

*Faith, Hope
and Fiction*

The Lifesavers – Part I

By Patricia Crisafulli

Mackenzie

Mackenzie Braddock cruised through the grocery store parking lot, looking for a double space far enough away from the shopping-cart corral to avoid scratches and dings on her Lexus. She spotted one and slipped into position, her front right tire just far enough over the line so that no one else could park on that side, while leaving her plenty of extra room on the left. Taking off her tortoise shell sunglasses, Mackenzie's cool gray eyes met their reflection in the rearview mirror as she pushed her straight dark hair behind her ears. Jake would call it selfish, she knew, although he'd be the first to complain about a dent in the door of the car as if were a wound on his own body. His accusations echoed: selfish, self-absorbed, self-centered—so many selves she would have to be three people. Mackenzie pressed her mouth into a hard line. What Jake thought, said, or did was fast becoming none of her concern. And as for the car, it soon wouldn't be his either.

Walking toward the double-glass doors of the store, Mackenzie assessed her reflection: fuchsia linen sheath with a square neckline and strappy sandals in bone—still summery given the heat, but acknowledging the fact that it was after Labor Day. Her simple gold necklace caught

the last glitter of sunlight before she headed into the shadow of the awning in the front of the grocery store.

The doors, triggered by an electric eye, slid open, and Mackenzie stepped into the chill of Shoptown and grabbed a cart. With neither list nor any idea of what she needed, Mackenzie made her way toward produce: six kiwis, bean sprouts, baby carrots, and a bag of spinach salad with cranberries and walnuts appeared in her cart. She was here because she had no place else to go at the moment and needed to have a break between the lawyer's office and home. She couldn't bear the cheeriness of Starbucks and she wasn't the type to go to a bar—or a church for that matter. Shoptown was safe and practical, as long as she stayed away from the cookies and snack aisle. The low roar in the back of her head could easily be dulled by a package of double-fudge something. She wouldn't do it—couldn't do it. She'd never give Jake the satisfaction.

Little curly things, as green as clover and resembling baby cabbages, struck her eye: Brussels sprouts, she realized, amused that she'd never seen them *au natural* without being split and steamed or, heaven forbid, swimming in butter sauce on a plate in a restaurant. She put six in a bag, knowing full well they'd probably wilt or rot or turn into hard little marbles before she figured out how to cook them. Gourmet-to-Go was on her speed dial at home.

Mackenzie looked at the fish counter, declining help from the woman in the long white coat and a sweater—the coolers in the back must be frigid, she thought—and moved on to meat. The steaks seemed too red; juice that collected in the corners of the plastic wrap looked like blood. Her head swam for a minute and her stomach turned just as it had when she was pregnant for Jonathan 20 years ago, when the look and smells of certain food instantly sickened her. Putting her hand against her Pilates-flattened stomach, Mackenzie exhaled and closed her eyes. Nothing like that this time around—not at 48 and not with her life in its current state. Just nerves.

Jonathan knew already; Jake had told him. When Jonathan had offered to cancel his plans for a semester abroad, her head had screamed “yes,” while her mouth said “no.” The assurance she had given him reverberated in her brain. *I’ll be fine; just fine. Your Dad and I are working this out.* What else could she say; you’re twenty, please stop your life for me? She would be fine financially. Even her lawyer had called Jake’s offer generous. But what about all the rest, including the ending of a 23-year marriage, which she hadn’t really seen coming. Sure, things had changed, but that was natural. Jake was busy at work and she had her decorating business, although with the downturn in the economy, clients were fewer and farther between. Couples went through cycles; she thought this was just one of them.

Mackenzie pushed her cart away from the meat counter, nearly colliding with a woman in baggy pants and a print top, which she recognized as a nurse’s uniform. “Sorry,” the woman said, steering away, even though Mackenzie knew it was her fault. She hadn’t thought to apologize, though. She just rolled ahead, preoccupied by her own world. Jake’s accusations echoed anew: selfish, self-absorbed, self-centered. Mackenzie decided to buy coffee beans.

She had twenty items, no matter how she counted them. On any other day, she would have made her way to express and feigned ignorance over having more than 15. The woman in the nurse’s uniform, who now looked familiar, was ahead of her in line. Mackenzie tried to place her, finally realizing that she lived in the neighborhood. She had a dog, a Jack Russell terrier that liked to sniff the two oaks in front of the house, but thankfully never left a deposit there. Mackenzie had no idea where she lived, but probably not on their block. She knew everybody to her immediate left and right and across the street, people who, like her, lived in over-sized houses that had replaced the modest ranches and small Georgians.

