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Formerly titled *Elizabeth Gail and the Strange Birthday Party*

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Libby's Great Idea

“I HAVE it!” Elizabeth Gail Dobbs sat up in bed, her hazel eyes wide. The morning sun peeked through her bedroom window, making the walls brighter. “I have it!” she said louder as she flung back the pink sheet and light blanket, then leaped out of bed.

Her yellow cotton nightgown touched her bony knees. Long thin arms stuck out from the sleeveless top. She smiled excitedly as she dashed down the hall to Susan’s room. Susan would want to know. This time Susan would want to be awakened. Still, Libby hesitated at the side of Susan’s bed. Maybe Susan would be angry. But Libby couldn’t wait. The idea was fantastic!

Before Libby completely lost her nerve she

grabbed Susan's slender shoulder and shook her. "Susan, wake up! I have it!"

Susan jerked free and covered her head with her pillow.

Libby sighed impatiently. "You will love my idea, Susan. Wake up!" Libby wanted to pull Susan out of bed or dump cold water on her. Instead Libby grabbed the pillow and jerked it away from Susan, leaving Susan's red-gold hair in tangles. "Will you wake up, Susan? I have it!" Libby plopped on the bed beside Susan.

"Leave me alone, Libby," mumbled Susan as she tried to cover her head again.

"Susan Vera Johnson, you'll be sorry if you don't listen to me." Libby leaned close to Susan's ear. "I know how we can make money for Lisa and Amy Parr."

Susan's eyes snapped open and she pushed herself up. "How? How, Libby?" Her eyes were as blue as the summer sky outside her window.

Libby hugged herself excitedly. "You and I will give birthday parties here on the farm. We can take children for wagon rides or hikes."

"And have picnics in back of the pines," chimed in Susan, her cheeks flushed with excitement. "Play games, ride horses. Oh, Libby! What a great idea!"

"I know Mom and Dad will let us have birthday parties." Libby sighed happily. "We prayed for a way to make money to help Lisa keep her baby. Now Mrs. Wilkens won't be able to make Lisa give Amy up."

Libby thought of the many foster homes she'd been in during the past six years. She had not been happy or loved until the Johnson family had prayed her into their home several months ago. It would be terrible if baby Amy Parr had to be placed in a foster home where she wouldn't be loved. Libby shivered. Being unloved hurt as much as the beatings she'd received from her mother.

"We'll help Lisa buy food and clothes for Amy," said Susan dreamily. "Then when her husband, Brian, comes back home again, he will find a happy wife and baby." Susan shook her head slowly. "I feel so sorry for Lisa. She married Brian when her parents told her not to. Now he just walked out on her. I sure hope she's right about him coming home soon. I heard Mom say that he might never come back."

Tears stung Libby's eyes, and she blinked hard to keep from crying. Her father had walked out when she was three years old, and she'd never seen him again. She thought of

the shiny puzzle box on her desk that he'd sent her on her twelfth birthday last Valentine's Day.

Her father had been killed in a car accident. He'd prepared the box for her before his death. It had contained secrets, along with letters from him, and had helped Libby understand him. She didn't want Amy Parr to grow up not knowing her dad.

"How will we find customers for birthday parties?" asked Susan as she squirmed around to a more comfortable position.

"We'll advertise in the newspaper like Ben does for his Christmas tree business." Libby jumped off the bed and stood with her bare feet apart, her hands clasped in front of her. "I know of someone right now who would be glad to have a party here."

Susan leaned forward eagerly. "Who?"

"Jason Thornton. He's going to be seven on Friday. Yesterday in church I heard Mrs. Thornton tell Mom that she is going crazy trying to plan a party for Jason and all his friends. We can call her and ask if we can plan the party for her. Mom will help us decide how much to charge." Libby could not stand still another minute. "I'm going to get dressed right now, then call Mrs. Thornton."

Susan laughed as she jumped out of bed. "Maybe you'd better wait until at least nine. She might hate getting out of bed as much as I do."

By nine o'clock Libby had finished her outdoor chores, eaten breakfast, and practiced her piano for twenty minutes. She got up from the piano as the grandfather clock in the hall bonged nine times. She saw Vera look up from writing a letter at her small desk. "Now can I call, Mom?"

Vera nodded with a smile. "I'm sure Barb Thornton is up by now. I'm glad you thought of having birthday parties. I know you and Susan will do a good job."

"What if she says no?" asked Libby, picking up the telephone receiver. She looked at the notepad where she'd written the phone number when she'd first walked downstairs.

"You have to take chances when you go into business for yourself." Vera tapped the end of the yellow ballpoint pen against her hand.

"Never be afraid to do something. If you never try anything, you never accomplish anything."

Libby's heart raced as she dialed the number, then waited breathlessly until Mrs. Thornton answered.

Libby licked her dry lips, then told Mrs. Thornton her plan. It was hard to breathe as she waited for the woman's answer. What if she said no? What if she laughed at the idea? Libby looked wildly around for Susan. Why hadn't Susan made the call? Mrs. Thornton would agree to Susan's plan. Maybe she wouldn't agree to any plan made by a welfare kid, a kid nobody wanted.

Libby took a deep breath. But the Johnsons wanted her. They loved her!

"Libby," said Mrs. Thornton finally, "I think you have a wonderful idea. I'll be glad to leave it in your hands. Would 20 boys and girls be too many?"

Libby sank to the chair next to the phone. "Oh, no! Twenty would be great. We'll see you Friday at one o'clock."

"And if it rains?" Mrs. Thornton sounded as if that would be a fatal disaster.

"Then we'll have it in the basement, and the kids can play games and have a cookout right in the fireplace." Libby looked quickly at Vera to see if she agreed. Vera nodded and Libby felt like laughing with delight.

Just as she replaced the receiver, Libby heard a sound behind her and turned around. Susan stood there with her eyes round, her

face pale. "Did I hear you say 20 kids are coming?" she asked hoarsely.

"Sure."

"Twenty! And you and I are going to take care of 20 kids?" Susan pressed her hands against her cheeks. "We can't even take care of Toby and Kevin without Ben's help."

Vera laughed. "You're exaggerating, Susan. Your little brothers aren't that hard to take care of."

"We'll ask them if they want to help us," said Libby.

"I don't think they'll have time," said Vera slowly. "They're going to take care of the garden and have a vegetable stand."

Libby became nervous, thinking about the big job ahead. She wanted to call Mrs. Thornton right back and tell her they'd already changed their minds, but then she remembered Amy Parr. With her pointed chin high, Libby looked directly at Susan. "We can do it, Susan. We can have a birthday party for Jason Thornton on Friday. And it will be the best birthday party he ever had!"

Finally Susan smiled. "You're right, Libby."

Libby managed a shaky grin. She *had* to be right. Little Amy Parr needed their help.