

# **CRYSTAL CLEAR**

**Third in the Memory Box Trilogy**

*By*

*Cindy Bauer*

*“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived  
what God has prepared for those who love him”*

*1 Corinthians 2:9*

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First printing

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ISBN # 978-1-84961-028-5

Published by TheEbookSale Publishing  
([www.theebooksale.com](http://www.theebooksale.com))

# DEDICATION

To my husband Bob: For your continued support, encouragement and unconditional love, while I fulfilled my dream to write and be published. Also, for putting up with me through it all.

To my Dad: for always being there for me. To my sister, for investing in my future. And to my brother, for designing the cover!

To Donna and Aunt Willie, for all the encouragement and support you've shown me while writing this series. You were as excited as I was and your words along the way have meant more to me than I can possibly put into words.

In loving memory of my grandparents:

*Mathias and Gertrude Gaumer  
and  
Charles and Margie Cassman*

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my brother, Michael Cassman, for another beautiful cover!

And in recognition of everyone who has given me their constant support and encouragement, for without you this would not have been possible. You've all been very patient in awaiting this final story in the series and I can only pray that I've lived up to your expectations.

Other books in this series:

*Chasing Memories - First in the Memory Box Trilogy*  
*Shades of Blue - Second in the Memory Box Trilogy*

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## PROLOGUE

As she accepted the box, she noticed the trembling of her mother's hands as they let go of the precious gift. But before she could utter a sound, the old woman turned away from her again, returning to stare out the window and watch the snowflakes building in the corners of the window panes.

She wanted to scream out, "I love you, Momma! I'm not ready for this yet!" But she knew the old woman would not listen to her... for it was time. And there was nothing she could do to stop it now.

They just sat there together... in silence, while the old woman rocked... slowly... back and forth. Suddenly, the rocking stopped and at that moment in time, she felt

as though her heart had surely been broken.

She stood up to check on her, knowing full well without confirmation that her mother had gone home to the Lord. The tears began to flow uncontrollably down her cheeks now as she reached out to close the delicate and wrinkled eyelids for her. Turning back for one last glimpse, she closed the door silently behind her and began making her way downstairs...

## CHAPTER ONE

The call came as a shock to Susan. She couldn't begin to grasp the reality that her next guest at the shelter would be Annie Thompson. Never had that possibility entered her mind.

She checked in on Tommy. Now twelve, he was sleeping peacefully. She would just leave him a note in case he woke up while she was gone. He was used to the spur of the moment routine at the shelter when it came to picking up a new "guest" in the middle of the night. And he was old enough now that she didn't have to bundle him up and take him with her. She was grateful for that.

Susan was shaking as she double checked that she had her keys before locking the front door and pulling it

shut. The summertime night air was humid and very muggy. A storm was brewing somewhere nearby. Susan could tell by the deafening sound of silence and the still of the air itself.

There were no crickets out this evening, few stars could be seen in the black, night sky and as if to confirm that fact, she caught sight of flashes of light from some heat lightening off in the distance.

She slid into the seat of the used, but like new van she had purchased just three months ago and buckled in before turning the key. The whirl of the engine starting up seemed ominously loud in the garage. She hit the switch on the garage door opener and backed out, clicked the remote button to close it and continued on to back around into the turnaround space. She shifted into drive and exited onto the highway.

There wasn't any traffic out this late at night. The shelter she operated was located out in the country where its remoteness gave comfort and seclusion to the guests. But she could hear the mournful cry of a mother cow missing her baby nearby.

She always felt saddened by the sound and wished she could locate the poor animal and talk softly to it while patting its head. But she knew how silly that would appear to the neighboring farmers and chuckled with the thought of how they would react to such a deed.

It was calf-weaning season. At first she had been confused by the sound, wondering if the animal in question was hurt somewhere. After a chat with her nearest farming neighbor, she had learned that during calf-weaning, the calves were separated from the mothers, forcing them to learn to graze and for nights on end, sometimes weeks, you could hear the mothers calling out for them. It was so sad, but best to leave well enough alone. It was Mother Nature's way.

Susan had never lived on a farm. She came from the small town of Hampton, Missouri. Her parents had run their own consulting business, traveling all over the world and had rarely been home.