Mackenzie thought about the house, which Jake had given up quickly as if it were a peace offering to keep things civil. He didn't want it, she surmised now, because he had somewhere besides the apartment downtown he had rented. How could she not have known?

The nurse, as Mackenzie thought of her, was taking forever unloading her cart. When the last items were finally on the conveyor belt, the woman cast a smile in her direction, which Mackenzie returned feebly, then chastised herself: Where did she have to go in such a hurry? Looking around, her gaze rested on the gum and candy display. A king-sized dark chocolate Snickers would do the trick. Instead, she reached for a small roll of candy, familiar in its multi-stripe wrapping. She hadn't even realized that they still made them.

When the clerk began ringing up the woman's groceries, the conveyor belt moved, allowing Mackenzie to begin unloading her cart. She scooted around to the front to reach a kiwi that rolled into the far right corner. She placed it in the thin plastic bag with the rest of the fruit. "One-oh-four seventy-eight," she heard the cashier tell the woman ahead of her.

Mackenzie read the headlines of the tabloids and gossip magazines. Starlets she didn't recognize were having tummy tucks and implants. Young celebrities were engaged and old ones were on their deathbeds.

"How much?" the woman asked.

Mackenzie saw her squint at the display as she counted her cash.

Although she tried not to notice, it was obvious that the woman was paying with cash and didn't have enough money with her. Use your credit card and be done with it, Mackenzie thought. The woman shot her an apologetic look.

"I only have ninety-six. I didn't realize I had bought so much," the woman said.

Mackenzie re-read the magazine headlines.

When the woman began pawing through her purchases, Mackenzie realized she was going to start returning items to lower the total. Why did she always end up in the line that went nowhere?

The cashier scanned a tube of toothpaste and lowered the amount by \$3.59.

The idea seemed rather brilliant and downright charitable, accomplished with a sleight of hand that would have fooled no one if they hadn't been focused on the grocery return.

"Is this yours?" Mackenzie asked. When the woman ahead turned around, she picked up a twenty dollar bill from the floor.

"No, I don't think so," she replied.

"Well, it must be. You were counting your money and this is on the floor. It probably slipped out of your purse."

The woman looked behind Mackenzie where two other shoppers waited with full carts. She took the twenty.

"Ring up the toothpaste again," Mackenzie told the cashier.

The woman gave her a look as if it was all none of her business.

Mackenzie pretended to study the next aisle where an oversized balloon shaped like a sunflower bobbed on a bright yellow ribbon.

The cashier handed back change and a receipt and began ringing up Mackenzie's groceries. "Sorry for the delay. Thank you for waiting."

"No problem," Mackenzie replied, savoring her little taste of altruism as she ran her debit card through the electronic reader, punched in her PIN, and signed with a stylus.

The shopping cart rattled all the way over to her car, where no one was parked on either side. She popped the trunk and put the bags inside.

“I know what you did.”

Startled, Mackenzie jerked her head around.

The woman stood behind her.

“Excuse me?” Mackenzie replied.

“That wasn’t my twenty, it was yours.” The woman folded her arms.

“It was on the floor. Maybe it belonged to some other customer.”

“Look, it’s not that I’m ungrateful. It was really sweet of you, but I’m not a charity case.”

So much for doing a good deed, Mackenzie chided herself. “No charity involved. Just a twenty—on the floor.”

“You live near me.” The woman’s voice softened and her arms dropped to her sides. “I walk my dog on your street.”

“Magnolia,” Mackenzie replied. “You’re on...?”

“Chestnut—four blocks over.”

“You have a little dog.”

“Sparky.” The woman’s face curled into a smile. “My kids’ dog, but I’m the one who walks him.”

“That’s always the way it is.” Mackenzie’s hand lingered on the open trunk lid.

“So I’m going to pay you back,” the woman added.

“No, really...”

“Yes, really.” The woman looked down at her white tie shoes with thick soles. “I’m Beth, by the way. Beth Garrett.” She extended her hand.

“Mackenzie Braddock.” The shake was firm, brief.

“I know I should say thank you. Things are really tough right now. My husband died eighteen months ago. The medical bills are astronomical, but I’m keeping things together for the kids.”

Mackenzie felt the pull of sympathy. “How old are your children?”

“Fourteen and seventeen—son and daughter. I’m trying to keep the house so they can finish high school in the district—at least Michelle, since she graduates in the spring.”

Mackenzie instinctively reached into her purse, wanting to give Beth more money, but knew that would be offensive. Her fingers wrapped around the roll of hard candy she’d just purchased. Drawing it out slowly, she smiled, and offered one.

Beth took the bright red circle on top. “Cherry, my favorite.”

