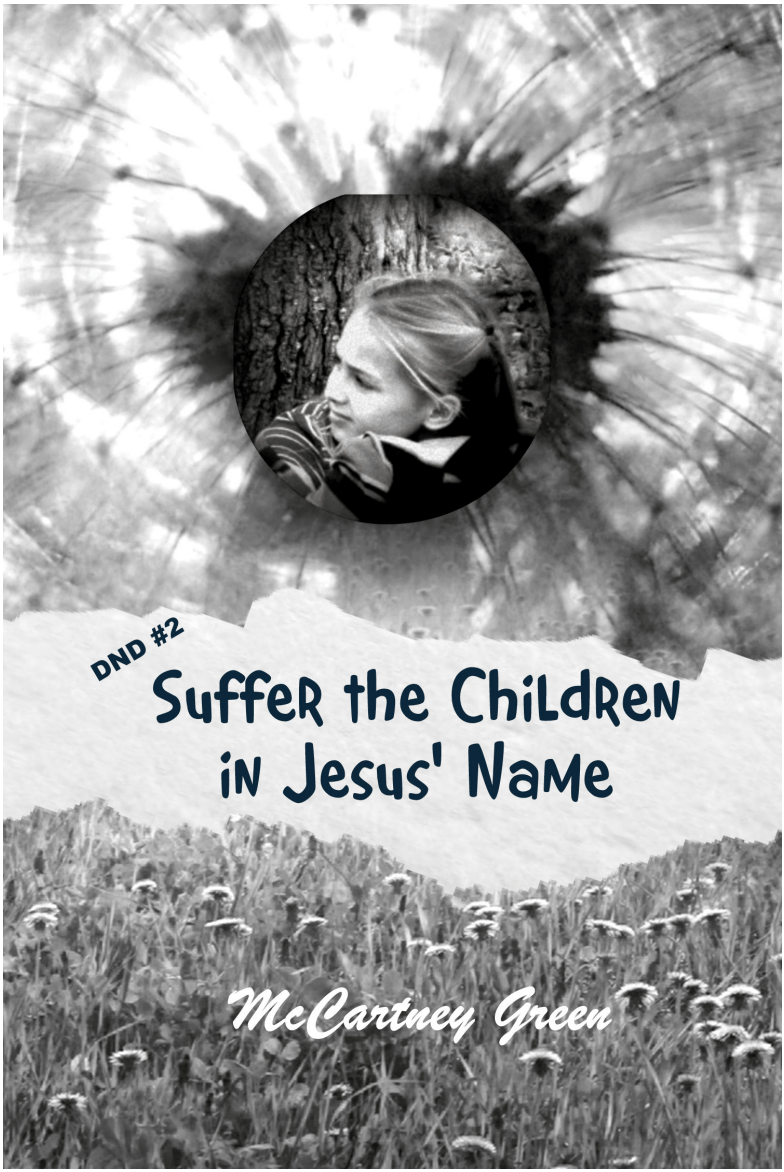

DND #2
Suffer the Children in Jesus' Name
McCartney Green

# DND #2

# Suffer the Children-In Jesus' Name

*McCartney Green*

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I'm supposed to say that, but really, share, share, share. You may share this work in its entirety to any and all.

This is a work of fiction, or is it? Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are *used fictitiously*, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is either unintentional or a very cool synchronicity!

Dedicated to all the now grown-up “little Carolines” out there. You can heal. Being a victim no longer serves you.

Jim, Libby, JP and Cari Still... I will always love you!

## Special Dedication

Like the Stillwaters in the story, there have been strong people in my life who were there for me without ever knowing how much their presence meant. They weren’t trying to make a statement or get glory, they were simply doing the right thing. This is dedicated to all those people who simply do the right thing, even when it’s hard. You are the true heroes.

“Then were there brought unto him little children, that he should put his hands on them, and pray: and the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.”

Matthew 19:13-14

Note to Readers:

The story you're about to read covers many topics and issues including child abuse, rape, alcoholism, mental illness, and even touches on incest. My intention is not to dwell on these negative things but to help those who have been touched by these things by pulling them out of hiding, shining a light to expose them, and hopefully bring the injured parties closer to God and to heal in Jesus' mighty name. My intention is also to remind everyone that real love does exist. It is beautiful and it is possible.

"When his disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved? But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible."
Matthew 19:25-26

"The course of true love never did run smooth."

~William Shakespeare~

# Chapter 1

"Caroline! Get down here and find my glasses."

Virginia Jones stumbled around the kitchen, knocking over dishes and mumbling obscenities, the pungent odor of alcohol and sweat wafting around her as she moved. "Caroline, get your skinny butt down here, now!"

Suppressing a shudder, little Caroline Jones closed the book she'd been assigned to read over the Christmas holidays by her seventh grade teacher. Setting the book carefully aside, she rose, reluctantly leaving the relative safety of her little room. Using a practiced stealth, she moved down the stairs of the small townhouse and peeked around the corner to peer at her mother. Disheveled and filthy in her oversized orange and yellow floral house dress, her mother shoved dirty cups and plates across the kitchen counter, apparently in an effort to find the missing eyeglasses.

When Caroline crept into the room, her mother looked up sharply. "Well, what are you staring at? Find my glasses!"

Caroline swallowed hard. "Mama," she whispered, "your glasses are on your head." When her mother looked at her as if she'd grown horns, she realized she would have to retrieve the glasses herself. Approaching cautiously, she reached a shaky hand up, plucked the glasses off her mother's head and held them out to her.

Virginia snatched them away, but before Caroline could move safely out of reach, her mother grabbed her cheeks in one iron hand. "Are you being smart?"

"No, ma'am." Balling her hands into fists to keep them from trembling, she tried to hide her fear.

Her mother held her there several moments as if she were trying to decide whether Caroline's actions warranted some sort of punishment. When she finally released her, Caroline quietly sighed with relief. As she watched her mother weave her way toward the front room, she wondered if she could sneak back up the stairs.

It had been a horrible week. Her mother had been worse than ever, drinking herself into a stupor every night. Usually, Caroline was able to help her up to bed before she passed out, but two days ago, on Christmas Day, she didn't make it. Halfway up the steps her mother simply dropped. They both ended up at the bottom of the steps. Caroline had tried to drag her over to the couch, but her mother was too heavy for Caroline's ninety-five-pound body. She ended up covering her with a quilt and tucking a pillow under her head.

The next morning there had been hell to pay, though Caroline was used to it. Since her father had left them several years earlier, the two weeks of Christmas vacation had been torture. There was less than a week to go before school started again, and unlike the other kids, Caroline looked forward to going back to school and the reprieve it would offer. However, this next week wasn't gonna be all bad, for Caroline was about to go on an adventure.

Tomorrow, she would get to leave the dingy little townhouse apartment for four glorious days. The couple for whom she regularly babysat was taking her with them on a trip to Tennessee. She was to help take care of their children over the New Year's weekend. Caroline's mom had resisted the idea until Caroline reminded her it would mean extra money.

The family, Jim and Sylvia Stillwater, shared the same townhouse apartment building along with Caroline and her mom and a few other families. Their front doors all opened onto a tiny common front yard. The day the Stillwaters had moved in, Caroline had watched them, first from her bedroom window and later from the small porch. When the Stillwaters' two-year-old had started for the street without anyone seeing, Caroline had seen and dashed after her and scooped her up. The Stillwaters were grateful and the children took to Caroline immediately. It wasn't long after that she found herself employed to be their everyday babysitter.

Caroline thought the Stillwaters were the best people she had ever known, and their two children, Paul and little sister Lynn, seemed more like Caroline's own brother and sister. Paul was now four and Lynn, three. Though Caroline herself was only twelve, the Stillwaters trusted her and that meant the world to Caroline. She wasn't alone with the children for very long each day. Mr. Stillwater worked during the day and was home by five. Mrs. Stillwater had to leave for her job just after three in the afternoon, so Caroline was in charge of the children for less

than two hours each day.

The moment she arrived home from school, she would dump her books and head over to the Stillwaters'. She loved watching Mrs. Stillwater get ready for work, putting on her makeup, ironing her skirt, curling her hair. She was beautiful, Caroline thought, and when she left each day, she would kiss her children so sweetly. Somewhere in the back of her mind, Caroline remembered her own mother doing that when she'd been little. That, however, had been before her father had left them.

Her memory of him grew a little dimmer every day. Had there even been a man who laughed with her and tossed Caroline into the air, promising never to let her fall when she'd screamed in both fear and delight? No more dark memories now, Caroline thought, drawing a deep breath. Tomorrow, she and the Stillwaters would be driving from Atlanta to the Tennessee mountains and no matter what she ended up doing, she was sure it would be better than what lay in store for her here at home.

"Caroline!"

Rousing herself from her reverie, she hurried into the living room. "Yes, Mama?"

"Where are my car keys?"

The question put dread in Caroline's heart, for even if it meant another beating, there was no way she could let her mother drive in her current condition. She might kill herself, or even worse, kill someone else. And even though there had been times Caroline had wished her mother dead, she didn't really mean it.

"Well girl? Are you gonna just stand there like some idiot? Where are they?"

"I– I don't know," she lied.

Her mother moved toward her. "I want them and I want them now!" she screeched.

Before Caroline had a chance to answer, the woman swung, knocking Caroline to the floor. She rose shakily, licking at a small drop of blood on her lip. Slowly, she raised her eyes to meet her mother's, bracing for the next blow, but she could see in her mother's eyes it would be a different path this time.

"Oh, oh, baby, I'm sorry, baby," her mother cried, with tears in her eyes. She reached for Caroline, grabbing her by the shoulders and pulling her hard up against her. "I'm so sorry. I'm just so tired, you

know? I just need to run to the store to get me something to help me sleep. You understand, don't ya? Mama didn't mean to knock you down, baby, but you know you need to help me when I ask you to. It's just me and you, baby girl. Just me and you. We gotta stand together."

"It's okay," Caroline comforted, pulling away. "I know you didn't mean it. C'mon, I'll help you find the keys."

She took her mother by the hand and led her to sit on the sofa.

"Let's see now, maybe they're under here." Caroline lifted the cushion of the overstuffed chair. She glanced at her mom then turned to shuffle through some newspapers on a table, pretending to look for the car keys. It took only a few minutes for her mother to finally pass out. In a reversal of roles, Caroline covered her with the old quilt she'd brought down two days earlier. She rubbed a gentle hand against her mother's cheek. "It's okay, Mama," she whispered. She grabbed a sweater for herself and slipped outside. She needed fresh air.

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"Not much longer now, Caro," Mrs. Stillwater called back to her.

Caroline smiled at the news, and at her nickname. The children had decided that "Caroline" was too long and too hard to say, so "Caro" it had been from the first week she'd known them. Conversely, she'd told them their names were too short and from now on Paul was Paul-a-kalooza and Lynn was Lynelli-belli which had led to many giggles and tickling matches.

Stiff from the long drive, Caro took a moment to stretch out her legs. She'd kept the children laughing and giggling for many miles. Finally, after a rest stop, the children had wound down and were nodding off in their car seats. Caro had been singing silly songs softly to her charges in the backseat of the minivan when Mrs. Stillwater pointed out their exit sign.

Caro had no idea where they were except somewhere outside of Nashville, in the Tennessee mountains. They would be visiting old college friends of the Stillwaters who lived on a farm, in "the middle of nowhere," as Mr. Stillwater put it. Caro would be in charge of keeping the children as occupied as possible while the parents partied in the front room on New Year's Eve.

The children woke once the van left the interstate, so Caro occupied them by teaching them to count cows, then telephone poles, then gas stations, until they were all counted out. They turned onto a dirt road and laughed as the bumpy road made their voice boxes vibrate
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while they sang a note.

Around the next bend they came upon a clearing. Caro's mouth fell open. The view was awesome. They were on a mountainside, a patchwork of fenced off fields in the distance. "Oh my," Caro said softly. "It's like being at the top of the world."

Mrs. Stillwater smiled at Caro. "Pretty, isn't it? In the spring those fields are lush and green and– see that long line of trees? Those will be covered with tiny pink or white flowers. It's probably hard to imagine, but believe me, it's beautiful."

Caro had no trouble imagining. It was already beautiful. Up on the mountainside, it really did seem like she was on top of the world looking down on her kingdom. She turned her head to peer up toward the top of the hill. That must be the house, she thought, only it was nothing like Caro had pictured it. Mr. Stillwater had said it was a farmhouse and Caro had thought of an old rustic building, the wood graying, maybe an old red barn beside it. This house was nothing like that. It was one of those modern houses she'd seen in magazines, with lots of huge windows that made it look like it was made of glass.

Caro peered through that glass as they circled around the drive and pulled up to the front of the house. It looked warm. Warm and inviting. She could see lots of wood. Wide wooden beams across the ceiling and wood shelves lined with books. There was a pale blue sofa with lots of bright pillows and she could see a fire in the fireplace, calling for her to come and warm herself.

The van came to a halt and Caro immediately turned to help the children out of their car seats. Everyone piled out and Caro followed the Stillwaters up the steps of an enormous wraparound porch. They didn't have to knock. The door swung open and a beautiful lady with dark hair and bright blue eyes was laughing and hugging and pulling everyone in out of the cold December air.

Mr. Stillwater heartily shook the hand of a large man with a giant smile. Paul and Lynn were being hugged and kissed and told how they'd been just babies when seen last.

The beautiful lady finally turned to peer at Caroline. "And who is this pretty little thing?"

Caroline quickly looked behind her, making everyone laugh. Realizing the lady had been speaking about her, she blushed.

Jim Stillwater gently placed his hand on Caro's shoulder. "This is the amazing young lady I told you about. We simply could not get

along without her. Caro, I'd like you to meet my good friends, Joe and Ellen Smith."

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Smith," Caroline said softly.

"Oh, please, call us Joe and Ellen," the woman answered.

"Oh, she won't do it," Sylvia Stillwater said with a laugh. "She has southern manners that won't quit. She's known us for a year now and won't call us anything but Mr. and Mrs. Stillwater."

Ellen smiled kindly. "Well, that's just fine then. C'mon in the kitchen now. I bet y'all are hungry."

"Where are the kids?" Jim Stillwater asked Joe.

"Molly and Ben are over at the neighbor's house trying out their new PlayStation. Tobias is out on the tractor doin' chores but should be in soon seeing as how it's lunchtime and I swear that boy never misses a meal."

Caro peered around wide-eyed as they were ushered inside. She'd never seen a home so lovely. In the kitchen they were served thick meat sandwiches and bowls of steaming hot soup. Caro couldn't keep her eyes from taking in every detail. They sat at a huge shiny wood table. The room was so big it seemed like a giant lived here. In the kitchen where she lived there was barely room for two people to stand. Here, along with the large table, was a bar with stools, a computer desk with a chair, and still enough room left to ride a bike in circles around a cooking island that was right in the middle of the floor. Shiny, fancy-looking pots and pans hung over the cooking island and off against one wall was a beautiful window seat. Caro could imagine snuggling up there to read or dream or just be alone. She sighed. It was the most wonderful room she'd ever been in.

While the adults laughed and told stories, Caro made short work of her own lunch and then turned to encourage the children to eat. When she realized the grownups wanted to adjourn to the living room, Caro promised to stay with the children while they finished up. For once, the children were being quiet while they ate, so quiet that Caro was able to hear the conversation taking place in the other room, though she wished she couldn't.

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"Y'all must be tired."

"Not too bad. We all had a nap."

"All?" Jim questioned.

Sylvia laughed. "All except Jim who was driving."
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"And Caro," Jim added. "When the kids fell asleep she pulled out her book and read."

"Caro, what a pretty little girl she is," Ellen said softly. "That blond hair and those big brown eyes just look heavenly together, but she's awfully thin, isn't she?"

"She is thin," Sylvia agreed. "I know things are tight for her and her mom. I keep my refrigerator full of food but still, she hardly ever helps herself. We guess that she's just not a big eater."

"Or maybe it's those southern manners you were talkin' about," Joe put in. "Where's her father?"

Jim shrugged. "Good question. Never seen him. Caro's not a big talker and neither is her mother."

Sylvia nodded. "From what I've been able to gather he left them several years ago."

"He doesn't send child support?" Joe asked.

Sylvia shook her head. "I don't think they even know where he is. Caro's mom works in an office in downtown Atlanta and little Caroline has had to be very self-sufficient. She's quite mature for her age, and she's a real sweetie."

"She seems to be," Ellen agreed. "Her hair is such a pretty blond, they could use it on the front of a box of hair color. I'd like to trim it up, though. When it gets that long it starts to look stringy."

Joe laughed. "My Ellen, she's still trying to make people over."

"Saving the world from fashion mistakes one person at a time," Ellen said with a giggle.

In the kitchen, Caro finished up with the children and worked on clearing the lunch dishes, trying her best to ignore the whispers coming from the other room since she was pretty sure she wasn't supposed to be hearing what was being said. She caught a glimpse of herself in the glass of the double oven and tugged on a lock of her hair, trying to see what Mrs. Smith saw.

"Hello."

Drawing in a sharp breath, Caro swung around. The glass she'd been holding slipped from her fingers and shattered on the floor. A boy, the owner of the voice that had just startled her, reached out toward her. She ducked instinctively and he withdrew his hand.

"Everybody okay in there?" Ellen called from the other room.

Caroline could feel the blood drain from her face. She'd been there a little over an hour and had already messed up. The boy's eyes met

hers and to her surprise, he winked at her.

"Everything's fine, Mom," he answered, kneeling to pick up the pieces of glass. "I just dropped a glass. No biggie. I'm pickin' it up."

"Well, be careful, please."

"Yes, ma'am." He looked up at the girl. Her mouth formed a perfect "O." He smiled at her. "What? It was my fault."

She shook her head.

"Yeah, it was. If I hadn't scared you, you wouldn't have dropped it." He stood with the pieces and went to the trash can. "You must be the one who's gonna babysit tomorrow night. My name's Toby. What's yours?"

He turned and held out his hand. Caro shook it timidly. "Caro."

"Caro? Well, Caro, it's nice to meet ya."

She smiled. He's very nice, she thought. And very cute.

"Caro, I wanna get down," Lynn demanded.

"Let me get a broom first," Toby said.

While the boy swept up, Caro turned to take care of the little ones, wiping their hands and faces, helping them down and patting their bottoms as they ran to join their parents. Caro quickly cleaned up the rest of the lunch mess and stood in the threshold watching the children, while behind her, Toby fixed his own sandwich. He passed her, sandwich in hand, as he entered the living room to greet his parents and company. Caro watched him walk. He strolled slowly, casually, as if he had all the time in the world to move from one place to another.

"Hello there Aunt Sylvia, Uncle Jim."

His voice was deep like a man's, which was probably what had startled her, yet, he wasn't a man. Mrs. Stillwater had said the Smiths' oldest son was close to Caro's age. He looks like his mom, Caro thought, with the same black hair and blue eyes, but he's tall like his dad. And he's cute, she thought again.

Mr. and Mrs. Stillwater rose and looked him over. Mr. Stillwater shook his hand and mussed his hair and talked about what a fine young man he'd grown into. Mrs. Stillwater hugged him hard and kissed both his cheeks and said he was still just a little boy to her and always would be.

"Honey," his mother began. "Would you mind straightening up the lunch dishes for me so I can show our company around and get them settled?"

"It's already done."

"Oh, thank you, sweetheart. I hadn't realized you'd been in the kitchen that long."

"I haven't. She did it." He jerked a thumb back at Caro.

She looked down immediately, her cheeks warming.

"Well, thank you, Caro. I'm beginning to see why the Stillwaters think you're so indispensable."

She nodded politely.

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Brow creased, Toby studied the girl from his bedroom window as he changed his shirt for dinner. She'd taken little Paul and Lynn out to play on the tire swing in the backyard. She was having to run beside Lynn to make sure she didn't fall. Caro's long blond hair blew all around her in the cold wind making it a tangled mess. The spots of red on her cheeks were evidence of just how cold it was. Even though he couldn't hear what they were saying, he could tell she was trying to talk the children into coming back inside and they kept talking her into one more turn. He frowned when he realized an ugly gray sweater that was minus a few buttons was her only protection against the icy wind.

Rag-a-muffin. That's the word his mother would use to describe her. Not unkindly though. She would mean it in a charitable way, like she wishes she could do something about it. He considered it. Yep. Definitely a rag-a-muffin. His heart went out to her. He thought about how scared she'd looked earlier when she thought she would be in trouble for breaking a glass, and how she'd flinched when he'd reached toward her. He shook his head. Something wasn't quite right about her, and man, when she'd smiled at him in the kitchen, well, it was definitely weird. It was as if the sun had burst out from behind the clouds. His mother used to say that about his little sister Molly when she'd been just a baby. "Watch," his mom would say. "Her little smile just lights up the room." He was beginning to understand.

