

1

Ready or Not . . . Here It Comes!

Chippie the parakeet never saw it coming. One minute he was peacefully perched in his cage. The next he was sucked in, washed up, and blown over.

The problems began when Chippie's owner decided to clean Chippie's cage with a vacuum cleaner. She removed the attachment from the end of the hose and stuck it in the cage.

The phone rang, and she turned to pick it up. She had barely said "Hello" when Chippie got sucked in.

The bird owner gasped, put down the phone, turned off the vacuum, and opened the bag. There was Chippie—stunned but still alive.

Since the bird was covered with dust, she grabbed him and raced to the bathroom, turned on the faucet, and held him under the running water.

*One minute we're seated in familiar territory
with a song on our lips. Then
a phone call comes: "What are we
going to do about Mother?"*

Then, realizing that Chippie was soaked and shivering, she did what any compassionate bird owner would do. She reached for the hair dryer and blasted the pet with hot air.

Poor Chippie never knew what hit him! After that, he never sang much but just sat and stared. It's not hard to see why. Sucked in, washed up, and blown over—that's enough to steal the song from the stoutest heart.¹

Can you relate to Chippie? I can. One minute we're seated in familiar territory with a song on our lips. Then a phone call comes: "What are we going to do about Mother?" Suddenly we're sucked into the black cavern of uncertainty, doused with the cold water of reality, and scorched with the hot air of anxiety.

It happened to me. Seated comfortably in familiar territory, I had a

song on my lips. Anticipation of what life would be like if I ever had to care for my parents never even entered my mind. I had no plan for handling these responsibilities.

My parents were in their late 70s. Each time I went home for a visit, Daddy seemed more frail due to his Parkinson's disease. Mother exhibited the initial stages of dementia, which was causing mental regression, and she was frustrated by her inability to complete daily tasks. I couldn't ignore the signals that something was wrong. Ready or not, the challenge of parent care was upon me.

After careful deliberation and intense prayer, I began making arrangements to move my parents in with my family—the best solution for our situation. In the spirit of the moment, my family and I willingly joined the great army of persons caring for aging parents and grandparents. But nothing in our basic life training up to that point had prepared us for the task.

Until then, *ostomies*, *Foley catheters*, *duodenum dressings*, *decubitus ulcers*, and *incontinence* were irrelevant to my life. But they were about to become everyday reality.

Until then, *bathtub safety rails*, *transfer benches*, *deluxe portable commodes*, *folding walkers*, *flotation cushions*, *Depends shields*, *safety vests*, and *ostomy pouches* were unheard-of terms for me and my family. Now, these products were in our home.

Until then, we were free to set our own daily schedule. Now our lives revolved around pills, bathroom needs, doctors' appointments, balancing checkbooks, medical forms, and the myriad concerns involved in caring for a loved one.

If you're reading this book, it's likely that you're either providing care for an aging parent or you sense that the possibility is on the horizon. You're not alone!

*My parents will never get old;
they'll never get sick;
nothing will ever change.*

Margaret Close and her husband care for both their mothers. One of their mothers lives in a retirement center and requires assistance with her activities of daily living, so they shop for her groceries, pay her bills, do her laundry, and prepare medications so she can take them correctly.

The other suffers with serious health problems and needs help with home repairs, health insurance forms, business affairs, and other activities.

Melody Watkins, an only child, assumed full responsibility for her mother when her mother became unable to make decisions for herself. Iris Edwards is 76 and caring for her 99-year-old mother. The stories are endless.

According to a survey by the National Alliance for Caregiving and the American Association of Retired Persons, an estimated 22.4 million households in the United States—nearly one in four—are now providing care to a relative or friend aged 50 or older or have provided care during the previous 12 months.² Other surveys suggest that today's baby boomers—adults born between the mid-1940s and the mid-1960s—likely will spend more years caring for a dependent parent (an average of 18 years) than for their own children (17 years).

Debbie and Jim, for example, are both in their mid-30s. They have been married 10 years and parent three young children. Both had child-rearing training, but nothing in their life experiences prepared them for taking care of Jim's 70-year-old mother. Debbie relates, "We're moving my mother-in-law in to live with us. I can't imagine the adjustments this will mean. I don't know anything about caring for an older adult."

Adult children typically avoid the aging issue by thinking, *My parents will never get old; they'll never get sick; nothing will ever change*. But chances are that you're going to face the possibility of becoming your parents' teacher, monitor, and caregiver. Ready or not, here comes the challenge of parent care!