“Good omen.” Mackenzie’s was green, with a sweet lime flavor.

“Well today you were my lifesaver, so this seems appropriate. Thank you.”

“My pleasure—really.”

“I will pay you back.” Beth took a step away.

“Not necessary.” She tried to remember that expression people used about good deeds.

“Pay it forward, you know?”

“Yeah, I know.”

Later that night, Jonathan called from his college on the East Coast. He was upbeat and chatty, excited about leaving for Edinburgh later in the month. He would be staying there through the holidays, maybe going to the Continent to do some skiing. His father was coming for Christmas, Jonathan told her, which hit her in the gut harder than the fact her son would be so far away. “That’s great. I had planned to come over then, but maybe I’ll wait until New Year’s.”

Mackenzie paced across the oriental rug in the living room, hand-knotted and made in some obscure country where, she hoped, small children hadn't been employed.

"You could come together—I mean at the same time," Jonathan suggested.

Mackenzie closed her eyes and exhaled slowly. "I'm sure your Dad would be glad for the time alone with you. With his schedule, it's hard for him to get away. So he'll go at Christmas, and I'll come for New Year's."

"But, Mom, what will you do?" Jonathan asked.

"Your Aunt Caroline has asked me to come out and spend the holidays," Mackenzie told him, inventing an invitation that had not been offered, but which would be if she asked. "I think I might go."

"Well that's good." Jonathan switched subjects abruptly and told her about his friend, Gina, who was a senior and hoping to get into public health. She was doing an internship in Burkina Faso, which Mackenzie figured out was in Africa. "You should see the list of shots she has to get, Mom."

Mackenzie wished she could be inoculated right now against all feeling.

The next morning, Mackenzie stepped outside in her yoga pants and t-shirt to retrieve *The Wall Street Journal*, which Jake always had delivered to the house. She supposed he would get the subscription transferred to his condo downtown. Pulling the newspaper out of the plastic sleeve she scanned the front page and started reading. She lingered in front of the house, and then finally went back inside.

On the third day when she went outside a little later than usual because of an early-morning call from a client who was redecorating a recreation room in the basement, Mackenzie

nearly stepped on an envelope on her front step. Inside were a twenty dollar bill, a short thank you note, and a roll of Life Savers. Smiling, Mackenzie opened the little cylinder of candy and extracted an orange one.

That evening, after a long afternoon of looking at upholstery swatches and paint chips in her client's house, Mackenzie sat at the kitchen counter and ate chicken and steamed vegetables that she had picked up from Gourmet to Go, and went through two days' worth of mail. Wanting a sparkling water, she opened the refrigerator to get a LaCroix. Her eyes landed on the produce sitting on near empty shelves. The outer leaves of the Brussels sprouts had developed a few brown spots and the bag of salad appeared wilted inside the cellophane packaging. She tossed both into the trash with only the mildest thought of being wasteful. One of the kiwi fruit, dislodged from its plastic bag, rolled forward on the shelf. Mackenzie caught it as was about to drop over the edge.

Finding a paring knife in one of the kitchen island drawers, Mackenzie took off the fuzzy brown outer rind and then sliced the bright green fruit. Something so simple as peeling it herself suddenly felt pleasing, as if she were more self-sufficient than she realized.

The note from Beth lay on the counter beside the opened mail, most of which could go into the recycling bin without shredding. She had signed it with her address and phone number.

Rinsing her plate, fork, and the paring knife and putting them in the dishwasher, Mackenzie decided to go for a walk, which she rarely did, but it now it seemed like a good idea. The evening was cool with a promise of fall in the air, a welcome break after a long stretch of hot summer weather. As she set off down the sidewalk, Mackenzie vowed she would walk every night after dinner instead of getting lost in her email or flipping through channels on the television. She waved to a neighbor as she walked down the street and admired the landscape of

the big brick house with a Frank Lloyd Wright look to it, which had been rumored to be a short sale and quite the bargain for the young couple who bought it. Mackenzie wondered if they would decorate, and considered leaving her card in their mailbox. Normally her business was referral only, but word-of-mouth had been pretty silent lately.

When she turned the corner, Mackenzie tried to pretend she wasn't headed any place in particular, but with a minimum of meandering she was on Chestnut Street and then on the block that matched Beth's house number. Two teenagers were in the yard in front of a well-kept ranch; the boy shot baskets at a hoop implanted beside the driveway, and the girl sat on the step talking on her cell phone. The dog lounged beside her. Mackenzie slowed down, as if admiring the modest garden planted with hastas and two pots of bright flowers beside the front steps. Beth stepped out of the attached garage wearing gardening gloves.