"Well, I don't care what you say, I *like* her!" The little sister he'd just been thinking about was yelling out in the hallway, probably at his younger brother, he mused. Toby made his way out to the hall where they argued.

"Hey, what's going on, guys?"

"Ben says that girl is ugly and I think he's being mean," five-year-old Molly argued.

"What girl?" Toby asked.

"The girl that's visiting us," Ben answered. "You know, that Caro
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girl. What a dumb name."

Toby winked at Molly. "You're absolutely right, Moll, Ben *is* being mean. Mom's not gonna be too happy to learn that Ben is being rude to a guest, huh?"

"Man," Ben protested. "I didn't say anything to the girl. I was only talking to big-mouth here."

"It's all the same, Ben."

"Well, you don't want me to lie, do you? She's skinny and her hair is ugly and she doesn't even wear a coat when she goes outside. I mean, how dumb is that?"

"Ben, sometimes there are things that..." His voice trailed off as the one they spoke of appeared on the stair landing. Her face seemed pale, and sad, and Toby thought he saw her chin quiver before she smiled nervously.

"I, uh, sorry, I was just coming up to get washed up before dinner," she explained.

They moved out of her way so she could enter the bathroom.

"Now you've gone and done it, Ben," Toby said, his voice low.

Molly's hands went to her hips, imitating her mother. "I bet she heard you. I'm tellin' Mom."

The two ran downstairs, still arguing.

Toby was also pretty sure Caro had heard the comments his eight-year-old brother had so callously made. So? Why should he care so much? He liked girls and all, but she was only a little girl and he was practically a man at fourteen. Still, somehow, for some reason, she got to him. His mom said she was twelve, but she seemed older. Ancient maybe. And no matter what Ben said, she was nowhere near ugly. Especially when she smiled. She was thin, he conceded. Her brown eyes seemed too large for her narrow face and her hair looked as if it hadn't been brushed in weeks, but still, she wasn't ugly. The kids at school would give him a real hard time if they knew he was even slightly interested. Which he wasn't. Not really.

He wondered what it was about her that affected him. Lips pursed, he thought about it. Her eyes. It was her eyes, he decided. They reminded him of a wounded animal. Much to his mother's dismay, he was always rescuing 'critters.' He'd find an injured squirrel or an old homeless dog and would bring them home and nurse them back to health. He couldn't stand to see them suffer. Now, this girl was making him feel like she was some wild creature that needed to be rescued. He

shouldn't care, but he couldn't help it. Oh, what the heck. It didn't matter anyway because in a few days, she would be gone. Still, for now, he figured he could do something. He could apologize for what Ben said.

The bathroom door opened and she stepped out. Her head jerked up, obviously surprised to find him still there in the hall.

"Hello, again," he said. "I didn't mean to scare you."

She smiled.

Yep, Toby thought. Her face really did light up, like someone turned on a switch. Actually, if you took just her face, separated it from the scraggly hair and the too thin body and put it on the front of one of those magazines his mother liked to read, she could probably be like a model.

"It's okay," she said softly. "You're pretty good at it."

His brow drew together. He'd forgotten what he'd said. He glanced up at her. She was giggling. A joke? Oh, yeah. About the way he keeps scaring her.

"Yeah," he grinned. "I suppose I am. That's twice already. Um..." His mind stalled. *Come on stupid, make polite conversation*. "Uh, so, how do you like Tennessee?"

She sighed deeply. "It's so pretty here. Your home is really nice."

Her voice was soft, her Georgia accent very pronounced and somehow different from the Tennessee southern drawl he was used to hearing, though he couldn't pinpoint the difference.

He sat on the top step and patted the space next to him and was surprised when she accepted the invitation and eased down to sit.

"So, listen," he began. "I know you heard what Ben said."

"It doesn't matter," she jumped in. "Kids can be cruel." She looked away and shrugged. "It doesn't really bother me."

"Well, we don't like for anyone in our family to be cruel, so, I apologize for him, if you'll accept."

She shrugged. "Okay."

Well that was easy. They sat silently, side by side, hands resting on their knees, their chins on their hands. Reaching down he wiped some dirt from the toe of her shoe. He raised his hand, looking around for somewhere to wipe the mud and grinning, started toward her. She laughed. "Don't you dare!"

Smiling, he shrugged and wiped the mud on his jeans. "It snowed last week so it's still muddy outside, I guess."

"I hope I didn't track mud on the carpet," she said, the worry creeping into her voice.

He grinned. "Well if ya did, it sure wouldn't be the first time, with my little brother and sister and all their friends comin' in and out all the time. You got any brothers or sisters?"

"No. It's just me." Caro stood. "Guess I'd better go. I'm supposed to be watching Paul and Lynn. They get into stuff pretty fast."

"Wait," Toby said, grabbing her hand.

She looked down at his hand holding hers and back up at him with a very grown-up look of impatience on her face. Toby wasn't sure why he'd tried to stop her from going. And he sure as heck didn't understand why he had hold of her hand and felt as if he couldn't let it go. She pulled away first and hurried away, leaving Toby to wonder what had just happened. Whatever it was, he'd just decided it was dangerous and he would steer clear the rest of the night.

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The next morning found Caro in such a state of panic that she actually argued with Mrs. Stillwater, something she'd never ordinarily do. The women had decided on a trip to the mall to get new outfits, including Caroline. Her mind was frantic with 'what-ifs.' Like, what if they want to know what size she wears? How can she explain that she really isn't sure since all her clothes came from the local church charity? Then they'll make her the center of attention, something she despised, and– and– oh no, what if someone wanted to step into a dressing room with her? They would see.

"But I just can't go shopping with you. I promised Paul and Lynn I would play 'horsey' with them," Caro protested, saying the first thing that came to her mind which she realized was absolutely feeble.

"It's okay," Mrs. Stillwater soothed. "It's not often us girls get to have a day to ourselves. The men will be able to handle the kids just fine. Besides, Molly wants you to come. She doesn't have any sisters and she really likes you. Come on, Caro, it's New Year's Eve. Everyone needs to be gorgeous for New Year's Eve."

"Why? All I'm gonna do is babysit."

"And you're gonna look beautiful while you're doing it," Mrs. Smith insisted as they dragged the reluctant young lady off to the mall.

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Ellen Smith was having Caro try on everything in the store, or so it seemed to Caroline. She tried to be polite as Mrs. Smith chattered

away, working her way through racks of clothing. "Of course, we must get the right kind of shoes to wear with those jeans, and a jacket and," she tapped her chin, "I think that red sweater will do nicely."

Caroline had been able to avoid the disaster of having someone accompany her into the dressing room by claiming extreme modesty. However, in exchange for letting her dress in private, she had to come out of the dressing room to model each outfit. It seemed to Caro that the stack of potential winners was never-ending. Finally, though, Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Stillwater settled on a couple of outfits for Caro. They talked her into wearing her new jeans and sweater while they continued the shopping trip.

Caro had begun to breathe a sigh of relief when the women focused their attention on Molly. Unfortunately, that didn't last long. Just as Caro had begun to relax, she found herself in a hair salon. Suddenly, she was whisked off to have her hair washed, conditioned and trimmed.

The women 'ooh'd,' and 'aah'd' over how shiny Caro's hair was and how "bouncy" now that a few inches had been cut. Caroline only shrugged, embarrassed by the attention. She hated being the center of attention. She hated even more that they were treating her as if she were a charity case.

"I know," Mrs. Smith said, her voice filled with excitement. "Let's get your ears pierced!"

Surprisingly, it was Mrs. Stillwater who stepped in this time. "Oh, I don't think Caro's mom would like that."

When all eyes turned toward her, Caro shrugged nonchalantly. "Mom won't care."

Caroline didn't know why in the world she'd said it. Maybe it was pride. Maybe it was wishful thinking. Whatever the reason, it was false. Her mother would definitely care. She tried to backpedal and talk her way out of it, but she was no match for Mrs. Smith. She'd had to desperately blink back the tears when the steel posts shot through her earlobes.

By the time they arrived back at the house, Caroline was decked out in new jeans, sweater, shoes and a soft, warm, quilted jacket. She had other packages, too: another whole outfit, shampoos, cosmetics, underwear. Her hair shone, her ears sparkled and she was mortified.

Everyone in the house crowded around the kitchen table to see their purchases. Molly's new dress, Ellen's gorgeous leather handbag,

Sylvia's 'strappy' shoes. Time and again Ellen pointed out Caro's new haircut and her new outfit. By the third time someone said, "just look at how pretty Caro looks in that red sweater," she thought she would shrivel up and die. At least she hoped she would. Caro was immensely relieved when she was finally allowed to go up to her room.

But Ellen wasn't done yet.

"Toby, do me a favor, dear."

Toby frowned because he didn't like the sound of that. "What is it, Mom?"

"Well, honey, Caro seems to be such a shy child, don't you think? And I was just wondering, since you're so close to her age, would you just go up and talk to her? You know, so she doesn't feel left out and alone while she's here."

He rolled his eyes at his mother.

She smiled. "My heart just goes out to her."

"Your heart goes out to everyone, Mom."

"You have no room to talk, young man. You and your animals. Please go talk to her, Toby. She seems upset. Maybe you could find out what's bothering her."

He sighed. "Okay, I'll talk to her. But don't ask me to take her to the party tonight. Amy's gonna be there and it'll ruin everything."

His mother smiled at him. "Oh, I wouldn't dream of ruining everything. Besides, Caro is our babysitter so she can't go to the party." She touched his cheek. "Thanks, baby. Now, go on up. I think I may have been a little too– overbearing, so make her feel better."

"You? Overbearing? Not my mom," he said sarcastically.

She smacked his rear.

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Toby knocked softly on Caro's door. When she didn't answer, he opened it and peeked in. Caroline sat cross-legged on the bed, staring out the window.

"Hey."

Her head jerked around. She started to tell him to go away, but realized she had no right to say that. After all, this was his home. Still, she didn't have to talk to him if she didn't want to, and she truly didn't want to. She didn't want to talk to anyone. Why couldn't everyone just leave her alone?

He drew a deep breath and smiled at her as he came into the room, closing the door behind him. She watched warily as he sat down on the
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edge of the bed facing her. Turning her head away, she looked out the window and across the giant front yard as it sloped down the mountain. Toby cleared his throat, but she continued her silence. Just maybe he would get the idea that she didn't have anything to say.

"Bad day?"

Keeping her face averted, she shrugged her shoulders in answer. His voice had been soft and full of concern, when he asked the question. It sounded like he really cared. It sounded as if he thought of her as a real person and as if it were important whether she was having a bad day. That should make her feel good, so why did she suddenly feel like crying? Against her will, her eyes welled with tears. Panicked that he might see her cry, she desperately tried to force them back. She certainly couldn't turn and speak with him now. He would be able to tell she was about to cry. She would be mortified. So she kept her silence and her face averted.

Toby sighed as he sat, searching for the right words. This is impossible, he thought. She's obviously upset and with girls you never know what's gonna happen when you ask them what's wrong. Why had he promised his Mom he would talk to her? Still, he *had* promised and he now realized he was stuck. He took a breath and jumped in. "Look, I know my mom can be a little pushy sometimes, but she means well. So like, don't be mad at her."

He was met with another solid wall of silence. He watched her profile. He could see why everyone was making such a big deal about her new stuff, because she really did look pretty. Yes! That's it, he thought! Dad says to say something nice to a girl about how she looks and it'll have her eating out of his hand.

"Um, so, your new sweater is really pretty."

Her head swung around as if he'd thrown a bucket of ice water on her, and she wasn't smiling. As a matter of fact, if looks could kill, he's sure he'd be deader than that snake he'd killed out in the pasture last summer.

He rolled his eyes. Obviously, this wasn't working. Well, there certainly was no reason for her to be mad at him. He hadn't done anything to the girl. He'd gone out of his way to be kind. He'd covered for her when the glass broke. He'd apologized for Ben. Why was she giving him the silent treatment? It was his mom she was mad at, and heck, his mom wasn't really that bad. "Look, Caro, haven't you ever tried to fix anything?"

She raised her head, her eyes questioning. Encouraged that at least he had her attention, he forged on.

"You know what I mean? Like picking something up off the floor, or straightening a picture on the wall, or re-stacking the magazines on the table so they're just right?"

She remained silent, but her eyes were attentive.

"See, that's all Mom was doing. Straightening up, restacking, fixin' things. Mom was just fixin' things, that's all."

Her chin quivered. That wasn't quite the reaction he'd been hoping for. He began to feel a real panic coming on. *Oh, Lord, don't cry.* He could kick himself. Man, this wasn't coming out right at all. Okay, he thought, just calm down and try again.

"Caro, Mom didn't mean any harm. You see, she sees things that she thinks need doin' and she just does them. Not that I'm sayin' you need doin'– uh, I mean fixin'."

A sniffle. *Oh, gosh, she's crying. Stupid. Man, can you be any more stupid?*

He sat momentarily stunned, listening to her muffled sobs. Decisively, he stood. "Um, maybe I should go now." When she didn't answer with anything other than another loud snuffle, he turned toward the door. He was halfway out when his conscience yelled at him. COWARD! Someone might just as well have knocked him in the back of the head. Coming to an uncertain halt, he turned slowly and peered back at her. Sighing, he stepped back inside and softly closed the door.

"I, uh, I can't leave you like this." He shoved his hands in his pockets. "What in the world can I say to make you feel better?"

Feeling completely inadequate, he went to her and placed his hand on her shoulder. She flinched slightly and he realized, it wasn't him that was good at scaring her, it was her that was easily scared. He patted her shoulder softly as he eased down next to her. "Caro, you're not the only one she's ever tried to fix. Honest. At least you don't have to live with her. She tries to do something to fix me every day. Stand up straight. Learn to speak properly. Manners are important. You are not going out dressed like that." The last was said in a mock female voice. He rolled his eyes. "It never ends."

That got her attention. Caro raised her head to look at him, wiping a tear away. When she smiled timorously, he blew out a breath of relief. The crisis was over. He jumped up and grabbed the box of tissues off the dresser and placed them in her lap.

She took one, wiped her tears and blew her nose. It made such a funny trumpet sound that they both laughed.

She sniffed. "She tries to fix you?"

"Sure, but it's not like I listen to her or anything. Well, I mean, sometimes I humor her. After all, she is my mom."

Caro shrugged. "She's pretty nice and all. I guess I just felt sort of weird, like everyone was making fun of me."

"Naw, Caro, it wasn't like that. It was just that– well, you really do look pretty."

When she frowned, he added quickly. "But hey, if it makes you feel better, I'll tell ya you're as ugly as a dead possum in July."

She giggled. He figured he was in calmer waters so he quickly changed the subject. "Uh, so, how did you meet the Stillwaters?"

She drew an unsteady breath before she answered. "They live in the same apartment building. They needed someone to babysit while Mrs. Stillwater is working at night. They're saving up for a down payment on a house."

"Knowing Uncle Jim, I bet you make good money."

"Pretty good, I think." She blotted her eyes with another tissue.

"At least you get paid. I do all the stuff around here for free." When she was silent he searched for another subject. "The kids seem to like you a lot."

She smiled. "Oh, I love them. They're just the cutest little kids in the world. And the Stillwaters are great. They don't judge anybody. They trust me with their kids and that means a lot."

As he watched her talk, he realized she was different from most girls. Any other girl might say something about how messy little kids are, or what a hassle they are and they sure wouldn't talk about the importance of the trust some kids' parents might place in you. He wasn't sure he would have even thought of that. "Ya know, you're pretty smart—for a twelve-year-old."

She made a face. "You're pretty smart— for a boy."

He grinned at her. Her hair was shining in the late afternoon sun slanting through the window. It honestly *was* pretty now, just like everyone said. The earrings glinted and flashed in the light as she moved her head. Thinking to get a better look at the newly drilled holes in her ears, he reached up to tuck her hair behind her ear and she flinched. He lowered his hand.

"Why do you keep doing that?"

"Doing what?"

"You duck like you think I'm gonna hit you or somethin'. I don't hit girls."

Her smile disappeared. "I don't do that."

"Yeah, you do."

She looked at him with fire in her eyes. "Why don't you just mind your own business?"

Toby wanted to get mad right back but he realized something in that instant. Pressing his lips together he made a decision. He shrugged. "It doesn't matter if you don't want to admit it anyway, because I know why you do it."

Caroline swallowed hard, feeling like a trapped animal. She waited uneasily for him to go on and finish, but his next words took her by surprise.

"So, like, whaddya think about us being friends, Caro? Let's be friends. I mean, like, real friends. Friends that are special and tell each other things they wouldn't tell anyone else."

Her eyes blinked slowly. He held his hand out to her but she didn't take it. He waited. He'd done this same thing with a kid at school. Good ol' Jeff. Toby and his father had talked at length about Jeff. Back in elementary school, everyone picked on Jeff. Toby could never understand why they did. Jeff was a great guy. Maybe a little heavy, but a great guy. It upset Toby terribly to see Jeff so abused. One day, when things got too bad for Toby to stand idly by, he decided to do something about it and stepped in to take up for Jeff against the typical playground bully. Toby ended up with a three-day suspension from school for fighting, hence the talk with his dad.

His father told him, first, he was proud of his son for stepping in and doing the right thing and second, Toby couldn't change how other people saw Jeff, but Toby could offer his own friendship. Toby had done just that and he and Jeff had been best friends ever since. That had been a few years ago. Now Jeff had grown tall and slimmed down and, barring a really crummy tryout, he and Toby were slated to be the only freshmen on the high school varsity baseball team. And Jeff, well, Jeff was now 'Mr. Popularity,' himself.

Toby eyed the small girl in front of him. "C'mon, Caro," he prodded. "Wouldn't it be nice to have one person, like, just someone you could trust? Someone you could talk to and tell anything and you know they would never tell anyone?"

She looked up at him, hesitant and shy. A friend? Someone she could talk to? It would be nice, she thought. None of the kids at school ever talked to her. Well, if she was gonna be fair, she didn't talk much to them either. Finally, she smiled and timidly placed her hand in his to shake on it, but he didn't let it go. Instead, he held it as he spoke.

"Friends?"

"Friends," she affirmed. Then immediately cornered him. "So, tell me a secret. Something you don't want anyone else to know."

It was a test of the new friendship and he knew it. He thought hard. Heaving a sigh, he continued to hold her hand, turning it over in his, this way and that, examining the small hand as he spoke.

"You promise not to tell anyone?"

She nodded solemnly.

"Back when I was eight, me and a friend were out in his father's hay field playing with a magnifying glass. We would set fire to a small patch of grass, then stomp it out. After we did it several times, we decided to let the next one burn a little longer, you know, let the fire get bigger. I guess, we thought we could put it out easy enough. Well, we couldn't. It spread so fast, suddenly, fire was all around us. When we realized we were in over our heads, we ran. The whole field burned, and to this day his dad doesn't know how the fire got started."

Her eyes were wide. "Oh my. I bet y'all were scared."

He laughed. "Mostly scared of gettin' caught." He tugged on her hand. "Now, you tell me something."

She shrugged. "I can't think of anything to tell."

"Sure you can. I mean like, it doesn't have to be your biggest secret. Just something."

He waited while she thought.

"There's nothing to tell," she insisted.

So, she's not gonna play fair, he thought. He should've known. Well, he'd given it his best shot. Gone above and beyond what his mom had asked. He stood abruptly. "Okay. Fine. Well, I gotta go." He started to leave and got as far as the door when she finally spoke.

"Why?"

He stopped and turned. "Why what?"

"You said you know why I do that 'thing'. So– tell me why."

"You mean why you duck like I'm gonna hit ya?"

When she nodded, he leaned against the door, his arms folded across his chest, choosing his words carefully. "So, like, I'm always

bringing home stray animals. All kinds. It drives Mom crazy. One day, I brought home this old flea-bitten dog. It had large areas of fur missing from his back and sides. The vet said it was scarring."

"Scarring?"

"Yeah. He had scars where the hair wouldn't grow anymore from being beat so much. We had to be real careful about how we tried to pet him, because whenever we reached out toward him he would cower down. It was really pitiful. Ya see, he was so used to being hit, that he automatically thought it was about to happen again. My dad said that's called 'conditioning.'"

He stopped to see if she understood, but she only looked at him with those big brown eyes, waiting for him to finish.

Toby nodded. "Well, Caro– I think you've been conditioned."

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Psalm 34:17-18

"The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

# Chapter 2

Caroline didn't see Toby again that evening. Between the time she'd helped with food preparations for the night's celebration and gone up to fetch the children for dinner, he left for his party. She didn't have time to think about him anyway, because as more friends of the Smiths arrived, so did more children. By the time everyone was there, Caro had eight children to watch and more importantly, to keep out of the way so the adults could party. No way was she upset about not being included as an adult, for she had no desire to be around a bunch of grownups who were drinking and being goofy.

