy was gone, and if you hadn't been there and healed him he would be gone!'

'I was only doing what anyone would have done, honest.'

'I don't believe there is anyone else that could have saved my son, Martha, only you!'

Martha felt hugely embarrassed.

'Anyways I wanted to thank you,' Paul Lucas insisted sincerely. 'We will never forget it, Martha, never.'

She escorted her neighbour to the front door, promising to visit Timmy and sending every good wish to his wife Sue. Watching as he crossed the street and climbed into his car to drive to the hospital, she was grateful that her own children were safe under their own roof.

'Well!' said Annie on her return. 'What in heavens was all that about, Martha?'

'His boy Timmy got knocked down today, outside the Easton Market store.'

'Aw, the poor kid!'

'Mom and I were there,' interjected Mary Rose, 'and it was just awful. He was on his bike and got crushed by this big Jeep! He was right underneath it and it seemed like he was dead. Mom was amazing, she went straight over and helped him.'

'And what's this about you healing him, Martha?' enquired her mother, concern in her voice.

'Mom, I just did what I could. I wasn't going to watch a boy not much bigger than Alice die before my eyes.'

'God, the poor kid! It must have been awful.'

'He was in a terrible, terrible state, crushed, lying there. We couldn't move him. His life just slipping away, with all these gruesome strangers standing around watching and doing nothing. I *had* to help him.'

'What did you do, Martha love?' asked her mother.

'All I did was to touch him, just like I'd touch any of the kids here if they were hurt or injured and try to ease the pain, rub it away. I kept talking to him too, while we waited for help. Just laying my hands on him I could feel his fear and pain, and I wanted to lift that from him. If that's what you call healing then I guess that's what I did! I wasn't prepared to give up on him and have him die. I knew he was still alive. And somehow I could reach him. It was as if we were connected, linked, if that's the right word.'

'Didn't you feel any different?' enquired Annie earnestly.

'This kind of energy surge seemed to flow through me and I felt real scared because I realized how bad he was and that he was slipping fast.'

'They all said he was dead,' interrupted Mary Rose again. 'Then when the ambulance came and they were trying to lift and move him Mom said he was breathing and they put the oxygen mask on him.'

'Like in the Bible,' murmured Annie.

'Come on, Annie. It was just one of those weird things like you read about in the papers, where some man gets the strength to lift a ten-ton weight off his trapped wife or a mother runs through a fire to get her child and doesn't even feel the burn. A bolt of energy or light, an adrenalin rush - I don't know! I was in a crisis and my body or intuition or whatever responded to it.'

'Did you pray, Martha pet?' asked Frances.

'Believe me I prayed! I prayed to God, to whatever power controls this universe. I prayed for that little boy, cos I was not prepared to give up and watch him die.'

'Thank God, then,' murmured her mother, squeezing her hand. 'Thank God that you were there.'

‘Maybe you have a healing gift or something, Martha, maybe.’

Martha shook her head vehemently. Annie was into all this new age stuff, healing and crystals, of which Martha knew very little. She didn’t believe in any of that kind of thing anyways.

Martha yawned. She felt tired. Maybe a cup of strong coffee would perk her up. A drooping hostess was no good to anyone. She was glad the boy was all right, relieved that his life had been spared and that Susan and Paul Lucas still had their son.

‘You OK, Martha?’

Mike came over and bent down, his breath, like her own, smelling of garlic.

‘Fine.’

‘Hands up who’s for coffee!’ she offered.

‘C’mon, I’ll give you a hand.’

In the kitchen, she stacked some of the dirty dishes and set the kettle to boil. She got down the rich roast Colombian coffee that was kept for special occasions: no decaf tonight. She watched as her forty-two-year-old husband set out the cups and saucers on the tray, adding the cream jug and sugar. His fair hair was starting to recede ever so slightly but golf and trips to the local gym had ensured that he stayed in shape, his body still well muscled and lean. Still as handsome and even more attractive than when she’d met him eighteen years before.

She filled the coffee pot and carried it back to their waiting guests. The kids had repaired to the den where they were likely already involved in some computer game battle of skill; their laughs and shouts filled the air.

‘Here you go, Mom,’ she said, pouring the coffee into a white china cup. She was glad to sit down by her mother and relax. Mike and Jack, at the far side of the table, were now talking about golf.

‘That was a lovely meal,’ said Annie. ‘It was good of you to invite us over.’

‘Family should be together, gather round the table,’ said Frances, ‘though you can’t help thinking about the ones that are missing.’

Martha smiled, unsure if her mother was referring to her missing siblings or her father who had passed away over twenty-two years ago.

‘Anyways, you had a lovely birthday party, Frances!’ cajoled Annie.

Martha knew that her mother held a grudging respect for the neat, blond-haired young woman who had managed to tie down her wild son Jack and turn him into a good husband and doting father.

‘That I did, that I did!’