"Out for a walk!" Mackenzie called.

Beth strolled over toward her, pulling off the gloves. She wore shorts and a faded yellow t-shirt that said Grand Canyon across the chest. "So you did get my note," she said.

Mackenzie wondered if she was supposed to call to acknowledge receiving it. "Yes, thank you. You know you didn't have to pay me back."

"I thought you found the money on the floor," Beth eyed her with mock suspicion and then laughed. "Do you want some iced tea?"

"Sure." Mackenzie followed Beth up the driveway, meeting her son, Daniel, a freshman in high school, and Michelle, a senior. When Beth went in to get the iced tea, Mackenzie stayed outside and tried to make conversation with Michelle and Daniel, who answered her queries about school in two or three words. She remembered Jonathan at that age, infuriating her with the brevity of his remarks. "Describe the Amazon to me!" she had once demanded, trying to

force him into something resembling conversation. He had thought for a moment and replied, “Hot and wet.” Then he had put his hand gently on her shoulder and said, “I’m a teenager, Mom. This is how we talk to adults. I don’t know why, but it just works that way.” She missed her son with a dull ache.

Beth returned with a pitcher, three glasses, and an older woman who looked so much like her, Mackenzie instantly knew she was Beth’s mother. She had the same thin build, although hers was a bit stooped in the shoulders, and instead of Beth’s sandy brown hair, hers was gray. The blue eyes and face shape, though, were so similar they could be images of the same woman thirty years apart.

Beth introduced her mother as Eleanor Black, and explained that she was visiting from outside Indianapolis. As Daniel went back to shooting baskets and Michelle made another call on her cell phone, the three women walked around to the back of Beth’s house to the patio. Mackenzie noticed the trimmed lawn and a small garden in back. When she commented on how cheerful it looked, Eleanor explained she had helped Beth plant it back in July, when she came up for a visit, which she tried to do every couple of months.

As Eleanor talked about the flowers, Mackenzie thought of her own parents living outside Palm Springs whom she saw once a year, usually in the dead of winter when the California desert provided a break from the cold and gray of suburban Chicago. When she had told them about the divorce, her mother had asked her to stay with them for a while. She appreciated the gesture but knew, after a few days, they’d be on their nerves. Too much alike, Mackenzie reasoned, and not in a good way.

“So which one is your house?” Eleanor asked.

Mackenzie ran her fingers through the condensation on the outside of the glass. “I’m a few blocks over.”

“Remember when we walked Sparky and you saw the garden you thought was so pretty?” Beth interjected. “Well that’s Mackenzie’s house.”

“I don’t think I could find the house on my own, but I do remember the garden,” Eleanor smiled. “Flowers are my passion.”

Mackenzie wanted to say the garden had been planted and tended by a crew who came every week; she didn’t do so much as pull a weed. Instead, she asked the name of the flowers in the pot. Eleanor chuckled and called them, “Plain ol’ geraniums.”

“Do you have children at home?” Eleanor asked.

“No, my son is away at college. He’s twenty and leaving very soon for a year abroad. He’ll be in Scotland and Wales, studying geology, of all things.”

“Sounds marvelous,” Eleanor glanced at Beth. “We hope Michelle gets to do something like that.”

“It’s a great experience. Jonathan was actually reluctant at first, but we told him this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, to live abroad without worrying about expenses.” Mackenzie stopped abruptly.

“So you and your husband are empty-nesters.”

Mackenzie drank a little of the iced tea. “Well, my nest is really empty. My husband moved out four months ago.”

She saw Beth’s eyebrows draw together and her eyes take on a soft look.

“I’m fine, really. It’s pretty amiable—well, now anyway. My lawyer says Jake is being very fair, generous even.”

“Well, if you don’t mind my saying so, I think he’s a fool. You’re a lovely woman, and I don’t just mean on the outside.” Eleanor laid her hand gently on Mackenzie’s forearm.

A little knot twisted in Mackenzie’s throat. “I’m not sure he would agree with you. His parting shot to me was that I was selfish, self-centered, and self-absorbed. Some days I would say he was right.” Raising her glass, Mackenzie took a long sip of the iced tea.

“So, are you seeing anyone about this?” Beth asked.

“That’s the last thing on my mind,” Mackenzie sputtered. “I’d like another man in my life right now about as much as I’d want a foot growing out of the top of my head.”

Beth grinned. “That didn’t come out right. I meant seeing someone like a therapist.”

That had been her mother’s advice, too. “No, I’ll be fine.”

“I have the name of someone in case you change your mind. She helped me so much when Greg was dying and then after he died.”

Beth’s eyes welled up. She brushed tears away hastily and excused herself to go get the therapist’s name and number.