The children's ages ranged from Lynn the youngest at three, to Ben, the oldest at eight. A large family room in the rear of the house was the children's designated play area. Caro stood in the center of the family room and looked from face to face. She grinned. "We're gonna have a blast," she declared amidst cheers from the kids.

The family room was quickly established as 'base.' From there, a delightfully long hallway that ran the entire length of the house became the major racetrack. It led from the family room to the far end of the house where it took a sharp turn to the left and opened into a game room. They began in that hallway by playing regular games like 'Red Light Green Light' and 'Mother May I,' and moved on to playing ones Caro had invented. Even though they had their own goodies, one of the favorite games involved a mission to sneak into the front room where the parents partied and swipe snacks without being seen. Afterward, they sat around munching on their spoils of war, as Caro told them funny stories. Caro knew she was supposed to be "working," but actually, she was having an awesome time. She thought she might have trouble with Ben at first when he showed reluctance to join in, but now he was laughing and playing just like everyone else. Having overheard what he'd said the day before, she felt triumphant.

Being the youngest, Paul and Lynn were partied out by nine-thirty. Caro left Ben in charge for the few minutes it took to take them

upstairs and tuck them into bed. They were so tired that they fell sound asleep almost immediately. Now, Caro thought, the real fun could begin. She grinned. The remaining six children were just old enough to hear scary stories and just young enough to make it fun.

Back downstairs, they turned off all the lights in the family room and sat in a circle on the floor. Armed with a flashlight, Caro altered her speaking voice into her version of a scary witch. She had to keep from laughing at the wide-eyed stares of the children. She told story after story. Thanks to her love of reading, she knew lots of them. She would finish a particularly scary story, and the children would run screaming down the length of the hall as she chased them, cackling like a witch. They screamed as they turned at the end of the hallway and had to run past the witch to make it back to base again where they would settle for another round. They were hot and sweaty, full of chips and dip and sodas and having a grand time.

Toby, meanwhile, was not having quite so much fun at his party. In the basement of a friend's home, lights were low and music loud. He could barely carry on a conversation with Amy, the girl every boy dreamed of being with. From what he could gather, she was pouting over what some girlfriend had done to another girlfriend and— "didn't he think it was just a shame?" Whatever.

He glanced around the room searching for signs of life. Some of the kids were making an effort to dance to the music. A few, including his friend Jeff, were playing cards. Others were gettin' pretty hot in the corner. Toby glanced up toward the stairs to see if any chaperones were nearby. There were none in sight and it was a good thing too, judging from what he could see from where he sat. No wonder the host parents had insisted that all the boys had to be gone the minute the clock struck 12:00. The girls, on the other hand, would stay for a giant slumber party. Toby smiled, thinking THAT would be fun to come back and crash.

He turned his attention back to Amy. She smiled at him. "Oh, poor Toby, you're not having a very good time, are you?" She moved to sit on his lap.

Now that's better, he thought. She put her hand in his. He took it and turned it over this way and that, but his deliberations had him frowning. Caro was invading his thoughts. She meant nothing to him, so why was he thinking about her now? Probably because he had taken Caro's hand earlier today in much the same way. He tried to wipe her

from his mind but he couldn't help himself, he had to compare. Amy's hand was so different from Caro's. Amy had those fake kind of nails, and three rings on one hand alone. Caro's nails were short, plain, and she wore no jewelry.

He was being judgmental, he told himself. There certainly was nothing wrong with Amy being a little more sophisticated than Caro if that's what it was. After all, Amy was older and came from money. Of course she would know a little more about life. No, Toby corrected himself. It was actually just the opposite, wasn't it? Amy was the one who knew nothing about life. Not real life.

Amy shifted over his legs, bringing him back to the present. Did she know what she was doing? Maybe having her sit on his lap wasn't such a good idea.

She leaned close to his ear, pressing herself against him. "A penny for your thoughts."

Well now. He couldn't very well tell her the things that her current position was making him think about.

"Well?" she said with a pout.

Quickly he lifted her off his lap before he embarrassed himself, turned abruptly and pulled her up to dance a slow dance, but still, he couldn't even get her to do that because she stopped every few seconds to talk to girlfriends, chattering away as if he didn't exist. Amy, Toby thought, was absolutely and completely beautiful and absolutely and completely interested in one thing, herself. Why was he just realizing that?

He knew why. It was that little girl. Why could he not get her out of his mind? Caro had done something to him. Bewitched him somehow. He was miserable the rest of the night and only too happy when Jeff, also bored, suggested they leave the party early.

Meanwhile, Caro's games had progressed to hide-and-go-seek in the dark. Most of the hiding places were in the game room behind chairs, in closets, under the pool table and behind the door. The eerie silence would be broken intermittently by shrieks of laughter when someone was found and tried to rush back through the darkness down the long hallway to base.

Shortly before midnight Toby came in through the kitchen door. He peeked in at the adult party and smiled at his father dancing with his mom, their party hats pointing upward. He had just been wondering what Caro and the kids were up to when he heard laughter and screams

coming from the rear of the house. Grinning, he quickly decided he'd join in on the fun. He swung open the hall door.

There was a terrible sounding thump, silence, and then a soft moan. He reached for the light switch immediately. Caro lay flat on her back, a huge goose egg growing on her forehead. The children crept from their hiding places one by one, eyes wide, peering down at their fallen caretaker.

Toby dropped down by her side. "Oh Lord, Caro. What happened?"

"I was running back to base and..." She put her hand to her head and moaned.

"And I opened the door right into you," he finished for her.

"I'll get Mom," Molly cried, rushing off.

"No, wait," Caro called. Trying to rise up, she appealed to Toby. "Please, Toby, don't tell. They'll think I was being irresponsible. And I'm okay. Really."

Molly stopped and waited for her brother's okay. However, he wasn't convinced. "I don't know. It looks pretty bad."

"Please, Toby," she whispered. "I mean, it's almost midnight and it'll ruin their party."

Her eyes held so much fear, he couldn't resist her. He nodded and turned to his little brother. "Ben, sneak in and get some of that crushed ice. And be quick."

Toby turned back to Caro, his fingers moving over her head. "Okay, we won't tell, but you gotta lie back down and let me put some ice on your head."

She smiled with relief as she obeyed.

Ben rushed back in with a large handful of crushed ice. He slapped it on her head.

"Ben, get a towel or napkin or something," Toby snapped. "And do you have to be so rough? Here, let me do it."

Toby took over. He looked into her eyes as he placed a towel full of ice on the bump. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," she confirmed, sitting up to show it.

"Children," Mrs. Smith called. "It's almost New Year's! Come on in and watch the ball come down on TV!"

The children scrambled off to see. Toby reached his hand out to Caro and pulled her up. She stood shakily. "You okay?" he asked. "Not dizzy or anything?"

She shook her head. The two of them inched into the front room and leaned unseen against the back wall. Caro slid down the wall to sit. Toby joined her. They watched as the kids were given pots and pans and spoons and horns to make noise.

"Pots and pans?" Caro questioned.

Toby smiled. "Yeah. It's a tradition."

"Tradition?"

"Yeah, we do it every year. We have lots of traditions."

"Like what?"

He shrugged. "Black-eyed peas and greens for dinner tomorrow. That's a New Year's tradition."

She made a face. "Why peas and greens?"

"It's supposed to bring you good fortune or money or something like that." He turned to face her. "How's your head?"

"It's okay."

"Here, let me see." He touched her chin and turned her face toward him. "Man, it looks terrible. It's huge! I feel really bad about this. I'm sorry, Caro. You know I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I'm okay, Toby. Stop making such a big deal about it."

He studied her face. She was so sweet. So kind. So– different. Any other girl would be making a very big deal about it. His mind flashed to the drama that would be taking place right now if it had been Amy whose head he'd bashed. This time he didn't try to stop the thoughts. He let himself compare Amy to Caro. Amy was indeed beautiful, but when he studied Caro he saw that her big brown eyes were perfectly shaped, and warm and sweet. Caro was definitely skinnier and barely had any breasts at all. Why did that suddenly seem unimportant? Because a few days ago it truly seemed like breasts were hugely important.

And just look at Caro's mouth. A perfect bow. Pink. No weird colored lipstick. She wore a slight smile, not a forced pout like Amy. If he turned toward her right now, he could kiss her before she could pull away. He'd bet she'd never been kissed before. The thought possessed him. Just one touch of his mouth to hers. That's all he needed. Then maybe he could put these ridiculous thoughts to rest. It'd probably scare her though, he thought, but decided it was worth a try. "I know another New Year's tradition," he said softly.

"Really? What?"

"At the stroke of midnight, you're supposed to kiss someone. It'll

bring you good luck."

She eyed him, her face turning pink. "That's a dumb tradition."

He laughed. "I don't think it's dumb. You saying that just shows how young you are."

She pursed her lips. He licked his. She was so cute. And she sure didn't like him saying she was young.

They could just see the TV from where they sat against the back wall of the front room. The ball in Times Square began its downward journey. Caroline watched in delight as the children began to dance around in circles and bang their spoons on the pots and pans. The room seemed to swirl around her. There was a buzzing in her head as the ball reached its destination. She blinked as the adults each grabbed their husbands or wives and kissed them, some very passionately. The sound in her head was getting louder. She wasn't sure if it was from the lump on her forehead or from what she was about to do, but before she could change her mind, she turned to Toby and pressed her mouth to his cheek.

"Happy New Year," she whispered.

He smiled. "Backatcha, Caro."

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The next morning, New Year's Day, Caroline was the first one awake. She went about the business of cleaning up from the party and fixing breakfast for the little ones. Mrs. Smith, Toby's mom, was the next to arrive in the kitchen, moaning and heading straight for the coffee maker. Glancing up at Caro, she gasped. "Oh my goodness, what happened to your head, child?"

Caroline looked anxiously up at her. "I, uh, I ran into the door when we were playing last night. It's okay. It's just a little sore."

"Lord, have mercy, Caro, it looks as if someone hit you in the head with a baseball bat. Come over here and sit down and let me take a look at that."

Caroline did so, albeit reluctantly.

"What's the matter?" Mrs. Stillwater asked as she entered the kitchen. But one look at Caro told her the problem. "What in the world? Caro, are you okay, honey?"

"I'm fine. I just ran into a door last night. It doesn't hurt."

Mrs. Smith made her look into a flashlight and count fingers. She pressed on the lump several times, making Caroline wince.

"I don't want you doing another lick of work today. You are to rest
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until I'm sure you're okay."

"But..."

"No buts, young lady."

"What's up?" Toby asked as he entered the fray.

His mother turned on him. "Toby, did you know about Caro getting hurt?"

His expression fell. His eyes lowered. "Yes, ma'am, but I thought she was okay. Is something wrong?" He glanced worriedly over at Caro where she sat on the stool. Caro rolled her eyes, making him smile. She was just fine.

"And just what are you grinning at? I hardly think this is funny, young man. Just look at her poor head."

He sobered immediately. "No, ma'am, it's not funny a bit." He went to Caro's side, held out his hand. "I'll take her out for a nice quiet walk. Maybe the fresh, cold air will make her feel better."

"You do that," his mother agreed. "That's a good idea. And don't forget to wear your coats."

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It was a heavenly day. Cold, yes, but the sun was shining, the farm was beautiful and Caro's new coat was doing its job.

Toby showed Caro the horses, promising a ride later; if his mom declared her fit enough. They wandered down to the creek where they skipped stones and talked about school. He led her through a path in the woods, coming out on the other side of the farm. A barn came into view and he took her inside and showed her around. They climbed into the loft and stretched out on bales of hay, staring up into the rafters. The tip of Toby's finger touched Caro's little finger and suddenly, they were holding hands.

It was the first time Caro had ever held hands with a boy. A slight tremor ran up her arm toward her heart. It's a nice feeling, she thought. She liked it. Liked it just fine. It seemed as natural as walking or talking. She had a friend and she felt she could trust him with anything. It made her feel sort of funny inside. Good funny.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" she asked.

"I'm not so sure what I want to do. How about you?"

She was silent a moment. Finally, she turned on her side to face him. "I want to be a dancer," she whispered.

He considered that for a while. "Really? A dancer, huh?"

She smiled. "Uh huh."
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"That would be cool, I guess."

"My daddy gave me a music box. When you open it up this tiny ballerina spins around. I can just sit and watch her for hours making up stories in my head. He's gone now, but he used to say I could be anything I want to be, but it won't come to me. I have to go after it. He said it never hurt to try and that's just what I'm gonna do."

"That sounds like pretty good advice. Maybe I should listen to that too."

"Why, what is it you want to try?"

He shrugged. "Singing." He grimaced. It sounded pretty dumb when he said it out loud.

"Wow, can you sing?"

"My mom says I can." He laughed. "Well, I guess all moms say that, but my chorus teacher at school says I'm really good and that I should do something with it. I dunno." He shrugged. "It's just a thought. And then there's baseball."

"Baseball?"

"Yeah. Jeff and me, we..."

"Who's Jeff?"

"Oh, he's a friend of mine. We're gonna be on the Varsity baseball team."

She blinked. "Um hm."

"It's a big deal," he said, realizing she didn't understand. "I mean, like, we're the only two freshmen. Everyone else is older. Anyway, so what I was gonna say is, well, I'd like to go pro."

"Oh."

He shook his head. "It probably seems silly to you, but playing pro baseball is a big deal to guys."

"What does your dad say about it?"

"Well, he talks a lot about being stable."

"What does he mean by that?"

"I think he's saying he wants me to get a real job." He looked over at Caroline. "So, you said your dad is gone now. Where is he? Is he dead?"

She sat up. "I dunno."

He waited patiently for her to continue.

"He left us. About five years ago. We don't know where he is. Maybe he *is* dead."

Toby sat up next to her. "Does it make you sad?"

"Not me so much. Not anymore, but it makes my mom real sad."

"Wow, then it's not your dad that..." He stopped himself. He'd been thinking out loud. Caro's head lowered and he knew she knew what he'd nearly said. Caro's mom was the one who beats her, not her dad. It was difficult for him to imagine her mother doing that. Moms are supposed to be sweet and kind. They take care of you when you're sick and cheer you up when you're sad. He tried to pick up the thread of the conversation. "So, does your mom think he'll ever come back?"

Caroline shook her head. "Mom says she wouldn't take him back if he came crawlin' on his hands and knees."

"Well, that sounds like she's more mad than sad."

"Sometimes she is. Especially when she's drinking."

Caro quickly looked up into Toby's face. "Oh, I didn't mean to say that. Don't tell."

He nodded solemnly. "Don't worry. You can trust me. I told you I wouldn't tell any of your secrets." He took her hand again. "So, your mom, does she drink a lot?"

She only shrugged in answer.

He squeezed her hand. "It's okay if you don't want to talk about it right now. I guess we'd better get back. Breakfast will be ready and I have chores that need doin'."

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Later that afternoon after all chores were done, Toby hooked the hay wagon up to the tractor and took the children for a ride. Caro sat between Paul and Lynn, her arms tight around them so they wouldn't fall over or slide sideways. The children laughed and shrieked with glee as Toby turned in a sharp circle.

While the children played, Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Stillwater worked hard to prepare a delicious supper of black-eyed peas, greens, homemade macaroni and cheese, a giant honey-glazed ham, buttery cornbread and the biggest chocolate layer cake Caro had ever seen. Everything was scrumptious.

After supper Caro played with the little ones while dishes were being done, since she was still being babied over the lump on her forehead, which had become quite colorful. When the adults joined her in the living room, Caro was surprised to see Toby carrying a guitar. Mrs. Smith sat down at the piano and Toby sat on the edge of the piano bench.

Over the next few hours, Caro was given a glimpse of what real
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family life could be. Everyone sang and laughed and told stories on each other. They argued and fussed but only in a teasing sort of way. No one got mad. No tempers flared. No one yelled at Ben when he acted silly and accidentally knocked over a picture frame. Molly sat snug in her father's lap while little Lynn had crawled up into her mother's arms and fallen fast asleep. Caro's heart yearned.

She was stunned when the Stillwaters asked Toby to sing 'Amazing Grace.' She'd never been to church, in fact, wasn't quite sure what to think about religion, but his rendition brought tears to her eyes. His teacher was right, he had a beautiful voice. Strong. Clear. Like someone on television. He winked at her while he was singing, warming her heart and making her blush.

Caroline glanced at the clock. It would be bedtime soon. And tomorrow, she would go home. The feeling of hopelessness hit her hard. Oh, how she wished she could stay here forever. Oh, how she dreaded going back to the apartment she shared with her mother. How nice would it be to have a mother like Mrs. Stillwater or Mrs. Smith and to live in a home like this and most of all, to have a friend like Toby nearby every day?

She frowned, feeling ashamed of herself. Those weren't very kind thoughts. Her mother needed her, depended on her. Caro pushed all her yearnings down into her heart and told them to be quiet.

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However much she didn't want it to, the next morning did arrive. Apparently though, she wasn't through having fun just yet, for at the break of dawn, Toby knocked on her door and poked his head in. She sat up sleepily. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," he answered with a smile. "Get dressed. I'm taking you out riding."

"On a horse?"

"No, on a pig. Yes, a horse, now get going before anyone else wakes up and tells me it's not a good idea."

The wind was brisk as they walked down to the stables, but Caro felt toasty warm. Was it thanks to her new coat, or was it the young man walking beside her that made her feel that way? Toby talked to her as he saddled the animal, telling her about Molly, the mare they were about to ride.

"Y'all named your sister after a horse?"

He laughed. "No. They were both born at the same time, and Ben's
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favorite name at the time was Molly."

The look of utter bewilderment on her face made him chuckle. "You see, my father named me after his uncle who died when my dad was a boy, but my mom never really liked the name."

"She doesn't like Toby?"

"Tobias. My name is Tobias."

She made a face. "I like Toby better."

He smiled. "Me, too. Anyway, Mom said a child could name a baby better than that, so to prove it, when Ben was born, they let me name him. It became a tradition and when Molly was born they let Ben name her. He was only three and he had a book about a bunny named Molly. So, at the time, it was his favorite name. The horse and Molly were born around the same time and Ben insisted it be the horse's name too. No one saw any reason to argue with him, so, Molly and Molly joined our family."

Caroline shook her head. "Your family is weird. Weird but nice."

"Yeah, they are," he agreed. "But what about your name? I mean– Caro? What kind of name is that? Is it like Karo syrup?" he teased as he bent to tighten the cinch.

She giggled. "No, it's like Caro-line."

He said it over a few times. "Caroline, huh? Like the princess?"

"Yes, I mean, no. I mean, yes the 'I' is long, but definitely not like a princess."

"I like Caroline. I think that's what I'll call you. Everyone else can call you Caro, but I'll call you Caroline. Maybe even Princess Caroline. Well, Caro-line. Ready?"

He bent down and cupped his hands. "Just step here with your left foot and swing your other leg over the saddle. Now, don't be afraid. I'll get up right behind you."

It took a few tries before she was able to make it, but she finally did. To Caro it seemed she was sitting forty feet off the ground and she was indeed afraid. When she felt Toby move up behind her and wrap an arm around her waist, she relaxed. He seemed to know what he was doing. He felt very big behind her, his arms strong, and Caroline suddenly realized that for the first time in as long as she could remember, she felt safe. What a wonderful feeling! She closed her eyes for the sheer joy of it.

Toby guided the horse down the path they had taken the day before. They rode slowly past the barn and finally to open pasture. She

smiled, experiencing the pleasure of the cold air as it hit her face, the movement of the large animal beneath her and the warmth of Toby's breath in her ear.

Once they were in the open field, he leaned forward to talk in her ear. "Wanna take the reins?"

She looked back at him with both excitement and apprehension in her eyes.

"Go ahead. You can do it." He placed the reins in her hands and showed her how to guide the horse. Toby spoke calmly to Molly while Caroline tried to take over, but she was too afraid and quickly relinquished command. Toby laughed and took control again, deciding to give her a little thrill.

His arm tightened around her. "Hold on!"

She gasped as he kicked Molly into a canter. Caroline shrieked and laughed at the same time. This was better than any amusement park ride, nevertheless, she was relieved when he slowed. It took several minutes for her heart to settle.

They came to a stream and Toby debated with himself whether to take her across. Deciding against it, he dismounted and helped her down. They walked to a nearby tree and sat with their backs against the tree trunk. He held out his hand out and she slipped hers into it.

Toby sighed. "It figures, soon as you find a good friend, they have to go away."

"Last night I was wishing I could stay here forever, but doin' that only makes it harder to leave."

What she said was so honest. He looked into her eyes and the thought hit him again. She sure didn't seem like she was only twelve years old. "So, don't you miss your mom?"

She was silent for a long time. "Ya know, I do miss my mom. I mean I miss her from the way she used to be a long time ago. Since my dad left us, she's, well, she's different."

"Different? How?"

He waited through another long silence and finally spoke up to help her. "You mean the drinking?"