She had been raised by a nanny, but had been extremely close to her parents. Especially her mother. Their relationship mimicked that of sisters, more than mother and daughter. And oh, how she missed them!

After a marriage to an abusive husband, her parents had boarded a flight toward home to be with her through the divorce and support her, but their flight never made it there. It crashed and there had been no survivors. Susan's only real salvation had been her son, Tommy, and her dearest friend, Laura.

Because of the marriage and what happened after the divorce, she had purchased an old farmhouse which had been turned into a Bed and Breakfast by the former owners after their children had grown and left the nest. She'd gotten a very good deal on the place when it was put up for sale after their estate was probated when they passed on.

She had remodeled it so she could turn it into a refuge for battered women and their children, a safe-haven for those who had nowhere to go to get away from their abusers. It was her way of giving them that opportunity.

Susan had been fortunate enough to have Laura to turn to, but many in the same position she had found herself in had no such place. Until she'd opened up the shelter.

Annie Thompson, Laura's daughter, now appeared to be her next guest. Confused and worried about this turn of events, Susan almost missed her turn on the old highway that out skirted the town of Hampton, leading to the Baptist Church she attended. It was also where she picked up her guests.

Annie wasn't married or living with anyone. *So why would Annie need refuge? And why call on her instead of Laura and Greg?* That was the most confusing question for her. *Why Annie? And how had it happened that she'd obviously been kept out of the loop?*

She whipped into the church parking lot and pulled in next to the pastor's old, blue station wagon, a beat up

remnant of days gone by and certainly in desperate need of replacement in Susan's opinion. But it always brought a smile to the pastor's lips when she would question him about that. And he always answered the same.

"Now Susan, we've been over this a thousand times. There's nothing wrong with Betsy. She's my first car and has been my mode of transportation going on twenty-five years now. Runs like a top and she's made of pure steel. I feel comfortable driving her. I can go grocery shopping in the rain and there's absolutely no reason for me to buy some fancy, plastic thing that costs as much as a house did when Betsy first came out on the market. Not everything new is better, you know. The Lord has provided me with what I need and it serves its purpose just fine."

Susan had stopped shaking now, but almost locked herself out of the car getting out. She just caught the door before it shut when she realized her purse and keys were still inside. She hated to admit it, but she didn't feel as confident tonight. She was frightened. *Of all the people for me to be picking up this late at night to take home, I can't believe it is Annie Thompson!*

She pulled her purse closer to her body and clasped her fingers around the straps as she mounted the steps to enter the foyer of the familiar church. She still loved the way the huge doors creaked when they were opened. The heavy wooden doors were made of oak with stained glass crosses forged on the upper halves – old, yet so beautiful.

At night, same as tonight, the light from inside the church illuminated them, giving them an almost eerie, yet comforting feel. She rushed in, not wanting to waste any more time.

Annie was sitting in a pew up front, her head bowed, her hands clasped. She had been praying and didn't hear the heavy doors open or close. Pastor Brown was also up front, near the altar, lighting candles. He turned and smiled, moving his arm in a gesture toward the despondent woman sitting in the church at this late hour of the night. Susan didn't waste a moment.

“Annie? Honey, what’s happened?” Susan rushed over and sat down in the pew next to her, putting her arm around her shoulders in a comforting solace. That was all it took for Annie to begin sobbing uncontrollably again. Her shoulders shook as the flow of tears poured down her cheeks.

“Baby, I know it’s hard for you, but you’ve got to try to calm down and tell me what’s happened. And start from the beginning.” Susan waited for her to reply.

“I need to go home with you, Susan.” Annie looked up, her face streaked red from crying. “It’s not what you’re thinking, though. I’ll tell you in the car.”

Susan stood and helped her to her feet and nodded at the all-too-knowing pastor. They had been through some difficult times together over the years. She led Annie out to the car. Annie slid in and buckled up her seatbelt.

Susan glanced over at her before starting the car up, then backed up and turned around. When they hit the main highway to head towards home, she couldn’t wait any longer. The suspense was really beginning to eat at her. Her nerves were raw.

“Okay Annie, it’s just us now. Tell me what is going on and don’t skip a thing! Start from the beginning.”

**End of Sample**