Frances regaled them with stories of her best friends, Bee and Louisa. It had crossed Martha’s mind to invite them over too but she had felt it would be tempting Mike’s patience too much to expect him to sit and listen over dinner to her mother and her friends’ stories for hours on end.

‘Bee had a perm at the salon, but they did it wrong and now her hair’s coming out in clumps.’

‘Poor Bee,’ murmured Martha.

‘Well, she’s got herself a lawyer and he’s going to sue them for a fortune, millions of dollars likely. That hair falling out could be the making of Bee!’

Martha and Annie smiled at each other, knowing well that Frances Kelly was about to launch into more stories about her women friends. Martha slipped off her shoes and curled up on the couch, only half listening to her mother. She was thinking about the day’s events, glad that in some small way she had helped the Lucas boy survive the accident.

## *Chapter Three*

THE DRIVE ALONG Penton Avenue and Columbus Drive was busy as mothers like herself ferried their offspring to the local schools, open finally after the long summer break. Martha dropped Patrick and Mary Rose first at St John's before driving back in the other direction with Alice, who attended Bishop Delaney Junior School. Alice was fussing about the hardness of her new shoes after weeks of slopping around in sandals and was worried in case she was not in class with her best friends.

'You've just got to wait and see,' she told her.

It was unlike her youngest to worry so Martha decided to accompany her to the school yard and give her a bit of moral support. The two of them joined the growing throng of parents and children outside the school.

'Be positive and optimistic and your child will sense it.' That's what all the good parenting books told you to do. Martha did her best to appear relaxed, aware of her daughter's small hand clenched in her own as they walked towards the main entrance, both of them searching for the familiar face of any of Alice's schoolfriends. She nodded as Abe Harrison and Kate Nils, both teachers she knew, passed by, trying to look cheerful at the start of another term. It was hard on everyone getting back into the routine of school.

Crowds of children pressed past them: new bags, new shoes, new haircuts.

'Mom, there's Becky!'

Martha smiled, recognizing her daughter's play-mate who had just returned from vacation. The two girls raced toward

each other, as she and Evie Hayes watched on.

‘How you doing, Martha?’

‘Fine, Evie. Fine. You look great! Tell me, how did the house on Eagle Lake work out?’

Her friend seemed totally relaxed and refreshed, her skin a golden honey colour, her short brown hair sun-tinted a shade lighter.

‘We had the best time ever. The house was right on the shore and the kids just swam and fished and sailed from sunrise to sunset while Frank and I lazed and unwound. You and Mike would adore it. I honestly think it was one of our best vacations ever.’

The two girls’ heads were together, whispering as two more friends arrived over. Martha was relieved that Alice had company as the yard bell sounded and the children began to organize themselves into some semblance of a file to line up at the school entrance.

Alice wrapped her arms around her and hugged her tight, Martha breathing in the sweet scent of her daughter’s apple shampoo as they said goodbye.

‘See you later, Mom!’

The parents stood clustered together as their offspring entered the school building, one or two dabbing at their eyes or running to look in the windows. Martha almost dreaded the still and quiet of home that awaited her. As she stood chatting with Evie, a few of the other mothers joined them.

‘I heard about the Lucas boy,’ Kim Hamilton interrupted.

‘I know, it was such a terrible accident!’

‘No, I mean about you. How you saved his life - healed him.’

Martha took a deep breath. She was real fond of Kim, with her sparky sense of humour and good nature, but her friend did have a tendency to get things wrong. ‘Kim, I just happened to be there, and did what any of you would do, that’s all,’ she said.

'That's *all*? Not the way I heard it! I heard you all but brought that poor boy back to life! That in front of everyone you laid your hands on him, and somehow he started to breathe again.'

She could see a flabbergasted Evie staring at her, and the others intently watching for her reaction.

'Hey, come on. Don't be crazy, I just helped him. You know, he was in a lot of pain, and shock, stuck under that Jeep.'

How could anyone imagine that she had such a power? It was just her adrenalin and sheer necessity that had made her keep trying to save the Lucas boy.

Kim raised her eyebrows. Evie looked puzzled and Martha could sense everyone else's curiosity.

'How's he doing anyway?' interrupted Berry Wilder, who had four boys of her own.

'His mother Susan's still up at the hospital and he's had a lot of surgery and is in pretty poor shape.'

'It's just awful for her. I don't know what I'd do if something like that happened to any of my boys, some lunatic driving over them.'

'I don't think it was her fault,' argued Martha. 'Timmy just came out of nowhere.'

'Still, she should have been more careful!' insisted Kim forcefully.

The school yard began to empty, and Martha and Evie walked companionably to the roadside. It was an unspoken agreement to stay home the first morning of school and not to go gallivanting, in case the school principal phoned. Mindful of this, Martha arranged to meet Evie later in the week for coffee.

Dishes and laundry and mess were all there waiting to greet her as she stepped through the door of 552 Mill Street. Putting on an old Paul Simon CD to cheer herself up, she set to her household chores, trying not to notice the silence of a