Caroline looked up, bravely refusing to let the tears pool in her eyes. "She didn't use to drink. She used to be nice. At least I think she did. It's hard to remember. Now though, all she seems to do is drink and when she drinks, she gets real mean."

"I'm sorry, Caroline. I wish there was something I could do. Can't

you talk to a teacher or someone like a school counselor? You could talk to my parents or how about the Stillwaters?"

"No! No." She jerked her hand away from him. "Secrets, remember? Never tell anyone. I thought I could trust you!"

"Okay! You can. You can. I forgot for a second, that's all. It's just that I hate that I can't do something to help you, but I promise, I won't say a word," he said solemnly. He put his arm around her shoulders and squeezed, then sat quietly, giving her time to calm herself.

Caroline drew a deep breath. "Having you to talk to does help me. Don't you see? I don't need anyone else."

He did see. What he saw was he'd taken on a huge responsibility. It was several minutes before he spoke again. "I was just wondering, does your mom go to work?"

"Yeah. She's like a secretary. She gets up and goes to work every morning and brings a bottle home with her every night and then she goes in her room and drinks until she passes out and gets up the next morning and does it all over again."

"Man, it must be hard."

She shrugged. "I get by. It's weird though. Sometimes I love her and sometimes I hate her. I know I shouldn't hate my own mother, but sometimes I wish I could just leave and never come back and not care what happens to her."

He hurt for her. How must that feel, to be so torn? To have no one to depend on, to have nowhere to go? He took the small gift he had for her out of his pocket. "Here, I want you to have this. It's not much, but maybe when you need to tell someone a secret, you can tell him."

Caroline rubbed her finger over the smooth wood of a small carved dog.

"I carved it a few years ago for a school project. It's the dog I told you about."

She smiled. "I love it. What's his name?"

"Mutt-face."

"You named that poor doggie Mutt-face?"

He shrugged. "He didn't know what it meant. What he did know was that he could trust me to take care of him and feed him and love him. And I sure did love that dog."

"Thank you, Toby. I know this means a lot to you. I promise to take very good care of it."

He smiled. There was no use in comparing Caroline with Amy any

longer. There simply was no comparison. "I'm gonna miss you, Princess Caroline."

She leaned her head on his shoulder. "I'm gonna miss you too, Toby. What am I gonna do without my friend to talk to?"

"We could call each other every week," he offered. "Do you have a phone?"

She looked up at him, smiling sadly. "A cell phone? No. Just a regular landline kinda phone, but I couldn't use it to call you. Mom would never let me."

"Then I'll call you. How about every Sunday, in the evening. Okay? Then we can tell each other more secrets. You can tell me about your problems and I'll tell you about mine."

"I don't think you have any problems."

"Everyone has problems, Caroline. Like right now, I'm gonna be in big trouble for taking you out without permission. Everyone's probably worried about where we are and what we're doing. And they're gonna tease me and say I'm sweet on you."

She looked down immediately, embarrassed by his words. However, he tilted her chin up.

"And they'd be right." He held his hand out. "Come on."

Without another word, he helped her back up onto Molly and they rode silently back to the house. Toby kept his arm snugly around her the entire way. As they approached the house, they saw the Stillwaters already outside loading the van. Toby leaned close to her and whispered in her ear. "Be strong, Caroline." He kissed her cheek, dismounted and lowered her to the ground.

"Well, now," Mr. Stillwater began. "We were wondering where the two of you had gotten off to." He was smiling a knowing smile at Toby, who quickly lowered his head as he tied Molly off.

Toby headed inside. "I, uh, I'll go help get stuff," he stammered.

Paul and Lynn came out on the porch to see the "big horsey." The moment Toby reappeared with an armful of luggage they demanded their turn. He quickly granted their pleas. Caroline ducked inside to thank Mrs. Smith for everything and to run upstairs and straighten the room she'd used. On her way back down the stairs, Caro was handed an egg-and-cheese sandwich by Mrs. Stillwater, who patted her head with a smile. "Here ya go, sweetie, you missed breakfast. Did you have fun with Toby?"

Caroline blushed and nodded politely. "He's very nice."

Everyone pitched in to help and in what Caro thought to be much too short a time, they were ready to be on their way. As everyone hugged and kissed, Caro stole a glance at Toby. He seemed troubled. Caro gave a little wave, unable to force a smile when she felt so sad. He smiled and winked, making her heart flutter. Only a few seconds later she and the Stillwaters were loaded in the van and pulling away from the huge glass house, heading home to Atlanta.

Caroline peered out the van window as long as she could, watching Toby as he stood on the porch, leaning against a column, arms folded across his chest. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, forcing herself to turn her attention to the children. Everything would be okay, she thought, comforting herself. She could hardly wait for the next Sunday evening, when she would hear his voice again.

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"Caroline Jones, you'd better come when I call you," Virginia Jones yelled again.

Caroline sighed. She'd been trying to do her homework and hoped that if she pretended not to hear, her mother would just go on to her room and sleep. Caro rose slowly, sticking her paper inside the book to keep her place, but she was too late. Her door slammed open.

Caroline whirled around to see her mom coming at her full speed with a coat hanger in her hand.

"I was coming, Mama," she cried, moving quickly to dodge the first blow. The next one caught her though, right across the back. She fell to her knees. It stung awfully bad. She raised her arm to block, but the wire hanger lashed across her forearm. She rolled away and struggled to stand. Standing turned out to be a mistake. Caro's legs bore bright red streaks by the time her mother finally tired out.

Virginia tossed the hanger aside. Stumbling around the room, knocking things over, swiping everything off Caro's dresser, she turned on Caro. "You've been mighty uppity since you been home from your little trip." She grabbed Caroline by the hair. "You think just because you get your hair all done and get a few new clothes that you don't have to come when I call you?"

"No, ma'am," Caroline cried.

"No, ma'am?" her mother shouted, yanking on the lock of hair she held. "Well that's not how it seems to me."

"I'm sorry, Mama. I was coming, really I was." The tears streamed down her face as she reached up and tried to pull her hair free of her
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mother's grip, but she froze as her mother's expression suddenly changed to intense rage.

"What are those?" her mother screamed. Terror gripped Caroline's heart. She'd been so very careful to keep her hair down over her ears. She should have taken the earrings off and just let the holes close up, but she'd thought, maybe she could have this one little thing just for herself.

Virginia grabbed her daughter by the ears. "Take them off! Take them off now!" she shrieked.

"Okay, Mama. Okay. Let me go and I will."

Her mother shoved her as she released her, sending Caroline flying across the bed. Quickly, she righted herself and with trembling hands, removed the earrings. She held her hand out to her mother, who snatched the jewelry from her.

For the next fifteen minutes Caroline listened to the rantings of a mad woman as she paced back and forth across the room, speaking of the evil that men do. Some of the language she used was extremely graphic and Caroline's face reddened as her mother spoke of what her father was probably doing to some woman at this very minute and that woman was probably wearing all manner of jewelry.

Her mother crossed the room to where Caroline sat on the bed, grabbed her by the hair and yanked. "That's all men want. They don't want wives, they don't want children, they just want to have as many women as possible." Her eyes narrowed. "I'd better not catch you with a boy, missy. If I do, you'll be very sorry. For you and for him. Now clean up this room and go to bed."

"Yes, ma'am," she whispered through her tears.

Caroline waited for her mother to vacate the room before she rose to clean the mess. Wiping her cheeks, she began picking up the clutter but stopped midway when she spotted her little Mutt-face. She scooped him up and sank to her knees. Oh, how she craved the feeling of safety she'd experienced up in Tennessee. The feeling she'd had when her big strong friend had hugged her close and made her feel like a real person. "Oh, Toby," she whispered. "I wish I could talk to you tonight. I would tell you a hundred secrets." She cried herself to sleep, the little carving of Mutt-face held tight in her fist.

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Caroline wasn't sure why what happened the next day, happened. She only knew it could never happen again. She'd been playing with
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Paul and Lynn when she realized it was almost time for Mr. Stillwater to be home. That meant it was time to clean up the toys, wash hands and faces and wait for daddy. For the first time ever, Paul was refusing to cooperate. Caro told him he'd better be good or she wouldn't play horsey with him tomorrow. The warning didn't even seem to faze him. He began to cry and when she tried to put the toys away herself, he started screaming.

"Stop it, Paul," Caro ordered. She was tired and irritable herself, since her mother's outburst the night before.

"Noooooooo!" he screamed. "I don't want to clean up. I want to play. Stop putting my toys awaaaayyy!"

She tried to ignore him. She and Lynn continued putting blocks in the wagon and puzzle pieces in their places, but he ran at Lynn and pushed her over. Lynn wailed.

Caro whirled on him. "Stop it, Paul. You hurt your sister."

But he didn't stop. He cried and screamed and threw a fit like she'd never seen and the next thing she knew, her hand met his face.

Paul drew in a startled breath. Lynn howled louder. Caro stepped back, horrified. Paul put his hands up to his cheeks as if to protect himself from any further blows. That sight broke Caroline's heart. She scooped him up in her arms, hugging him.

"Oh, baby. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

The words echoed in her brain. Trembling, she placed Paul gently on his feet and backed away from him. *Oh no, I sound just like my mother.* Panic took over. She was turning into her mother. She began pacing the room, talking to herself, berating herself as she choked down the sobs that were welling in her chest.

Confused by their babysitter's odd behavior, Paul stopped screaming and Lynn was down to small mewling sounds. Caro finally got a grip and sat the children in front of the TV then turned in a daze to finish straightening the room. Once she was done, she waited with dread in her heart for Mr. Stillwater's arrival.

When he came in, the children ran to him as usual. He greeted them with hugs and kisses and turned to tell Caro thanks and goodbye.

"Can I talk to you a minute?" she asked.

"Of course, Caro. What do you need to talk about?"

"I, I can't watch the children for you anymore."

It was obvious she'd surprised him.

"Why? What's the problem, Caro? Whatever it is, hon, I'm sure

we can work it out."

She lowered her gaze. "I can't tell you. I just know I can't watch them anymore."

"Caro, maybe you can talk to Sylvia. She can help, I'm sure. Please, hon, tell us what's wrong. You know, sometimes it helps to talk about things."

"I know. You're so nice, and Mrs. Stillwater too, and I love Paul and Lynn so much, but I can't talk about this. I'm sorry, Mr. Stillwater, I can't tell you why. Please, I'm sorry, but I just can't." She stood abruptly and ran out the door.

The rest of the week was miserable. She stayed in her apartment for fear of running into the Stillwaters. They'd knocked on her door several times but she pretended not to hear. When Sunday finally arrived Caroline could feel her anticipation grow. Waiting for Toby's call was making her crazy. She would tell him everything. Just hearing his voice would make everything better, she was just sure of it. It was so nice to have a friend like him. Older, mature and true.

Her mother was always worse on Sundays since she'd had the entire weekend to work herself up. Caroline figured it would be perfect, because she would pass out by six o'clock for sure.

However, at seven, her mother was still going. She called Caroline to her and handed her a dollar bill. "Here, run up to the store and get me a candy bar."

Caro's heart began to pound. She could refuse and face a beating, or go and possibly miss the phone call. Why oh why, hadn't they arranged an exact time for the call?

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Her mother said as she shook the money at her.

I can do this, Caro thought. I can make it. I'll run the whole way. Then when I get back, she'll take the candy and go to her room and I won't see her the rest of the night. She grabbed the dollar and took off. The little convenience store was located at the end of the street at the top of a hill. It would take fifteen minutes, tops. She ran as fast as her legs would carry her, nevertheless, her greatest fear was taking place as she burst through her front door, candy in hand.

"Who are you?" her mother was shouting into the phone.

Caroline tried to take the phone from her. "Let me take it, Mama," she pleaded.

"The hell you will." She slapped Caroline away and turned her

attention back to the caller. "I know what you want from my daughter and you're gonna have to get it somewhere else."

"No, Mom," Caroline screamed, mortified. She reached for the phone again. This time, though, her mother reared back and knocked Caroline in the head with the receiver. Caroline stumbled backward and slipped to the floor, the room spinning.

Her mother returned her attention to the young man on the phone. "Let me tell you something, buster, my daughter is off limits to you. Do you understand me? Don't you ever call here again or I swear, I'll have you arrested." She slammed the phone down.

Virginia Jones turned and stood over her fallen daughter. Caroline was unsure of her mother's next move. Maybe another lesson in men. Maybe another beating. She thought of what Toby must be thinking right this very minute and decided she didn't care. She would rather die right now.

"You little pig," her mother said between clenched teeth. "You gave yourself to him, didn't you?"

"No, Mama. I swear I didn't," she cried as she struggled to get to her feet.

"Did you like it, girl?"

Caroline could feel her face burn. "No, Mama, it wasn't like that. We're just friends."

"Don't you lie to me, little girl. He has a voice like a man. You tellin' me you're friends with a grown man? Oh, I just bet you were real friendly. That's who gave you the new clothes and the earrings wasn't it? What's his name, Caroline? I'm calling the police. His rear end will be in jail by tonight."

"No," Caroline pleaded. "You can't do that. He's just a friend."

"Don't you tell me what I can't do," her mother shrieked. "And those Stillwaters took you up there and let him have you. I should go over there right now and give them a piece of my mind!"

Caroline wasn't sure what came over her. Resolve maybe. Defiance definitely. Maybe it was her need to protect Toby. He didn't deserve to get in trouble just for being nice to her. "I'm telling you right now, he didn't do anything to me and if you call the police I'll, I'll, run away. I'll leave and you'll never find me."

"Don't you talk to me like that, you little..." She swung hard at Caroline's face.

But enough was enough. Caroline's hand came up to block the

slap and before she could stop herself she shoved her mother with all her might. Virginia Jones stumbled backward sprawling onto the sofa.

"I hate you, Mama!" Caroline screamed. "I hate you! You've ruined everything." Turning, she bolted up the stairs.

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Psalm 37:11

"But the meek shall inherit the land
and delight themselves in abundant peace."

# Chapter 3

*May, Fifteen years later*
*New York City*

Caro glanced up with a smile as her regular morning customers sauntered through the door. "Mornin' y'all," she called.

"Mornin' y'all," Irene mocked. "Caro, sweetheart, if you used that cute little southern accent just the right way it could help you go far here in New York."

"Don't you go listening to her, now," Rosie whispered before she turned to Irene. "Our little Caro doesnae need to use her accent or anything else. Besides, she already has every guy she meets eating out of her hands."

Caro laughed, arms akimbo. "Do you think that could be because I'm a waitress?"

"Funny. But really, kiddo, listen, men here love that stuff," Irene said as she dumped her bag in the empty booth where her two friends, Alice and Rosie had already dropped their stuff. She joined them at the counter. "All you have to do is come with me tonight and you'll come home with a grand, easy."

Tapping her chin, Caro pretended to seriously consider Irene's offer. "Hmmm, I've always wondered what it would be like to be a 'lady of the evening,' but—I think not."

"Suit yourself," Irene said with a shrug.

"Caro has nae need to pick up our profession, do ya now, sweetie?" Rosie said, making her Irish accent more pronounced. She smiled at the sweet young Caro as she watched her pour each woman a cup of fresh hot coffee, provide them with cream and sugar and call in their usual order.

"So, Caro, how'd your audition go? You hear anything yet?" Rosie asked.

Caro turned with a smile. "Rosie, you are so sweet to ask."

"Oh, yeah," Irene agreed sarcastically. "She's so sweet, why, I

don't even need sugar. I could just dip her finger in my coffee."

Caro grinned. "The final cut is not until Thursday."

"That was yesterday, wasn't it?" Rosie asked. "Or is it tomorrow? Oh sakes alive, I've forgotten what day it is again." She put her hand to her forehead. "I think I'm in the first stages of Alzheimer's."

"Today is Friday, sweetie. And final cut is next Thursday," Caro clarified. "Until then, I have to go straight from here to rehearsal every day. It's nerve-racking. Y'all keep your fingers crossed for me."

"Aye, we surely will," Rosie promised, patting Caro's hand. "I've got a good feeling aboot this one, Caro, girl. I'm thinkin' it's the lead for ya."

"Well, I hope you're right, because I really need the work right now. I'm running short this month."

"Did you have to send money to Atlanta again?" Irene asked.

"Yeah, Mom's gotten worse. They've started her on some different medications and I had to pay for part of it."

Irene shook her head. "I don't know why you keep sending your hard-earned money down there anyway. What'd she ever do for you?"

Caro had to think about that. Shrugging, she finally said, "She brought me into the world."

"Get real, Caro," the usually quiet Alice spoke up. "Anyone can do that. Getting pregnant and giving birth is no big deal."

"Oh, leave the poor wee girl alone," Rosie ordered.

Caro smiled as she served them. They were a crazy bunch. They came across as happy and carefree, but Caro knew that wasn't exactly the case. She really liked them, but she worried about them too, because they'd all fallen, one way or another, into the questionable and dangerous profession of prostitution. They made light of it, and Caro didn't want to judge them, but she really did wish they'd get off the streets. Funny thing, though Caro should be the one looking out for them, they were always asking after *her* welfare.

She looked them over. First, there was short, stout Rosie, her black hair cut to chin length. She had startling green eyes and was the eldest of the three. A seasoned veteran, she'd been in the business since she ran away from home as a teen when her parents had first moved here from Ireland. Even though she never quite found a way to remove herself from her situation, she was always looking for ways to 'save the souls' of the working girls she came in contact with.

Rosie had been responsible for getting Alice to at least enroll in

college. Alice was a trim girl with bright red hair and chocolate brown skin, who hoped she would one day be involved in the juvenile defense system. If she survives, Caro thought. Then there was tall, bottle blonde Irene, who was saving for her dream. Irene hoped to buy a small hair salon in a small town in upstate New York, where Caroline suspected she was from.

Working as a trio, they watched out for each other. They had a way of making their lifestyle seem quite attractive, if one could get past the actual deed. They arrived at the tiny diner almost every morning for breakfast before they went home to sleep and had come to know Caro well enough to care about her.

"You still teaching ballet on Saturdays?" Alice asked, snapping Caro out of her daydream. "Doesn't that bring in some extra money?"

"Yes, but that one class doesn't pay enough to help much. I'm gonna talk to Madame and see if I can pick up another class sometime during the week."

"That'd be cool, but I thought you take classes yourself from Madame during the week."

"I do, but I could still teach two days plus Saturdays. I'll tell ya though, if I don't fix my budget soon, I'm gonna have to drop my own classes and take on another job that pays."

"We can't let that happen, honey," Rosie soothed. "You're gonna make it big one day. Don't give up."

"Oh, please. I'll be twenty-seven this year. I'm past my prime. I tried but I didn't make it. At least I can say I tried. It's okay, ya know? I've been in some big shows and I wouldn't trade that experience for anything. Right now, I'm just grateful for any chance I get to do what I love, and that's dance." She twirled and bowed. They applauded.

"Thank you, thank you." She blew a kiss.

"They just let anybody in here."

Caro jerked around at the familiar tinny, greasy, sound of the voice. It belonged to George Mancini, a sleazeball in every way, who unfortunately, was also her landlord.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

"I came for breakfast," he stated, his eyes roaming over her as he slid into a booth.

"Yeah, right. At six in the morning?"

"You got a problem with that?"

"So, order then," she snapped, not bothering to answer his

question. She stood silently waiting for him to place his order, but he snatched the pad out of her hand.

"First things first, Caro. You must have forgotten to put your rent money in the lock box on the way out this morning like you promised. So, I figured I'd do you a little favor and come over here and collect it myself."

She lost some of her aplomb. "I, uh, I just needed to work a few more days to get it all together. I'll pay you after work tomorrow."

"You'll pay me now or you won't have a place tomorrow."

"Okay, okay, I'll pay you when I get off—today." She made the promise having no idea how she would accomplish it.

"Sorry, babe, no can do. I can't think of a reason I should give you special treatment over the other tenants." He looked her over, then ran a finger down her arm. "But maybe *you* can think of something, cuz I'm open to all kinds of suggestions."

Caro jerked her arm out of reach. "I suggest you get out of here before Eugene comes out. I said I'd pay you today, now get." She turned quickly, hoping to make a hasty retreat, but she wasn't fast enough. George sprang up, grabbing Caro by the arm.

Rosie ran for the kitchen, intent on bringing Eugene into the equation. Eugene, the owner of *Eugene's Diner,* could have been the model for the Mr. Clean character. A retired Navy cook, he would make short work of this guy.

George yanked on Caro's arm bringing her flush with his body, stuck his hand inside her apron pocket, and snatched the wad of money she habitually carried with her for safekeeping. Irene jumped on him, pounding on his back, but he flung her off and stood back to count the money.

"You're a hundred short."

"I said I'd bring it to you later," she snapped, trying to keep her voice steady, while rubbing her arm where he'd grabbed it.