“It’s been so very hard on her,” Eleanor said gently. “Greg had leukemia. When he got sick, his business failed, and he had taken a second mortgage out to help finance it.” She shook her head.

“What kind of business?” Mackenzie asked.

“He had a sports memorabilia and collectible shop. It was popular for a while, but with the economy, people weren’t buying that sort of thing.”

Mackenzie thought of two signed jerseys and a half-dozen footballs and baseballs autographed by famous players that had been displayed around the bar in their basement. Those Jake had taken with him, not that she cared.

“Beth says she’s worried about losing the house,” Mackenzie said.

“I think she’d going to, unfortunately. The bank is being wonderful, but she’s so far in debt with Greg’s business and the medical bills.” Eleanor shook her head. “I think they’ll move in with me, which I’d love. I’m by myself now. Beth’s dad died eight years ago. My place is small, but we’ll be okay. I just feel sorry for Michelle. This is her senior year and she’ll get the lead in the musical again.”

The back door opened and Beth came out with a piece of paper in one hand and a Kleenex in the other. “Sorry, it took a little digging to find it.”

Mackenzie took the paper, read the name of Dr. Sandra Reinhold the phone number with a suburban area code. “Thank you.” She put the paper in her pocket.

They talked for a few more minutes, and drained their iced tea glasses. Mackenzie knew it was time to head back home.

“If you’re not doing anything on Sunday, Michelle has a voice recital,” Beth began.

“She’s really good,” Eleanor piped up. “Not sure where she gets it from, since neither one of us is particularly musical.”

“Well, Greg was—but not like Michelle,” Beth added.

“Sure,” Mackenzie agreed, more out of a sense of obligation than wanting to go. Maybe she could come up with a last minute excuse.

“Listen, if you don’t want to go, you shouldn’t feel obliged,” Beth added. “I just mention it.”

Stung that Beth had known her reaction so plainly, Mackenzie protested. “No, it sounds like fun, and I don’t have any other plans for Sunday.”

Getting up from her chair, Mackenzie thanked Beth for the tea and told Eleanor it was a pleasure to meet her. The older woman gave her an unexpected hug. “I’m glad you two girls are friends. You can help each other.”

Mackenzie paused. They weren’t exactly friends and they certainly weren’t girls any longer. “I’m glad, too,” she replied, and noticed Beth’s smile. “See you Sunday.”

Cars ringed the Community Church, where the recital was being held in the basement. A young girl in a black leotard and wrap skirt handed Mackenzie a program for the Voice & Dance Academy. As she headed down the side aisle, Mackenzie read the description, knowing that these after-school lessons had probably cost Beth more than she could afford. Maybe Eleanor paid for them.

Hearing her name called out, Mackenzie spied Beth and Eleanor waving from the second row. She made her way toward an empty seat.

The third performance was Michelle, standing in a plain black dress and illuminated by a spotlight. She looked straight ahead and sang with a rich voice, pure and bell-like. The song was from *La Bohème*, and slightly familiar to Mackenzie. Caught up in the voice and the music, she forgot she was sitting on a folded chair in a church basement. It could have been the New York Met or the Chicago Opera House.

The applause was thunderous, and several people jumped to their feet. Beth, Eleanor, and Mackenzie rose well after others had begun the ovation. Michelle bowed once and left the stage. When the applause continued, the director of the academy came out and beckoned Michelle to take a second bow, which she did.

“She’s amazing,” Mackenzie yelled in Beth’s ear above the noise.

“I know!” Beth replied, beaming.

“She’s got to stay here, Beth—one way or the other.”

Beth bit her lip and nodded. “I know that, too.”

Mackenzie’s palms tingled from applauding so hard and so long until the director asked them to be seated.

Dancers were next, a wise choice since no singer would want to follow Michelle’s solo. As the girls in leotards and tutus flitted across the simple stage, Mackenzie ran scenarios through her head for how Beth could stay here, until she reminded herself it was really none of her business. The girl had enough talent no matter where she was. Surely it wouldn’t matter what high school she graduated from; she was already a senior. But flights to auditions cost money, and probably more than Beth’s budget. Here, she could help, Mackenzie knew. The women’s clubs that hit her up for donations on a regular basis—not just cash but two-hour consultations on decorating that she offered for silent auctions at fundraisers—must have scholarships.

A plan began to hatch in her brain: a few phone calls, a couple of inquiries. She’d have to tell Beth, of course, but this is something she could do and not just out of guilt or to prove some point. She wanted to help, and it felt very, very good.

Part II of The Life Savers will be published in the October issue of FaithHopeandFiction.com.