"What's going on here?" Eugene demanded, emerging from the kitchen, glowering at George.

George glanced at the big man and began backing toward the entrance. Losing some courage, he nodded at Caro. "I'll go ahead and give you until this time tomorrow. If you don't get it to me by then, you're out."

Eugene advanced, but George made a quick exit.

Caro sank down onto a bar stool, her hands shaking. Eugene put

a beefy hand on Caro's shoulder. "Did he hurt you?"

She shook her head. "No. I just need a minute."

"You want I should take him out?" Eugene asked.

Caro looked up to make sure he was just teasing. "I appreciate the sentiment, Eugene, but no." She shook her head. "I don't know why I let him bother me. He's a jerk and I've brushed off plenty of those in my time."

"He thinks if he puts the squeeze on you, you'll give in and give him what he's after," Irene said.

"Well, that shows just how stupid he is," Rosie said. She turned, sniffing the air. "Um, do you smell something burning?"

"Oh no." Eugene turned and ran to the kitchen. "Take all the time you need, little girl," he called back to Caro.

She sighed. "I don't know what I'm gonna do."

"Get a new apartment. That's what I'd do," Irene offered.

Caro shook her head. "You know how hard it is to find a place in New York. And even if I could find a place, they'd want a deposit and first month's rent. If I can't come up with a measly hundred dollars, how can I afford to move? No, I may as well pack up and go back to Atlanta," she said, sniffing back the tears that threatened. "Though I don't have any assets there either."

Irene put a hand on her back. "Come with us tonight, Caro. You know *The People's Music Awards* are in town. We're gonna work the hotel. Maybe I was kidding around earlier, but really, you would make a killing. It's not as hard as you think, you know what I mean? You get used to it after a while."

Caro looked up into Irene's eyes. As ludicrous as the offer was to Caroline, she knew Irene was sincere. Caro shook her head. "I can't. I'm sorry, but I just can't."

"Look," Rosie said. "We can pull together. Whatever we make tonight, we'll get enough to share with you and help you out."

"That's very kind, really, but if I can't do what you do to make your money, then I can't very well let you do it for me and then take the money from you. Does that make sense?"

"It does," Alice said. "But I think I have the answer. You come to the hotel anyway. My cousin's husband is the manager and sometimes bartender in the hotel lounge. He could use an extra waitress tonight. I know because he asked me if I wanted to help out." She grinned. "I told him it sounded too much like work to me. Anyway, they're gonna

be slammed. Come on down, Caro. You'll probably make two, three hundred easy."

Caro nodded. She certainly didn't mind working hard for her money. "It sounds too good to be true, but I'll give it a try. My daddy always said it never hurts to try."

"Yeah, right before he walked out," Irene mumbled as Rosie elbowed her.

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"Are you sure I look all right?" Caro asked for the third time, as they entered the plush surroundings of the *Grand Marquis Hotel*. She eyed the place, awed by the glitz. The doorways and stairways and elevators were all trimmed in gold. Large lounge sofas were opulent in black and gold velvet surrounded by massive vases filled with fresh flowers. A giant crystal chandelier suspended from the cathedral ceiling made the gold surrounding the front desk sparkle like glitter. There were several shops right there in the lobby including a jeweler, a dress boutique, a drug store and the lounge where Caro would be working tonight.

"Caro, will you stop worrying about how you look?" Irene answered. "In that black skirt and those dancers' legs—girl, you just don't know. Trust me, doll, you look great." She reached for Caro's collar. "Here, let me fix something, though." She unfastened the first two buttons of Caro's white blouse.

Caro gaped at her. Irene shrugged. "What? Listen, honey, a little cleavage never hurts. Now, just work it a little, you know, like bend over low to place a glass on a table. You'll be surprised how that can raise your tip percentage."

Caro only shook her head and re-buttoned her blouse.

"Hey, Maurice," Alice called as they approached the bar.

Maurice came to greet them and to meet the new waitress Alice had promised him. He looked Caro over. "Man, oh, man, Alice. When you deliver, you really deliver."

Alice primped her hair. "Yeah, so I've been told."

The statement caused a burst of laughter and lewd comments from Irene and Rosie.

Maurice frowned. "Now, let's be discreet tonight, ladies. This is a class joint. The wife's pregnant and I can't afford to lose my job."

Alice kissed his cheek. "Don't you worry about a thing. You just keep looking the other way."
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Maurice sent the others on their way to do whatever they had planned to do, and had Caro follow him to show her around, find her an apron and name tag and throw her out into the deep end.

He was surprised and pleased it only took thirty minutes for Caro to become his best waitress. No slacker here. She worked hard. Moved fast. Made nice with the lady customers and made friends with the men. She was great. Definitely different from his other girls. It must be that southern hospitality thing she had going on, he decided. She smiled and chatted with each customer. She hadn't developed the harsh edge that comes from New York living.

She worked nonstop for several hours without a break. When business slowed Maurice finally called her over, told her to take thirty minutes. She nodded gratefully, grabbed a soda, slipped into the back room, and sank down into a chair. Curiously, she pulled out her wad of bills and counted. Four hundred and thirty-nine dollars, and there were still a few hours left to work! Forget a break. She would take complete advantage of this opportunity. Gulping her drink, she rushed back out to the waiting crowd.

"Whoa," Maurice said as Caro hurried past him. "I thought I gave you a break."

"You did, but I decided I don't want to miss out on a minute. I hope that's okay."

He shrugged. "Have at it."

Maurice smiled as he threw ice in a blender and lined glasses up on the bar. This girl is something else, he thought. She has the energy of a child. She only takes a few minutes to rest and she's right back out there, going strong as ever. She's an expert at keeping everyone happy. It's like this is a giant party and she's the perfect hostess. No one seems angry because of the large crowd or the wait on food. She's got everyone smiling, maybe because she's smiling so prettily herself.

Truth be told, Caro was having a blast. The crowd was such a jovial lot, she couldn't help but have fun. She laughed with a group of women who were eyeing the table of men across from them and making outlandishly lewd comments that Caro was sure they would never have made had they not had several drinks already. The women were begging her to play matchmaker when one of the men from the table in question called her.

"Caro?"

She whirled around. Smiled. "Yes, sir. What can I get for you?"

She was looking at a handsome face, with gorgeous dark, cobalt blue eyes. His dark hair curled just above his collar like someone who hadn't been to the barber in some time. He wore a black silk shirt with black slacks. A black Stetson lay in the seat beside him. There were others at the table with him and she figured them to be part of someone's band. She'd been surrounded by musicians all night from *The People's Music Awards* that would air live the next evening. The hotel was supposedly full of celebrities, but she was only concerned with one thing: her rent.

"Sir?" she asked again. "Did you need another drink?"

One of his friends smacked him in the back of the head. "The lady's talking to you, Nash."

He cleared his throat. "Uh, sorry. It's just that, well, I noticed your name tag. I used to know a Caro. You look a lot like her."

She smiled at him.

Oh man, it has to be her, he thought.

"Could be. Are you from Georgia?" she asked.

*Georgia. It is her. It would be too much of a coincidence to meet another Caro from Georgia who looked so much like the girl he remembered. Though this girl isn't a skinny little kid anymore. Lord, she's beautiful. Her blond hair is much thicker and healthier, and, well, she definitely isn't the little girl he remembered. Even though she could still be considered slim, she'd filled out in all the right places*.

"Sir? Are you from Georgia?" Caro asked, wondering if the man had a hearing disability.

"No."

She smiled again. "Then it probably wasn't me. Can I get anything for you?" While she waited for an answer, she balanced a tray on the edge of the table and bent to clear the glasses. Regardless of what Irene had advised, the view Caro gave them all was completely unintentional and she had no idea why one of the men across the table mumbled, "Well then, thank you dear Jesus."

The man who'd originally addressed her glared at his friend, then turned back to Caro. "I'm from Tennessee," he said softly.

She stilled.

"And the Caro I knew, I called her Princess Caroline."

Lifting her hands to her face, the glasses crashed to the floor.

"Yep, it's you," he muttered as he quickly knelt down to where she'd sunk to the floor. He took her hands, stilling them from trying to

clean the mess, and pulled her to her feet.

"Toby?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Toby Smith?"

"Yes, Caroline, it's me."

She stood frozen, as dozens of questions and emotions began churning inside of her. The feelings all came back in a rush. Every emotion she'd experienced all those years ago bobbed to the surface one by one like the remnants of a shipwreck. Fear, sorrow, hopelessness, hatred, loneliness, desolation, pain, embarrassment, longing. So much longing. And so much pain and heartache. She stepped back, couldn't breathe. "I can't believe it's, I mean, I never thought I'd..." She put a shaky hand to her mouth.

Placing a finger under her chin, he tilted her face up and smiled. "Me too, Princess. I thought I'd never see you again, and I can't believe you're right here, right here in front of me."

She pulled away, running a hand over her hair as if she had an urgent need to appear presentable. "I need—I—have to go." She ran.

Toby watched her go.

"Wow, Nash, what'd you say to her?"

Toby grabbed his friend by the lapels. "Jeff, be a good buddy and take care of the bill. I'll see you guys later." He grabbed his hat and tossed it to Jeff. "And hold on to that," he called over his shoulder as he ran after Caroline.

He'd been standing out in the carpeted corridor, waiting for her to come out of the ladies' restroom. Accosted by autograph seekers several times, he was beginning to worry that she'd slipped out without him noticing, but it was just a moment later that the door opened and she stepped out.

"Caroline."

Her head snapped up and he was reminded of that time so long ago when he'd startled her coming out of the bathroom at his home.

"Come here." It wasn't an order. More like a plea.

She moved toward him where he stood by a window, smoothing her hair as she approached. Standing before him, she peered up into his face.

"Does seeing me again make you so unhappy?" he asked gently.

"No! No, it's not that. I just felt so—I mean, I was just so overwhelmed."

"Me too, Caroline. Seein' you again blows me away."

She twisted her hands together as she spoke. "I'm sorry I ran away like that. I thought I was, well, I thought I was gonna be sick. I just needed to get myself under control. I was coming back. Really. I'm surprised you followed me."

He reached out, gently placing his hands on her shoulders. "Let me see if I can explain why I followed you. Since the moment you left my house that cold January day, my life changed. I was sick over you. I missed you. I worried about you. I couldn't get you out of my mind. Caroline, I thought about you almost every day for the last, what, fifteen years? And now I run into you here, I mean, it's like the freakin' twilight zone. So when you took off, I followed. There is no way I was letting you slip away again. I would have waited all night if that's what it took." He smiled at her. "And now, here you are standing right here in front of me. Unbelievable. Just look at you. You've grown into a beautiful woman, Caroline."

She looked down immediately. "Oh, please, Toby, please don't say such things."

"Why not? It's true. And how about me? Do you think I've changed much?"

"You have. You're so tall, but now that I know who you are, your face seems just the same. I don't know why I didn't recognize you right away."

"Toby! Toby Nash? Look, it's Toby Nash!" A group of women converged on them, literally pushing Caroline aside to get closer to Toby. He quickly signed his name on everything they shoved at him. All charm, he spoke to them as if they were all that existed for him in the world.

Caroline stood alone, watching. He was even taller now, like his father, and big. His athletic build contrasted with the softness of his eyes and the long, dark lashes. They'd called him Toby Nash. Her Toby was Toby Nash? Toby Nash, known as the most eligible country artist? Unbelievable. No, very believable. The night he'd sung for his family all those years ago played back in her mind. He'd had a beautiful voice. And now he was at the top of the country charts and a major sex symbol to boot. Not surprising at all. When the women finally left, Toby's eyes met hers.

"We need to talk."

She nodded.

"Not here though. Let's walk, maybe get a bite to eat."

Again, she nodded.

"I don't think you'll need this." He turned her around, untied her apron and tossed it over the arm of a Queen Anne chair.

"Oh, wait," she said as she grabbed the apron and pulled her neatly folded wad of money from the pocket and slipped it into the pocket of her skirt. He gripped her elbow and gently led her out the golden doors. Silently, they meandered down the walk, each trying to sort their thoughts before they put them to words.

Caroline spoke first. "I thought I'd never see you again."

He glanced down at her, suddenly uncomfortable with the pain he was remembering. He drew in a breath. "What happened the night I tried to call you?"

She gave a short laugh. "Other than my mother beating me senseless with the phone receiver?"

It was supposed to be humorous, but it wasn't very funny and neither one of them cracked a smile.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be crude. Sometimes it's easier to make light of things than to face the truth."

He stopped, turned her toward him, searched her face.

She smiled to lighten the mood. He brushed the back of his hand over her cheek. "I tried to find you, but I was too late. After I tried to call you that one time I was afraid to try again, worried it would get you in trouble. I moped around for weeks, trying to decide what to do. I'd promised you I'd never tell anyone your secrets, but I finally broke my promise and spoke to my father. On his advice I tried to call you again, but your phone had been disconnected. So I called Uncle James. When he told me you'd quit your job with them I was worried sick about you. He said you and your mom left the apartments, moved out, and he couldn't get any information on your whereabouts. So, Caroline, where did you go? What happened?"

She sighed. "So much happened the week after I left you." Her chin quivered as she recalled the hellish time. She told him of the beating she'd taken over the earrings, and the trip to the store to buy her mother a candy bar. As she told the story, emotions she thought had long been dried up began to surface. The feeling of being lost and lonely and vulnerable, with no one to protect or take care of her jumped out of some deep hiding place and threatened to consume her. "I needed to talk to you so desperately. I needed..." she stopped, bit her lip

to keep the tears from coming, but was unsuccessful. "I'm such a crybaby," she laughed through her tears, then stomped her foot in frustration because she couldn't stop them.

Toby stood on the chilly New York sidewalk watching her as she struggled for composure and his gut wrenched.

She wiped her eyes with the back of her knuckles. "This is so silly. Everything happened so long ago, I don't know why I'm crying about it now."

Toby couldn't fight the need to take care of her. A need he'd kept in check until now. "Caroline, come here, Princess." He gathered her in his arms and pulled her close.

She buried her face against his chest and let go. Feeling his strength, listening to his steady heartbeat, she realized just how much she had missed her one true friend. And now, she was safe, for the second time in her life.

Toby was realizing how desperately he'd wanted to do just what he was doing right now. He'd fantasized about finding her. He'd wanted to rescue her from the hell he knew she must be going through. Wanting to protect her had become an obsession. Later, she had become the object of other obsessions. When still a boy, he'd wished he'd kissed her that last day under the tree. Truly kissed her. As he'd grown, those fantasies had become much more than yearning for a kiss. And now, here she was, in the flesh. It was making his head spin and his heart pump—and those were the only parts of his anatomy he was currently willing to acknowledge. Was it possible to have such strong feelings for someone he barely knew? There had always been a connection, right from the start. Is there truly a soul mate for everyone? Is that what she is, his soul mate, or is he now simply taken by the warmth and charm of a gorgeous blonde?

The fact is, she's no longer a skinny little kid. She has all the softness and curves of a woman and she feels wonderful pressed against him. He stroked her back and squeezed her tighter, letting her spill all the feelings. When she quieted, he tilted her face up to him and used his thumbs to wipe away the tears.

"It's not too late, ya know. You can tell me now. I mean, everything you wanted to tell me back then, tell me now, and then I'll tell you everything. Just like we promised."

She smiled up at him. Wouldn't it be nice to sit and talk to him? She'd wondered if she ever saw him again would he seem like a

stranger or would they still feel that bond of friendship. She was happy to discover that the bond was still intact. Even though they'd each gone on to pursue their lives, they were still connected. And now her Toby was standing in front of her. No, not her Toby. The world's Toby. "So, are you really *the* Toby Nash?"

He chuckled. "Yes, I am, and I can thank you for that."

"Me?"

"Mm hm. You said you had to at least try to do what you loved. Well, I loved to sing and I decided, why not? Besides, with a name like Toby I had to either take over the farm or become a country singer. There was no in-between."

She laughed. "And you changed your name to Nash?"

"Stage name stuff. Nash. As in Nashville. My manager's doing. Catchy, huh?"

She laughed again. "Very. I can't believe I've listened to you on the radio hundreds of times and didn't realize it was you."

"You never saw me like on a video or something?"

She shrugged. "Don't own a TV or a computer."

He spotted a small Italian restaurant and ushered her toward the door. "Well, anyway, ever hear my song, *Four Days*?"

"It's one of my favorites. Kind of reminds me of the time I spent with you."

"That's because I wrote it about the time you spent with me. About us."

Her eyes filled with tears again.

"Okay, now, you can't keep doing that."

She laughed as she sniffed. "I always was a cry baby."

He opened the door and guided her through. A heavily tipped host settled them in a corner, out of sight of any adoring fans.

Toby shook his head in wonder. "I can't believe I ran into you. I mean, who would've guessed we'd see each other again in a bar in New York City of all places?"

"Did you really think about me?" she asked.

"Thought about you, worried about you, prayed for you. I didn't realize until after you left that I would miss you as much as I did. I'm telling you, Caroline, you made quite an impression on me."

She smiled. "I lived in a few foster homes for a while. At night, I'd lie in bed and pretend you showed up at my door, snuck me out, put me on your horse and rode away." She frowned. "I kept hoping you would

try to call me again, but if it was several weeks before you tried, I was gone by then."

"Gone where? I tried writing, hoping you'd left a forwarding address, but you never answered my letters."

"I never received them. I doubt there was a forwarding address."

He reached across the table, opened his hand. She slid hers into his, reveling in the warmth and strength. "So what happened, Caroline? Uncle Jim said you refused to even talk to them." He paused, hoping she would supply the reason for that. She didn't. Only her eyes told of the sadness she felt.

"It's crazy," she uttered softly. "All these terrible things happened. Once I got back from Tennessee, it was like my mother just went crazy. There were several episodes which I would rather not talk about. Anyway, the defining moment was in February when I passed out at school. I was taken to a hospital, examined, and along with all the bruises, they found I had a concussion from the most recent, um– thing with my mother."

"You can say it, Caroline. I know, remember? I figured you out. The most recent beating. That's what you meant."

She looked down. "She was just so lonely, so mixed up."

Toby frowned. He almost growled. "Please do not defend her to me, Caroline."

She looked at him, her brown eyes blinking slowly. "I just want you to understand."

"I do understand. Your father left her. She was bitter and she started drinking."

"Yes. And sometimes, when someone's drinking, they're not responsible for what they do or say."

He sighed. "Okay, I do understand that, but don't defend her. She was sad and lonely and bitter with good reason. Still, she knew she had a child to take care of and still she drank and then took all her bitterness out on a little girl who is the sweetest, kindest person I've ever known." He paused and tamped down his anger. "So, what happened at the hospital?"

"DFaCS was called in. That's child services. They put me in a foster home for several weeks while my mom went through treatment for drinking. We lost the apartment. My mother was finally released and took a room in an old motel. I was allowed to live with her again under supervision. They would come and check in on us. I hated it, but

I tried to get on with my life. I mean, she was a little better, but there were still some pretty bad episodes."

She drew a deep breath, her head shaking slowly. "It took me a long time before I was able to get up enough courage to try to contact the Stillwaters. When I did, I found they no longer lived in the apartments. I had no idea how to track them down. I suppose they finally had enough money for the down payment on their home. It all happened so fast. I was gonna ask them how I could contact you. Maybe call from their house, but I was too late."

"You must have gone through hell," he said, his voice gruff.

"Maybe, but I think it made me strong."

"Maybe it did. What I don't understand though, is why you felt like you needed courage to contact the Stillwaters. Caroline, they thought the world of you."

She shook her head. "No—you don't understand. They wouldn't think the world of me if they'd known what I did."

He leaned forward. "What did you do?"

She looked up, her eyes wide, startled that she'd said even that much. "It's not important."

"It must've been pretty important to keep you away from those kids. I know you loved them."

She shook her head.

"Princess, what did you do that was so terrible? I can't even imagine. Maybe it's not as bad as you think."

She opened her mouth but nothing came out. The horror of that day replayed in her mind as it had many times through the years. Over and over she could see her hand swinging and striking little Paul's sweet face. She shuddered. How she hated herself for that. She'd never told anyone what she'd done. And that's how it would remain. She couldn't bear for anyone to know what a monster she was. She drew a deep breath. "I can't tell you."

"Why? I thought we were friends, Caroline. Remember? You can tell me anything."

She shook her head. "I can't," she whispered. "I don't want to talk about me anymore. Please."

"Okay." It bugged him that she refused to confide in him. Sighing, he changed the subject, talked about his career, his parents, his brother and sister. He asked her about her career but to his frustration, she avoided that subject too. What could he expect after so long? She'd

lost trust in him. Still, that didn't keep them from holding hands and thoroughly enjoying each other's company.

"Let's give these guys a break," Toby finally said as he realized they were the last diners. He erased any misgivings the wait staff may have had for having to stay late with the size of the tip. He had them nodding and smiling and inviting them back anytime.

Back out on the street, it was cool and Toby slipped his arm around Caroline to keep her warm.

"So, the music awards are tomorrow?" she asked. "Or, I guess, today, since it's so late."

"Yep."

"And then?"

"Actually, I'm gonna be in town for a little while. We are doin' a recording session with Crazy 88 for like a country/rock crossover kind of thing."

"Wow, Crazy 88, that's pretty impressive. I have a friend who's gaga over their lead vocalist." She smiled up at him. "I'm proud of you, Toby. You made it. You're a huge success."

He stopped and grabbed her shoulders, excitement in his eyes. "Caroline, come to the awards."

"Really?"

"Yes, come with me. It'll be great fun," he said, a huge grin on his face.

"With you?"

He frowned. Her answer lacked the enthusiasm he'd hoped for. "Yes, who else?"

"Well, I just mean, well, don't you do that red carpet thing?"

"Yes, so?"

She shook her head. "No way am I gonna parade with you on camera in front of the world so some cheeky thing can add me to their worst dressed list."

"It won't be like that. They don't pay much attention to the country singers. Not the male ones anyway."

"Who are you kidding? No, I can't do that. I'm sorry."

He sighed. She was still such a closed person. Private. He was baffled by the fact that she still seemed to have secrets she wouldn't share with him. Pushing his frustration aside, he drew a deep breath. They'd been apart a long time. Maybe she didn't feel the connection as strongly as he did. Or maybe she just needed time.

"How about this? How about you attend just as one of the crowd?" He watched as she wrinkled up her cute little nose. Her eyes met his and he smiled.

"That might be okay," she finally said.

Pulling two tickets from his wallet, he placed them in her hand. "You can bring a friend. This is prime seating too!"

She shoved them down into her skirt pocket and out of habit, rummaged in the other pocket to make sure her money was still there.

He watched her. He'd been having a hard time keeping his eyes off her all night. Her mouth reminded him of rose petals. Pink, soft. Her upper lip was drawn up like a bow, her bottom lip, full, luscious. Remembering some of his fantasies, he found he wanted to taste those lips desperately. Her brown eyes were soft, expressive, her blond hair smooth and shiny, and that body—she had the most gorgeous legs he'd ever seen. Her calf muscles were ripped, the rest of her, so tight. He shook his head. "Lord have mercy," he mumbled.

"What?" she asked.

"Hm? Oh. Nothing. Just can't believe you're standing right here in front of me after searching for you for so long."

"It's a miracle, isn't it?"

He didn't answer her. His eyes were suddenly dark and dangerous. "Is something wrong?" Caroline asked.

"I'm sorry, Caroline, but I've been wanting to do this for fifteen years and I find I can't wait another second."

Slowly, he pulled her around to face him. Placing a finger under her chin, he tilted her face up and lowered his mouth to hers. His lips brushed over hers softly, giving her time to get used to the idea. It didn't take long. Caroline leaned toward him, melted into him. She purred when he deepened the kiss. She tasted every bit as sweet as he'd imagined. He groaned softly with the sweet agony, his hands sliding through her hair. She sighed. That small sound aroused him beyond anything he'd experienced. Cautiously, he broke the kiss and stepped back, breathless. He felt as if he'd been punched in the gut and he was realizing one very obvious thing; one kiss was not gonna be enough.

Caroline stood swaying, breathless, dazed. Toby had kissed her! Just like she'd imagined all those nights when she lay wondering about him, dreaming of him. Once, she'd tried to push all those desires away, to stop the pain and now they came rushing back like a freight train. The heat pooled in her stomach, spread out in every direction, making

her feel alive for the first time.

"Oh, my," she finally uttered.

He smiled at her reaction. "Oh my, indeed." His hand reached out to cup her face. He moved the pad of his thumb over her mouth. Shivered. Stepped away. "I'd better get you back."

They arrived back at the hotel, surprised to find it to be almost three o'clock in the morning.

"Hey, before I forget, let me get your cell number."

She shook her head. "I don't have a cell phone."

"You're kidding? Everyone has a cell phone."

She laughed. "Not everyone. I can't afford it."

He sighed. "Okay. Well, anyway, where do you live, Caroline? I'll get a taxi and see you home."

"No," she answered quickly. "It's not far and I have friends who are around here somewhere. They're probably worried about me. I need to find them." She put her hand to her cheek. "Oh my gosh! I just realized I took off without saying anything to Maurice."

Why did those words provoke such sudden anger? "Maurice?"

"The bartender. My boss."

"Oh." Feeling calmer, he shrugged. "He probably thinks you quit so you wouldn't have to pay for the glasses you broke," Toby joked, he realized, to hide the fact that he'd been suddenly very worried if she had a boyfriend. Does she, he wondered?

She winced. "I need to find him."

"The lounge is closed. It'll be okay. You can call him tomorrow."

She sighed. "I hope he's not too upset with me."

"I'm sure he'll understand. Now, where are those friends of yours? Or just tell me where you live, so I can get you home." He smiled, touched her nose.

Caroline backed away. She didn't want him to see the crummy little apartment she lived in. She didn't want him to know she hadn't accomplished her dreams like he had. She felt ashamed of her life. Toby had gone and become a big star and she was a lowly waitress in a diner. She looked up at him, gave a short laugh. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. I'll see you at the awards tonight."

He frowned. Just like when she was twelve, she still had secrets, and it was making him feel frustrated and irritable. He wanted to shake her and make her open up. He wanted to say, "I'm here now Caroline. It's me, remember? You can tell me anything." The annoyance of her

refusal to let him in was really getting to him. No. Maybe he was irritable because it was so late or maybe it was because he wanted her so much. He'd never felt such a surge of mixed up emotions. He pressed his lips together as an uncomfortable angry feeling simmered just underneath the surface. Anger? Is that what he's feeling? Is he angry or is the shock of seeing her again putting his emotions in turmoil?

Glancing around, he ran a hand through his hair. "Look, I can't just leave you here in a hotel lobby at three in the morning. I need to see you home."

She smiled. "I understand the southern gentleman kind of thing, but I'm a big girl now, Toby. I can take care of myself."

Now why did that statement bother him? Of course she can take care of herself. She's a grown woman isn't she? She's been taking care of herself for a very long time. What is she trying to say? She doesn't need him anymore?

She took his hand. "You're staying here at the hotel?"

He nodded his head.

"C'mon, Toby. I'll walk you around to the elevator."

Reluctantly, he walked beside her. When they arrived at the elevator doors, they stood silently. Awkwardly. His hand tightened on hers. "Man, I'm having a hard time saying goodbye."

"Me too."

He leaned against the wall, pulled her close to him. "Let me take you home," he whispered.

"No," she whispered back.

The frustration mounted. He fought it down. He ran his hands up and down her arms, snaked one arm around her waist, bringing her body flush with his. She raised her face to him, anticipating. He kissed her softly. Lord, she was sweet. So sweet. Slowly her arms rose to circle his neck. His lips left hers for a moment to taste her just below her ear. She whimpered. More, he had to have more.

His hands slid down her upraised arms, to her waist. She swooned. He held her tighter. He wanted her more than he'd wanted anything in his life. His Caroline was here, in his arms, pressed against him. It was heaven and hell at the same time.

In an awareness somewhere in the back of their minds, they heard the elevator chime, knew someone stepped out into the corridor.

"Well, well, well," Rosie declared loudly, obviously having had a

little too much to drink. "I see you finally got you one, little miss Caro," she said, slurring her words badly. "Now, you need to take that wee laddie upstairs, and make sure you get paid first, dearest. Oh, and if I were you, I'd charge extra for all that kissing," Rosie declared with a sly smile as she sauntered off.

Smiling, Caroline stepped back from Toby to look into his eyes and give him an explanation of Rosie's words. It was almost funny. She started to make a joke about him being her "John" until she looked up to see the expression on his face. She'd never seen him like this before. His blue eyes appeared almost black, his countenance thunderous. Is he actually angry?

"Caroline, you're turning tricks?"

Once again she opened her mouth to speak, to deny, but hesitated. She was so completely floored by the extent of his anger that she could only stand there, her mouth open like a codfish.

Hands on his hips, he talked between clenched teeth. "So, I guess, that's why you didn't want me to take you home. You're not finished working for the night."

The fact that he could be so angry so quickly was fueling her temper. She clamped her lips shut to keep from saying something ugly. Like telling him what a donkey he was being.

"Don't you have anything to say for yourself?" he bellowed.

"You have no idea what you're talking about," she answered sharply, finally finding her voice.

"Oh, I know all right," he came right back. "I know that you let strange men touch you in ways that..." He couldn't even say it. The thought made him feel sick.

"Are you sure you know it?"

"Are you denying it?" *Please deny it, he thought. Please.*

She would. Could. But would be darned if she would give him the pleasure. Crossing her arms over her chest, she glared at him.

"So, when were you gonna tell me?" he interrogated.

"What business is it of yours anyway? So what if I *am* turning tricks? It's not like you've been in my life. Who are you to judge?"

"How much were you gonna charge me or were you gonna give me a freebie for old times' sake?"

Now it was beginning to hurt. How could he say such things?

"How much?"

Her eyes appealed to him to stop, please stop and reconsider the

words he was speaking.

"How much, Caro? I mean, what's the going rate now?" He charged on. "I'm guessin' you must be workin' the musicians in town for the awards. Do you get more for the ones up for the really big awards? Heck, I'm up for country album of the year. I guess that would've really cost me, huh?"

She could feel the sobs working their way up from her chest to her throat. She forced them down again.

He yanked out his wallet. "This should about cover it." Pulling out every bill he had, which was a few thousand dollars, he grabbed her by the pocket on the front of her blouse and shoved them in.

Caroline stumbled away, incredulous. "You, you, horrible..." she stopped herself. Turning, she ran blindly toward the hotel door. She crashed right into one man and fell to the floor. Rising quickly, he began apologizing and made a big show of helping her up and brushing her off, but she didn't stay to hear his apologies. She had to get out of there.

Toby stood by the elevator getting his bearings, trying to fathom what had just taken place. What had just happened? What had he done? More importantly, what had she done? How could she throw her life away like that? How could she give herself to... again, he couldn't even finish the thought. And now, Toby had hurt her. He'd never wanted to hurt her and now he had. Thinking of those big brown eyes looking up at him, he sighed, shook his head, and started after her but stopped himself. He really needed to calm down first. He needed to think. Sighing with exasperation, he ran a hand through his hair and slammed the button on the elevator. The door opened immediately and he stepped inside.

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Once out on the street, Caroline heard Rosie calling to her. She stopped and turned, her hands on her hips, watching her friend approach. Caroline wanted to scream at her, but darn it, Rosie was in tears. Caro couldn't bring herself to heap misery on top of misery.

"I heard everything, wee Caro. I'm so sorry. I messed you up big time, didn't I? Let me make it up to you. I have a whale of a big mouth. It's always getting me into trouble, especially when I've had a wee bit too much to drink. Please, Caro, I'm sae sorry, honey. Say something."

"I don't know what to say." She shook her head violently, allowing the tears their escape. "Oh, Rosie, how could he say those things to
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me?"

The anger came back quickly, though. She pulled the money from her blouse. "Here. You can do something to make it up to me." She placed the money in Rosie's hand. "His name is Toby Nash. Find out which room he's in and take this back to him. And tell him— tell him— oh never mind. I don't know what to tell him."

✞✞✞

Ephesians 4:31-32

"Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

# Chapter 4

Toby's anger remained palpable while he fumbled with his key card and finally slammed open the door to his hotel room. He stormed in, tossing the offending card Frisbee-style toward the dresser and looked up, astounded to find the four band members he'd left earlier that evening gathered at the small dining table provided in each room.

"How did you guys get in here?" he barked.

Jeff looked up, grinned. "Sweet little maid, long black hair, just loves our latest album."

"Great, just great." He ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah, well, how about this? Get out."

"Shh, we're bettin'," Jeff answered. "I'll see your two and raise you five." He nodded at Ace to his left.

"What part of 'get out' do you not understand?"

"It's nice to see you too, Nash," Ace quipped before nodding at Jeff. "I'll see your five."

"What if I'd brought a girl back with me?"

Jeff chuckled. "Oh, we bet on that too." He held his hand out, palm up. "Unless ol' Toby's got a girl in his pocket, I believe you all owe me twenty."

Three men placed a twenty-dollar bill in Jeff's hand.

Toby stormed across the room toward the table, grabbed Jeff's cards and threw them down. "Out."

"Hey, I had a winning hand there."

Billy-Bob, nineteen-year-old twin brother musical prodigies, who moved, spoke and played as one, both reached for their money in the pot. They were an odd pair. William and Robert, who were referred to as Billy-Bob, always responded as one unit. It was uncanny, or as some put it—freaky. William played the mandolin and Robert the fiddle, or so it was believed. It was hard to tell. Freaky they may be, but stupid they weren't. They pocketed their money quickly.

"Alright, Toby, now you've gone and done it. You gone and pissed

me off," Jeff threatened.

"What are you gonna do about it?" Toby scowled. He was itchin' for a fight and Jeff was just the one who could deliver. He'd been his best friend since grade school and was also one heck of a drummer. Almost the same size as Toby, Jeff had obliged him in many brawls over the years.

Jeff rose. "You wantin' to fight me, Toby?"

Toby didn't answer; only spread his arms open wide.

"Well, I'll tell ya, Nash, there's nothing I'd like better than to kick your hind end right now, but ya see, man, we ain't out on the farm. This is a fancy hotel in New York City and I don't think it would be very good press to get thrown outta here."

Six-foot-four, two-hundred-twenty pounds of solid muscle, farm boy Toby, only heard the part about Jeff kickin' his hind end. "You really think you could take me down?"

Ace rose now, along with Billy-Bob. "Well now, maybe he couldn't, but I think the four of us could make a dent, big boy. Now why don't you just settle down."

Toby looked from face to face. Defeated and emotionally exhausted, he slumped down on the bed.

Ace shook his head. He was the eldest at thirty-seven. Ace the bass. Man, he loved that bass and it showed whenever he played. Right now though, he was playing big brother. "So, that skirt, she really messed you up, didn't she?"

Toby lay back, scrubbing his face with his hands. "Man, Ace, you have no idea."

Jeff gathered his cards and what was left of his winnings. "That reminds me, you owe me two hundred for your bar bill."

Toby sighed, pulled out his wallet, then remembered he'd emptied it. "I'm broke. I'll have to owe ya."

Jeff laughed. "You get taken, Toby? Is that what this is all about? That cute little blonde with the gorgeous legs take you for a ride?"

Toby's face darkened. He rose quickly. Ace moved fast, bracing his arms against Toby's chest. "Let's move it, Jeff. You've said enough. I think Toby's good for the money. We'll leave lover-boy here to cry in his beer."

"Don't be late for the red carpet, Nash," Jeff ordered, but softened at the look of despair on his friend's face. "Hey, I'll be in to check on you later."

Finally alone, Toby paced the room, going over the night's events. He tried to put logic to everything that happened and everything he'd said, but he couldn't. Nothing made sense. Why was he so angry? He'd been unbelievably happy to have found Caroline. It was like a freaking miracle. He shook his head. He'd turned and shoved that miracle right back in God's face.

His mind dazed and confused and his energy draining, he stretched out across the bed. Caroline had grown up and had far surpassed what he'd imagined. Only he'd never imagined her selling herself. He should have figured something was up. All night, she hadn't wanted to talk about herself. "I suppose not," he mumbled. He thought about her leaning over to clear the table, giving a little taste of what could be bought. A definite 'hooker' move. What if he hadn't noticed her name tag? What if Jeff had decided to take her up on her obvious offer? He groaned.

He rolled over and buried his face in the pillow. He had to stop thinking about it or he would go crazy. He needed sleep. Maybe he would think more clearly after a few hours of shuteye.

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Caroline finally made it back to her apartment and collapsed on the old worn sofa. She thought she'd become strong over the years. She thought she didn't need anyone, yet the minute Toby had reappeared in her life, she realized she needed him desperately. Why hadn't she told him the truth? Why had she let things go so far? Then again, why had he judged her so quickly and so harshly? Who did he think he was?

"Ohhh," she groaned. Everything was so messed up. And besides all that, she was totally exhausted and in a few hours would have to teach her Saturday morning class. She glanced at the clock. She should be able to get in about four hours of sleep, and then she would teach her class and come home and figure out what she could wear to the music awards, because she *was* gonna go. She would go and show him that she wasn't ashamed in any way. And if he tried to talk to her, she would tell him to get lost, and that would feel mighty good. Her decision made, she leaned her tired head against the arm of the sofa and in only a few minutes was sound asleep.

A few hours later Caroline awoke with a start. Someone was pounding on her door. She stumbled to the door and opened it a crack. "What do you want?" she demanded of George Mancini.

He pushed the door open all the way and strode in.
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"I believe you know what I want."

She shivered as his eyes moved over her.

"Have a long night?" he asked.

She looked down, self-consciously smoothing the skirt and blouse she'd slept in.

"You know, Caro, it doesn't have to be this way. I can be nice." He reached out to touch her shoulder. "Very nice."

She stepped away. "I'm sure." She started to reach into her pocket to pull out the money when he grabbed her roughly by the arm and shoved her against the wall, holding her there with the weight of his body against hers.

"You're not so high and mighty, ya know. You're a waitress. A waitress at a low-class diner, makin' less than minimum wage. Maybe you should reconsider the offer I'm making you."

When she tried to jerk away, he threw her back to the wall and pressed his mouth to hers. She bit down hard.

"Why you little..." George stepped back, wiping blood from his lower lip.

Caro moved away quickly, backing toward the kitchen. "Here, please, just take your money and get out," she ordered, thrusting her hand inside the pocket of her skirt. But the money wasn't there. Panicked, she searched the other side. No money, only the tickets Toby had given her to the music awards. Her face paled. "Where is it?" she mumbled.

Rushing to the sofa, she threw off the cushions, searching. "Where is it?"

"If you think I'm gonna fall for your lost money routine, you're dead wrong, sweetheart. You picked up a job last night, that much is plain. So dish it out, cookie."

She ignored him, desperately going over her steps in her mind. When, where could she have lost it? I know I had it before I ran into Toby. Just the thought of him caused a wave of despair to wash over her. Think, she told herself. I'm pretty sure I had it after we ate at the restaurant. When could I have lost it? Then it hit her. The man. The one she'd run into as she was leaving the hotel. He'd made such a big deal about knocking her down, helping her up, brushing her off. He'd stolen her money. Oh, no. She turned a fearful glance in George's direction. "I had the money. I swear. I think someone stole it."

George advanced on her. "Yeah, right. And pigs fly." He grabbed

her and pushed her down onto the sofa. She struggled to get away as he did his own search.

"What's this?" He pulled his hand out of her skirt pocket and held up two golden tickets.

His eyes big, he snickered. "Well, well, well, what have we here? You got tickets to the music awards?"

Grinning, he held the tickets out of her reach as he rose and stood over her. "These will do just fine, Caro."

"No!" She jumped up, reaching for the tickets but he held her off. "Sorry, Caro, I can't stay, I have things to do." He shoved her away and headed for the door.

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Jeff arrived in Toby's room about noon, but the wake-up call wasn't necessary because Toby was awake and sat against the headboard, his hands behind his head.

"Hey, man. Brought you some breakfast." He threw a fast food bag at his friend.

Toby nodded. "Thanks."

"So what's the deal, bro?"

Toby sighed. "I found her."

"Her? Her who?"

"Her. The one. You know. The girl I told you about. Caroline."

"The girl from the song, *Four Days*? You're kidding."

"Nope. Not kidding."

"The waitress? That's her?"

"Yep."

"Well, that's great! Isn't it?"

"Yeah, except the waitress deal is only a front. She's a prostitute."

"You're kidding?"

"Wish that I were."

Jeff sat and digested the information. "So then, that must mean that life has been pretty rough on the poor thing."

Toby grimaced at Jeff's compassionate words. He shook his head. "She's turnin' tricks. She lets strangers use her body. It makes me feel sick. And mad. Freakin' real mad. I can't seem to get control."

Jeff listened. He was a good listener and what he heard was his friend struggling with a large green monster.

Toby went on. "How can she let men use her like that? The girl I knew had been so shy and timid."
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Jeff nodded. "Okay, then that means things must have been pretty bad for her, huh? I mean for someone as shy as you say she is, to allow strangers to touch her, or for her to touch them, things must've been unbearable. Maybe it makes her just as sick."

Brow furrowed, Toby went over Jeff's words in his mind, groaning as he came to some realizations. "Ugh, how could I not see that? I should've been thinking of her and what she's been through. I should've been thinking about how hard it must be for her to- to—do it. I should've been thinking of how to help her. You know, get her off the streets. Instead I got angry. I let her know just what I thought of her." Toby rose from the bed. "Oh, man. I really messed up."

"Yeah, that's what I'm thinkin'."

Toby groaned aloud at Jeff's remark. His friend never pulled any punches. "I don't know what happened. I just came unhinged, man. The thought of all those guys—ugh."

"Finish it Toby. The thought of all those guys touching what you consider to be yours."

Toby turned and nodded at Jeff, the light beginning to come on. "That's right. I do think of her as mine."

Jeff's brows rose. "Yep, and if you think of her as yours, then you went off on her—why?"

He hung his head and sighed. "I guess because I was jealous."

"Big time."

Toby sat down again, reached for the bag Jeff brought, pulled out a greasy breakfast sandwich and bit off a large chunk. Thinking as he chewed, a sudden epiphany stopped him cold. He dropped the sandwich on the paper. "Oh, Jesus Lord, help me."

"What now?" Jeff asked.

"It's more than jealousy, Jeff. Know what I mean? I mean, yes, I was jealous, but, what I mean is I-I—"

Jeff decided to help. "You love her, Toby."

Toby rubbed his face with both hands. "Yeah, I think I do. I don't understand how it's possible, but I do. I mean, I've been in this girl's presence a total of about four days, and most of that time occurred fifteen years ago. How can I feel the way I do?"

Jeff shrugged. "I guess she is pretty special—regardless of her present profession."

"Man, I have to find her. I have to make it up to her." Toby's mind raced. He needed to see her, needed to rectify the situation. He had no

idea where she was, but he would tear the city apart to find her. Maybe, just maybe, she would still come to the awards tonight. If not, he would head back to the bar, and if she wasn't there, he'd have a talk with that Maurice guy.

Jeff's mind was also racing, but in a completely different direction. He laid a hand on Toby's shoulder. "So, like, this sort of brings up a little complication."

"The entire deal is complicated," Toby agreed.

"Yes, but I think you're forgetting about a major detail."

"What detail is that?"

"The wedding. Your—wedding."

Toby's jaw dropped open. "Oh Lord, I forgot about Tracy!"

"And that, my friend, says it all."

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Madame was watching her favorite student teach a dozen little girls to love dance. Caroline didn't realize she was doing that, but she was, and Madame Pierre was so proud of her. Caroline was so very good with the children, understanding their every need, knowing instinctively where a child might need help or have a difficulty. She recognized their moods and worked around someone having a bad day. More importantly, the children loved her. They loved coming to her class and when they left her and moved on to other teachers, they would already have the love of dance so embedded in their souls they'd be able to face any adversity in their dance career.

"Bonjour, Miss Caroline," the children called at class's end.

"Bonjour, mes petite belles," she answered sweetly.

"Good class," Madame praised as the little ones were collected by their parents. "But you look tired. Are you okay?"

"Yes, ma'am, I'm fine. It's just that I picked up an extra job last night and didn't get much sleep."

"You work too hard, dear." She glanced at her watch. "I have no time now, but, you will come to see me at my office sometime this week, yes? I have an offer I'd like to discuss with you."

Caroline smiled at her as she gathered her things. "I will, yes. I promise." She kissed the older woman's cheek. "Au revoir."

That sounded promising, Caroline thought as she walked home. Maybe I'll be able to pick up teaching some extra classes like I'd hoped. Still, the thought only lifted her spirits for a moment. Her mind kept wandering back to the words Toby had spoken to her last night.
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The beautiful ones and the ugly ones. She was torn between being angry with him and desperately wanting to see him again. When he'd kissed her, she thought she'd gone to heaven. In his arms, she was safe. She yearned for that, but no, he was wrong to judge her. And wasn't she just such a loser because she still wanted to see him again? Funny thing, it didn't matter what she wanted because thanks to George Mancini, seeing Toby was next to impossible.

She could go to the hotel and hang out, wait for him to show. Ick, how needy is that? Surely I have a scrap of pride left, she reasoned with herself. I thought I was a much stronger, independent woman than I'm turning out to be, Caro thought. Suddenly this guy comes back into my life and I turn into a weepy puddle of mush. Yet, am I the sort of person who would be stupid enough to cut off her nose to spite her face? No. I'm practical, down to earth and I do want to see Toby again, if only to set him straight. Still, I just can't go chasing after him after all the hurtful things he said.

Well, she thought, he did say he would be in town for a while. She decided that somehow, she would find a way to see him again.

~~~~

Toby paced nervously backstage. They would perform one of the opening numbers, but that wasn't what was bothering him. His eyebrows rose in question as Jeff approached.

"It's not her," Jeff said, "unless she's wearing a very bright red wig and gained about thirty pounds. There's some greasy guy too, wearing a matching red tuxedo, but maybe you should go look for yourself. I didn't see her face well enough last night to know if this girl is her."

Toby did exactly that and by the time he returned, the show was underway and he was mad again. It wasn't her, and, who was the guy? Probably her pimp. That infuriated him to no end. She'd handed her tickets over to some man who'd probably— ugh. He couldn't keep the visuals from playing in his mind. The thoughts were driving him crazy. It was all he could do to pull himself together long enough to get his performance out of the way.

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Caroline stood in the department store aisle, her eyes glued to the television screen. She turned up the volume. Her heart beat a mile a minute as they interviewed Toby on the red carpet. She should walk away. Just turn and walk away, but she was weak. She felt warm all over just seeing him. He smiled warmly as he spoke. He was humble,

down-to-earth, warm and friendly. Either their little spat last night hadn't affected him at all or he was a really good actor. He told the interviewer it didn't matter who won, he was simply grateful for the opportunity to sing. She could understand that because that was exactly how she felt about dancing.

She was still standing there sometime later when he performed. Caroline thrilled at his voice. It brought back the memory of that wonderful night when she'd sat in his home and listened to him sing. She remembered she'd wanted to stay there, and never go home. She found herself missing him desperately.

"Awesome, isn't he?"

Caroline glanced over at a young woman with a toddler in a stroller. She smiled and nodded. "Yes, he is. That voice could melt butter."

The woman giggled. "I wasn't talking about his voice."

Caroline laughed. "He is one good looking man." She didn't mention that she had been in that good looking man's arms just a few short hours ago.

The woman moved on but Caroline stayed until the end, thrilling when he won the *Favorite Hit Single* category and deflated when he lost out on *Country Album of the Year* to a female group.

When it was over, she admitted, the loneliness and sadness seeped back into her psyche. Her mind kept returning to the feelings she'd experienced at his touch less than twenty-four hours ago. She'd had a few boyfriends over the years, but none had ever made her feel like that; like she would give him anything.

Well, she certainly couldn't stand here and pine away for him for the rest of her life. She must either forget him, or try to see him. Her mind said the former, her heart, the latter. She would follow her mind. She'd never had much luck following her heart, but she immediately reneged. She just had to see him again. Okay, compromise. She would forget him for a few days, give him time to realize he'd made a huge mistake. That's not weakness, she reasoned with herself. It's just common sense.

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While Toby's peers partied and celebrated, he hurried back to the hotel lounge to try to get info on Caro. The bartender smiled up at him as he leaned across the bar.

"What can I get for you, sir?"
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"I'm looking for Maurice."

A second man made his way behind the bar. "You've found him."

"I'm trying to find a waitress you had working here last night, Caroline Jones."

"You mean Caro? She doesn't actually work for me. She was just helping out last night. She's not one of my regular waitresses."

Toby nodded. "Yeah, I know." He ran a hand through his hair. He didn't want to be reminded of that fact. "So, listen Maurice, I, uh, I need to locate her."

Maurice's eyebrows rose. Alice had told him about Caro's excursion with the singer. He wasn't sure if he should give this guy any information at all. So far, he saw no reason to do so. "I'm sorry, sir, can't help ya. She was a last minute hire. I didn't even get any paperwork on her and she left before her shift was over. I have no idea where she went."

Maybe it was years of playing poker that made Toby sure Maurice was lying. He looked around the room to see if he could spot her but to no avail. Sighing heavily, he turned back to Maurice.

"Look, man, I get that you're trying to protect her. That's cool. I can appreciate that, but you see, Caro and I go way back."

Maurice shrugged. "Yeah, well, Yankees and Red Sox go way back, if ya know what I mean."

Toby nodded. "Point taken." He realized he was gonna have to get personal with this guy. "Okay, listen, Caro and I have been friends since we were kids. Seeing each other again last night sort of blew us away and we left here together. If you're mad about her not finishing her shift, it was my fault. We were so excited about seeing each other that she didn't even think about the fact she was on the clock. When she realized what she'd done, she was horrified." He reached for his wallet. "That reminds me. Let me pay for the broken glasses."

"Your friend already took care of it."

Toby's eyes narrowed. So, if Maurice knew Jeff was his friend, he knew more than he was letting on. "Look, I messed up. I upset her. I only wanna find her to apologize. I swear, that's all I wanna do."

The two men stood face to face, each measuring the other. Maurice finally shrugged. "I know she works at a diner. Eugene's Diner. Eight blocks south, two blocks east, on the corner. And that is all I know."

Toby extended his hand. "You are a life saver."

Maurice smiled. "When you find her, tell her she's the best

waitress I've ever had and she can work for me anytime."

Toby was smiling as he stepped off the elevator and headed down the corridor toward his room, but his smile faded as he approached and found a woman leaning against his door.

He raised his eyebrows in question as he neared her.

"I have a message for ya, from Caro."

Heart pounding, he waited for her to speak.

She thrust a handful of bills out toward him. "She doesn't want your money and she says to go to hell."

He sighed heavily.

When he didn't take the money she grabbed his hand and placed it in his palm, then turned to leave, her chin held high.

"Wait, do you know where she lives?"

Rosie stopped, looked over her shoulder and laughed out loud. "Like I would tell the likes of you."

"Wait, please," he pleaded. "Please, will you just talk to me?" When she looked doubtful he added, "Just for a minute."

She moved toward him, a wary look in her eye.

"What's your name?"

She thought and couldn't really see any problem with telling him. "Rosie. Rosie McShea."

Toby smiled his most charming smile. "Well, Rosie McShea, I think it's great that Caroline has a friend like you. I mean, in her, uh, profession, you need friends you can trust."

"If you're trying to charm me, it's not a very good start."

He blew out a breath. "Look, she sent you here so you must know the story. I was wrong. I shouldn't have judged her. It was a gut reaction. I only want to apologize. If after that she still doesn't want to see me, I'll go away but, please, at least give me a chance."

Rosie frowned. "You mean it's okay she's a hooker? You forgive her?" she asked sarcastically.

"No. That's not what I mean. I want to apologize to her. I want her to forgive *me* for being so stupid, for judging her."

Rosie smiled. "You were stupid, ya' know."

"So I've been told."

She looked him over, considering. Caro hadn't told her to set him straight about her profession, yet, since Rosie herself was the one who'd caused the problem to begin with, she should at least try to fix the situation. "You're wrong, ya know. Caro is not a hooker."

"What do you mean?"

"She's not a hooker," Rosie enunciated slowly. She went on to tell him how the entire misunderstanding took place.

By the time Rosie had finished, Toby was happy and miserable at the same time. Happy she hadn't turned to the streets, but so sorry he'd hurt her. He never thought he would be included in that category.

"I have to make this up to her," he murmured. "I owe you big time, Rosie McShea."

"Yeah, you do."

"Will you tell me where she lives?"

Rosie shook her head. "Can't do that—but she'll be at work at Eugene's at 6:00 AM Monday morning." She poked her finger at Toby's chest. "Now, you make yourself useful and make her smile again, got it?"

Toby took her hand. "I was serious, you know, what I said earlier. I'm genuinely glad Caroline has a good friend like you."

Rosie blushed. "Oh, go on now."

Toby smiled as he watched her leave. His heart felt much lighter as he unlocked his door, noticing the key card worked perfectly this time. Figures. Taking a quick shower, he stretched out across the bed. His mind was rushing about, wondering how he would be able to win Caroline's forgiveness and her heart. He loved her. He did. Never had he felt this way about a woman before. Not even with his fiancée, Tracy. Especially not with Tracy. Tracy. What in the world was he gonna do about Tracy?

What could he have been thinking when he'd consented to marry her? How could that even have happened? She was attractive, yes, he admitted. He'd met her at a charity fund-raiser where he'd been headlining. She was daddy's little rich girl, who, according to her, was misunderstood, used and abused. That's how she'd gotten to him, he just realized, damn his soft heart. He was usually a pretty good judge of character, but, heck, she was good.

His own family hadn't been very taken with her and had let him know, which had only added to the 'I'm so misunderstood' melodrama. According to Tracy, her father had begun to demand she marry and marry well. There was no way he would let her reach thirty and remain single in his home. He had some old-fashioned idea about her becoming an old maid after thirty. Tracy had been so dramatic. How could she live on her own? She had no job, no career. How could her

father actually expect her to work and support herself in a matter to which she was accustomed? She'd gone on and on.

Toby had been through several botched relationships and had begun to think "falling in love" to be a much sought-after and unobtainable illusion. At least for him. One day, at a weak and not very sober moment, he'd finally given in to Tracy and consented to the marriage, figuring he'd never find real love anyway. Now though, he realized, that was because he'd already had it. What he thought was only an illusion turned out to be something real. Love is real and blissful and he finally understood the world's preoccupation with it.

He shook his head in disgust at his stupidity. Why hadn't he known real love existed? His parents were certainly in love with each other, and his sister and her new husband, and the Stillwaters. No wonder his parents had been so frustrated with him when he and Tracy had become engaged.

Well, now, he'd finally seen the light and he intended to fix everything. He pulled out his phone. A quick call to Eugene's told him the diner was not a twenty-four-hour establishment. As soon as he ended the call, his phone vibrated. He answered without noticing the caller's ID.

"Yeah?"

"Hello, darling. I'm so happy for you. *Favorite Hit Single*! It's so wonderful! I wish I could've come with you, but you know Daddy. If I had missed his sixtieth birthday, we would never hear the end of it."

Toby grimaced. "Hello, Tracy."

"Hello, Tracy? Is that all you have to say? Oh, Toby, are you down because you lost out on *Country Album of the Year*? Don't worry about it, darling. As soon as you do what I've been telling you all along, get rid of that makeshift band, hire on some real musicians and maybe a professional songwriter, you'll make it next year for sure. Not that the songs you write aren't good, but just maybe you need to expand some. You know what I mean? Anyway, we can talk all about this later. So tell me, how much do you miss me?"

He held his silence just a moment too long.

"Toby, are you there?"

He sighed. "Yeah, I'm here, Tracy."

"What's wrong, Toby?"

"Hmm? Uh, nothing. Just a little tired." He stopped. No, he wasn't gonna lie to her. Or to himself. Not anymore. That's the least he could

do. She deserved the truth. "Tracy?"

"Yes, darling?"

"We need to talk."

This time it was Tracy who was silent.

"Tracy?"

"Talk?"

"Yes, talk."

"I suppose this is not to discuss the colors on the wedding cake?"

"No, it's not. This is something important."

"Well, I beg to differ, Toby. I think the colors on our cake are *very* important. Monumentally important."

"Yes, I know you do."

"So, what are you saying, Toby? That we don't think alike? That we think different things are important?"

"Tracy, please stop twisting my words and going 'round in circles. It's maddening. Now, this is not something I want to discuss over the phone. I'll fly home. Just give me a few days. I'll need to get to a break in the recording session."

She bucked up pretty quickly. "Don't bother flying home, Toby. Whatever you have to say, you say it to me now. It's obvious it's not good news, at least not for me, anyway." She paused briefly while she thought. "Look, Toby, if it's a 'girl in each town' kind of thing, it's all right. It's not like we can't work around that. I understand you are a young, virile man. Don't worry about it. You've always had such a conscience." She gave a brittle laugh.

He closed his eyes. "You gotta be kidding me. I may be the worst kind of creep, but I don't use women like that. How can you think that? You know me better than that."

"Well, then, what is it?" she demanded, her voice becoming agitated. "What else could it be? Is there someone else? I mean, in the few days you've been in New York, have you suddenly fallen in love with someone else? Have you realized in the few short hours we've been apart that you don't want to marry me? Have you met someone you just can't do without? What is it?"

The remarks she made were meant to be ludicrous, so how could he tell her they were all true?

"It's not like that, Tracy. It's a very long and complicated story."

"So, there *is* someone else and you *are* breaking off our engagement?" she shrieked.

"Tracy, if you would just give me a chance to explain. I want you to understand. I want you to know it has nothing to do with you." Oops. He knew immediately those words were a mistake.

"Nothing to do with me?" She was screaming now. "This has everything to do with me, you son of..."

He held the phone away from his ear. "Now, calm down, Tracy."

"Calm down? Don't you tell me to calm down!"

"Look, what I mean is, well, if I could just make you understand. It would be unfair to you if we were to get married."

"Yeah, well, tell ya what, Toby, why don't you let me the judge of what's best for me?"

"Tracy, you deserve to marry someone who's head over heels in love with you. Look, you know I care for you, but I've never told you anything other than that. You know as well as I, that we agreed to marry more to help you out with your father than for anything else."

"Yes, but I thought you'd grow to love me. And you would, Toby, I just know it, if you would just give us a chance."

"Tracy, that's not the way it works."

"Of course it does, darling."

"Tracy, you should have let me come home and talk all this over with you."

"Come home then, Toby. Come home and I'll show you how good it can be."

"Tracy..."

"Come to me and I'll make you never want to leave me."

"Tracy!"

"What? Just say it, Toby. What do you want to tell me?"

"Darn it, Tracy, why do you make me have to be blunt? Look, my heart belongs to someone else. I've recently realized it always has and I've also realized it always will."

Silence, however, this one was not golden. It hung black and ominous in the air. Then he heard the sniff. Oh, no. "Tracy, don't cry. I had to be honest with you. We would never have been happy."

"I hate you!" she sobbed before she slammed the receiver down.

"Join the club," he whispered.

He hadn't wanted to hurt her, but he couldn't live the lie even a minute longer. He turned out the light and stretched out on the bed, letting his mind wander. Visions of Caroline's sad eyes floated through his brain. He could see her as a child, with that tremendous goose egg

on her forehead, dreading going home to her mother. She'd looked at him last night with those same sad eyes, only he'd been the one to make them sad. Now he'd done the same thing to Tracy. His mother said he was always trying to heal the world. Well, he was doing one heck of a job today.

He pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes. Caroline came back into his thoughts. He remembered how her mouth tasted. The kiss for which he'd waited so long had been everything he'd imagined. She'd felt so good, so right, in his arms. It had been obvious she felt the same. Then he'd blown it. Groaning, he rolled over onto his stomach. Sleep would be hard coming tonight.

✞✞✞

Psalm 51:6

"Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart."

# Chapter 5

Caroline peered through the window of the diner as she knocked to let Eugene know she was there. "What in the world?" she mumbled. Eugene had a grin on his face as he unlocked the door and held it open for her and swept his arm out wide.

"They're all for you, little girl," he declared.

Caro's mouth opened wide, but no words uttered forth. The diner was filled with flowers. Roses, daisies, carnations, lilies. The fragrance was overwhelming. "What? Who?"

Eugene shrugged. "Take a look. There's a card on each one."

She opened the one nearest to her, a beautiful bouquet of daisies and babies' breath.

*Please forgive me, Princess. I was wrong. I was jealous. I need another chance.*

She looked up at Eugene. "They're from Toby."

Eugene considered himself to be the big brother that Caro never had, so he put a proper big brother frown on his face. "And just who is this Toby?"

"He's a guy I've known since I was young." She sighed and shook her head. "Puppy love."

"From the look on your face, I'd say it's more than that."

"No, I don't think so," she argued a bit too quickly.

"Well, then, since it's just puppy love, you won't mind if I see the card?" Eugene took the card from her hand.

"Sure, I don't care," she said with a shrug.

While Eugene examined the first card for clues, Caro moved on to the next.

*Dear Caroline,*

*It doesn't matter what you do for a living. I was angry because I couldn't stand the thought of anyone else touching you. I've realized it's because I want you to be mine. Only mine. Please forgive me. Love, Toby.*

She handed it to Eugene, went for the next.

*Princess,*

*I can't let you slip through my fingers again. I'm an idiot. What I'm trying to say is, I love you. I do. I know that probably sounds strange to you since we haven't had very much time together. I didn't realize it back when we were kids. But finding you and, in the same night, losing you again, I figured out what I was feeling. I do love you, Caroline.*

And the next.

*I think I've been in love with you since we were kids. Forgive me.*

And the next, and the next, and the next. All of them said essentially the same thing. He was sorry for getting so angry. He'd been jealous and took it out on her. He'd discovered he loved her and would do anything to prove it.

Each time she read the words 'I love you,' it gave her a thrill. Her heart beat faster. Her face began to glow. She was thinking she returned those same feelings. Hadn't she thought about him steadily for the last fifteen years? Hadn't she dreamed about him coming back into her life? And now, hadn't she thrilled to his kiss? Didn't she long to be in his arms again? But— pigs would fly before she would tell him that. He would not get off that easy.

Eugene watched her and smiled. Caro seemed different. She was always pleasant, a real sweetheart, but her eyes never reflected the pleasure he saw in them now. She actually seemed happy. Oh, she tried to hide it well enough, but this Toby fellow must be something to have his Caro glowing like a candle. They turned as the regulars came filing through the door, wide-eyed.

"Wow, it looks like FTD threw up in here," Irene quipped.

Rosie smiled as she read one of the cards. "He's a fine young man, that one," she purred.

Caro shot her a fierce look. Caro hadn't forgiven him yet and Rosie was supposed to be on her side, but Rosie only shrugged with a smile. "What?"

"You know 'what' well enough. That *fine young man*..."

"Let you know he was upset you'd taken on my way of life?"

"That's enough of that," Caroline declared. "Eugene, get to cookin'. Y'all sit down and relax. I have a hard day ahead and don't have time for this nonsense."

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The second Toby's recording session ended for the day, he headed for the diner, only to discover that Caroline had already left. So, Toby took some time to get acquainted with Eugene instead. He left feeling assured that both he and Eugene had Caroline's best interests at heart, and with the address to the rehearsal hall holding Caroline's auditions.

Toby sat quietly in the back of the auditorium. Caroline's performance was mesmerizing. She was wonderful. Maybe he was a bit biased. No, no, being quite objective, he felt Caroline was the best. Unfortunately, some of the others were struggling, sending the choreographer into a dramatic rage. Suddenly he threw some papers and screamed Caro's name.

She moved forward to the apron of the stage and peered out at the man. Toby sank down into his seat. He didn't want her to catch him watching without her permission. He hadn't been able to help it. Once he knew where she was, he couldn't resist going to see her.

"Take group 'A' backstage," the choreographer demanded, "and work with them until they know the routine backward and forward."

"But," she began.

"What?" he snapped at her.

She smiled nervously. "I'd, uh, I'd like to stay with the main group to get the lead dance parts down."

"Look, Caro, I already know what you can do. Now, I need your help. And so do those girls. 'Cause if they don't get this dance down most of them will be out. Got it?"

Caro nodded in defeat. "Got it," she said softly. She turned and left the stage.

Toby considered what he'd just witnessed. The choreographer had led Caro to believe he thought she was the best. Otherwise, why would he call on her to instruct the others? Maybe he did think she was the best, but Toby wasn't fooled a bit by the ploy. It was a clear "booby prize" kind of thing. He had no intention of selecting Caroline for the lead dancer. He already had his girl selected. It was obvious he favored the buxom brunette. He'd asked Caroline to help because she was good and to let her know at the same time that even though she wouldn't get the part, he still thought she had value. It was a shame because she was good. Really good. At least from his uneducated point of view.

Toby slipped out before Caro noticed him watching. He had no wish to make her feel uncomfortable and more importantly, no wish to raise her ire. He thought about her as he headed back to the hotel.

She'd been beautiful on stage. Her hair pulled back away from her face accentuated her eyes. Had she always had those high cheek bones? Of course he remembered that cute little chin, and look at those gorgeous legs. He shook his head. Man, he had to stop thinking like this. His Caroline deserved only respect.

In the morning, he would find out if the flowers and cards made any impression on her at all, because he didn't have to be at the studio until eleven and that meant he would be at the diner first thing. That would give him five hours to obtain her consent to have dinner with him. He hoped it was enough.

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Irene's tirade on police officers came to an abrupt halt when a new customer breezed through the door, a tall, strong, handsome man. Alice and Rosie turned at once. Alice's mouth dropped open. Rosie smiled broadly. Caroline paled.

He sat at the bar. Being the only waitress until seven-thirty when the next one arrived, Caro had no choice but to wait on him. Frowning, she took out her pad and stood poised, aloof, and waiting for him to speak.

"Hello, Caroline," he said softly, reverently.

She didn't answer.

"Will you talk to me?"

"So you can insult me again?"

"I'm sorry, Princess. I made a mistake. Can you understand that? I went kind of crazy. The thought of men with their hands all over you, it just made me nuts."

She raised her eyebrows, crossed her arms and tapped her foot.

He sighed. "I was jealous. Please, forgive me."

"You were more than jealous, Toby Smith. You judged me. And you hurt me."

"I know. I know, and it kills me to think that I hurt the one person who actually means the world to me. I was wrong, Caroline. I don't know what else to say."

"I hadn't realized you had such a bad temper."

He shrugged. "Me neither. I mean, really, I don't know where it came from. Maybe it's because I've never cared enough about anyone to get that angry."

"Hah, that's a good one," Irene interrupted.

He turned and grinned at her. "I thought it sounded pretty good."
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When the giggles from the other side of the diner, subsided, Toby turned back to Caroline, who remained stoic.

"Is it hopeless, Caroline? Is there any chance that you can forgive me and let me start again?"

"I might," she said slyly.

"You might?"

"I might think about it."

Toby looked to Rosie and her friends with a smile. He winked. Rosie giggled. Caroline frowned.

"Traitors," Caroline hissed as she passed her friends.

Eugene emerged from the kitchen to greet Toby.

"Hey, pal," he said casually.

Toby shook his hand. "Nice to see ya."

Caroline watched this exchange, hands on hips. She was fuming. "You two know each other?"

Eugene shrugged. "Toby came by yesterday. We came to an understanding."

"Oh, really?" she said, feeling totally betrayed. She turned to Toby, who merely shrugged.

"Eugene, an understanding about what?"

"Just man talk, little girl. That's all you need to know."

She turned away, seething.

As Toby ate breakfast he kept up a steady conversation with the customers around him. Quite a few recognized him. Some even asked for autographs, even though most New Yorkers were pretty savvy about that kind of thing. By the time Toby left that day, everyone knew the famous Toby Nash was in love with their favorite waitress. They also knew that same waitress refused to even go out to dinner with the celebrity.

Toby tried one last time before he had to leave. Cornering Caroline by the kitchen door, he took her hand. "Please, Princess, consider having dinner with me tonight."

"I have a lot to do."

"Then tomorrow?"

She only shook her head. "Go, before you're late."

Dropping her hand and looking totally dejected, he left the diner. Caro watched him leave. She had to smile. Wasn't this fun?

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When Toby walked through the door Wednesday morning,
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Caroline's brow creased. He looked terrible. Tired. Worn. If it was because of her she would feel very guilty, but it probably wasn't her at all. It was probably because of the recording session. She'd heard that they could be rough going. Regardless of how tired he looked, Toby forced a smile as he quickly went to greet Caroline's trio of friends before he took his seat. When Caroline approached to take his order, he took her hand. "Good morning," he whispered.

She looked down at his large hand holding hers and then back up at his tired face and she couldn't help but be a little concerned. "You okay, Toby?"

His smile widened. "Does that mean you care?"

Caroline pulled her hand away and glared.

Toby sighed. "I'm fine. A little tired is all. We worked late into the night. No more tired than you, I'm sure."

Before she could answer, Eugene approached. Toby nodded at him and Eugene reached up to tune in the radio. He then took Caroline by the shoulders and sat her down.

"Eugene, what are you doin'?"

"Shhh," he hissed.

*And now we have a very special early morning dedication.*

Caroline's gaze swung around to Toby, but he wasn't gloating. Only love shone in his dark blue eyes.

*Our next song is one by Toby Nash and is going out from Toby to the woman he loves, Caroline. He hopes you will remember the beginning because he wants to be there all the way to the end. For Princess Caroline, with love.*

*Four Days* filled the diner with its melancholy melody, bringing tears to Caroline's eyes. She wasn't the only one. Rosie was dabbing at her eyes with the napkin Eugene offered her.

When the song ended Toby went to Caroline, knelt before her. "I have to leave. We're getting an early start. Keep me in your thoughts." He stood, pulled her to her feet, lifted her chin, placed a soft kiss on her lips and left her swaying.

Toby returned at lunch, his guitar in tow. The diner was much different from the first few times he'd been there. It was bustling with hungry customers and busy waitresses. Another cook was helping Eugene. Toby caused quite a stir as he entered. Caroline whirled around, obviously surprised by his noon visit. He smiled at her and nodded at Eugene before setting his guitar case on the floor in a corner

of the diner.

As Toby opened the case and removed the guitar, the diner became hushed. Caroline peered around her in amazement. All eyes were on Toby. He definitely had their attention. She was wondering just what he had up his sleeve this time when he began to speak.

"Hello, everyone. I'm Toby Nash, and if you haven't heard yet, I'm madly in love with your waitress here." He pointed the end of his guitar at Caroline. She scowled at him.

"I messed up royally and made her mad at me. I've been trying to make it up to her but she won't budge. So, today I'm gonna sing to her. Hope you don't mind."

"You sing your heart out, honey," an elderly lady called out.

He began to play a well-known song asking the question, "how do I live without you?" As he sang, he followed Caroline around the diner while she tried her best to continue waiting on her customers. He thought he had her cornered once, but she spun away. Finally, though, he got position and suddenly it was just the two of them, her back against the wall, nothing between them but the guitar itself.

She trembled as he continued to serenade her. His voice was smooth as butter. And warm. And deep. And beautiful. And she loved him. She truly did. And she had carried this game far enough, because she wanted him. She wanted him like she had never wanted anyone or anything in her whole life.

His song came to an end and the diner was silent. Toby was gazing into her eyes as he strummed the last note. Her heartbeat fluttered against her chest. Caroline struggled to catch her breath, then, the guitar was pressing against her as Toby leaned forward. She could resist no longer. She lifted her mouth to him and he took what she offered. Softly at first, then fervently. She didn't care that others looked on. She only cared about the rush of joy and love that flooded her heart.

When he pulled away the rushing sound in her ears faded and she was surprised to find the entire clientele of Eugene's diner applauding.

"Have dinner with me tonight?"

She couldn't find her voice. She nodded.

"I'll come for you. Where do you live? And don't give me the runaround this time."

She pointed out the window, across the street toward the southwest corner to a rundown brick building with a large green door. "Second floor, apartment 'A'."

He smiled. "See you tonight."

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Caroline took her time dressing. She settled on a white skirt and a white blouse with tiny pink butterflies on the lapels. The straight skirt, belted with a gold chain, was tight and came to just above her knees. She turned slowly in front of the mirror, making sure she was presentable. Her hair came sleekly to her shoulders and turned up in a little flip. She gave one last shake of her head as she heard the knock at her door.

Her smile fell, however, as she opened the door to find George Mancini in the threshold. She tried to slam the door, but he blocked it with his foot.

"What do you want now?" she asked, exasperated.

He ran a finger up her arm. "Well, don't you look good all dolled up like that?"

"Stop it," she said, jerking her arm away. "What do you want?"

He glared at her. "Just reminding you, next month you owe your regular rent plus the hundred you were short this time."

She drew in a sharp breath. "You took my tickets instead of payment!"

"Did I?" He grinned. "Prove it."

"Get out."

He moved closer to her. "Unless of course, you want to change your mind about other things."

She moved away. "I'm expecting company, now get out."

He looked over his shoulder then back at her. "Fine. Just remember, an extra hundred."

Only a few seconds later Toby made his way up the stairs. He nodded at the scrawny Italian lookin' dude who darted past him. Toby turned to watch him with a frown. He looked familiar.

The thoughts were wiped from his mind though, when Caroline answered the door. My goodness, she was something. She smiled at him. Sunshine. Pure sunshine.

"Hey," she said softly.

"Hey." He shook his head in amazement. "You look beautiful, Caroline. I still can't get over how you've grown up."

"I know what you mean. Seeing you again, it's like a dream."

"Well then, here's hoping I never wake up."

She giggled.
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They went back to the Italian restaurant they'd visited the night they'd run into each other. The staff remembered them and seated them among whispers, winks, and talk of lovebirds. Toby smiled at Caroline across the table.

"Tell me about you, Caroline. Last time we were together, we talked about the past and about me but we didn't talk much about you. Are you dancing like you told me you wanted to?"

She smiled, realizing how silly she'd been to try and keep him from knowing about her life. Besides, she actually was dancing and that's what she'd said she would do. "I am. I've actually been in twelve Broadway productions now and a whole bunch of smaller shows. And I also teach dance."

"You do? Where?"

"I teach at Madame Pierre's New York School of Dance."

"Wow, that's pretty cool. That's a big deal school. Even I've heard of that one."

"Madame Pierre is my teacher. She is a wonderful lady and an extraordinary teacher. She was the prima ballerina for the Paris Ballet back in her day. The Ballet de l'Opéra national de Paris," Caroline said with a smile. "It's a great honor that she allows me to teach for her."

"That's wonderful, Caroline. And your French sounds authentic, not that I would really know. So you teach dance, you perform, you work at the diner, you speak French, any other little secrets?"

"You mean like prostitution?"

He grimaced. "Touché. I just meant, you already do so much, is there anything else?"

"Okay, I'll be nice. Umm, I take classes three days a week, in the evening." She laughed. "Except I skipped tonight's class."

"Uh oh."

"No biggie. The big thing right now is I'm in the middle of an audition. I'm up for the lead dancer and actually, final cuts are tomorrow. I haven't had any really big parts in a while, so I'm hoping to get this one."

Toby looked into her eyes. He hated to see the hope there that he was sure would be disappointment tomorrow.

"So, are there other parts besides the lead dancer?"

"Well, there's the chorus, which is only ten people, of which only five are female. Then there's the main dancer. The entire show is based on dance so it's a really big part."

"Sooo, tell me, if you don't get the part, what will you do?"

She shrugged. "Hmm, if I don't get it, then I guess I'll do what I always do, keep on keepin' on."

He smiled. "You always were strong, Caroline."

Toby reached across the table, took her hand, rubbed his thumb over her wrist, sending chills up her spine. Leaning down, he softly kissed the skin of her palm.

She licked her lips. "You don't know what you're doing to me," she complained.

He looked up, amused. "Don't I?" Motioning for the bill, he helped her up. "Let's walk."

Spring in New York meant the nights were still cool. She shivered slightly, making Toby recall the time they'd met and she had nothing to keep her warm but a ragged sweater. He removed his sport coat and placed it over her shoulders, because he never wanted her to be cold again.

She smiled a 'thank you' as he took her hand. They moved slowly along the sidewalk in silence. It felt good, Toby thought. It felt right. What an amazing coincidence to come to a giant city like New York and find his Georgia girl. It was like it was meant to be. The thing is, he not only felt physically close to her, but emotionally too. Maybe even spiritually. He never wanted to be away from her again. Sighing at the realization that he was way too far ahead of himself, he peered down at her. She wore a very serious expression, making him wonder what she was thinking about. She looked up, her eyes meeting his, making his heart turn over with the love he felt for her.

"Toby?"

"Yes?"

"Where will you go when your recording session is over?"

Good, Toby thought. She's thinking about the future, maybe even thinking along the same lines as him. He tried to act cool. "I suppose I'll head back home to the farm to rest."

She frowned. "I'll miss you."

He stopped their progress and turned her to face him. "Come with me, Caroline. Just for a visit. The farm is beautiful in the spring. Wouldn't it be fun to go back to where we first met?"

She smiled sweetly. "It would be heavenly. I'd love to go back there, but I can't. I mean, I have obligations. People depend on me."

"I'm sure they do, but those same people care enough for you to

know you deserve a little rest."

Toby watched as Caroline silently considered his offer. She was adorable. Every bit as cute as she'd been fifteen years ago, only with a few more curves. As she thought, she rubbed a finger up and down the lapel of her blouse. His eyes lingered on the movement, completely mesmerized.

She glanced at him, catching him watching her. He quickly took her hand, stilling it, and breathed a sigh. Tugging her arm, they continued silently down the walk. He had no idea she was about to blow him away.

"Toby?" she said softly.

"Yes?" he answered, thinking she'd made a decision about coming to the farm.

"Make love to me."

He stumbled. Caught himself. Stood motionless. "Wh– what did you say?"

She smiled shyly. "I'm pretty sure you heard right."

He stared at her, unable to put a sentence together. She'd responded so well when he'd kissed her palm in the restaurant, he'd decided tonight he'd get more kisses. And maybe in a few months, once she was sure of how she felt about him, he'd marry her, and then he'd have her in his bed. She'd beat him to the punch.

"Well?" she prodded.

"Caroline, I-I mean, you can't be serious?"

"Of course I'm serious. I wouldn't say it unless I meant it. I don't play games."

"But Caroline..."

"What? What's the matter? Don't you want to?"

He swallowed hard. "More than you could possibly know, but I thought, I mean, I thought to take things a little slower."

"Why?" She looked up at him innocently.

"Why? Uh, why? Um, because I don't want to make you mad at me again, maybe?"

"Toby, I promise, it won't make me mad. I mean, why play games? You want me. I want you. Make love to me, Toby."

He shook his head. She'd always been honest and open, calling it like it is. There wasn't a pretentious bone in her body.

"You're shaking your head. Are you telling me 'no'?"

"Caroline," he hesitated, running his hand through his hair.

"Caroline, I'm trying to do the right thing here, sweetheart, I mean, the honorable thing."

She smiled provocatively. "That's sweet, Toby, but the woman you say you love has just asked you to make love to her. The right thing would be to do it, wouldn't it?"

"But Caroline, uh, I mean, uh..."

Caroline turned and leaned back against the window of a closed computer and TV repair shop. Smiling, she crooked a finger at Toby who came to a halt in front of her.

"What?"

She lifted his hand, brought it to her mouth, kissed his palm softly. Her other hand snaked around his neck and pulled his head down. Their mouths came together. He moaned as his body came to life. She whimpered and pressed herself against him.

Groaning, he pushed himself away and stood there breathlessly gazing at her sweet face. He had to clear his throat before he could speak and then it was only a couple of words.

"Come on."

Toby grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the hotel. However, it was taking entirely too much time to get there. He had to stop every ten feet or so to kiss her. At the corner before crossing the street. At the side of the hotel against the brick. By the large golden doors. As they waited by the elevators. On the elevator. Against the wall in the corridor. And against the door to his room as he swiped the card to unlock it. They tumbled through.

Toby tossed the key card on a table and advanced. Finally, they were out of the public eye, behind closed doors and he had her permission to show her how much he loved her. But Lord have mercy, he thought. This isn't right.

He gazed at her. Her eyes were wide with the wealth of feeling she was experiencing. Her chest heaved with the labored breaths she was taking. Beautiful. So beautiful. His body yearned for what she offered, but his mind was telling him to STOP. What was he doing? It was their first real date. Is this how he should be treating the woman he loves and wants to marry? Why did she so suddenly ask him to make love to her? Something about it didn't seem right. He calmed himself down, took a deep breath and smiled at her.

"Caroline, I know you've read the words because I wrote them about a hundred times when I sent you all those flowers, and I know

you've heard me sing the words, but I want you to hear me speak the words. I love you, Caroline." Cupping her face he kissed her reverently, softly, then stepped back. "But I can't do this."

She smiled sweetly. "Sure you can." Her fingers reached out, and unbuttoned his shirt. He couldn't move.

"Oh my," Caroline purred. He was gorgeous. She'd known he was a large man. Only now, with his shirt off, she could see his chest rippling with muscle, sinew and bone.

Her words brought Toby out of his trance. He took her hands in his and removed them from his chest. "What are we doing? This isn't how this should be going."

"This? This what?"

"This, our relationship. We are better than this—this barreling over a cliff kind of thing. Why are you so intent on rushing things?"

She smiled, began unbuttoning her own blouse. He quickly took her hands again, stilling them, turning her smile to a frown.

"Why are you in such a hurry?"

She looked up at him, eyes wide. "I'm not sure."

"We don't have to rush things. I'm not going anywhere." He pulled her over to sit on the bed. "Talk to me, Caroline, tell me what you're thinking."

"I don't know. I mean, you love me, isn't making love the next logical step?"

Toby thought, swallowed hard. "I think the next logical step would be to get to know each other a little better. We've only been in each other's company about a week's time, and half of that was over fifteen years ago. Yes, it feels like we were meant to be together, but still, I don't feel right about the direction we're headed. It's not that I don't want you, 'cause Lord have mercy, the wanting is powerful. But I want this to be a long, happy relationship, ya know?"

She nodded, wide-eyed. "Well, to be honest, I don't know much about the direction a happy relationship should go. I've never been in one. I've never been with anyone. I just thought, you love me, you would want to make love to me, and I don't want to lose you and..."

"So, you think if you don't give yourself to me then you could lose me? Princess, you could never lose me. And, please know, I *do* want to make love to you, but I want to do things right. I want to do right by you, and if you've never been in a relationship, then that is an even better reason for us to take this slow. But, hey, let me back up a sec,

you've never been in *any* relationship?"

She shook her head. "Not really. I've dated a few times, but it never lasted. I assumed because they always want to go straight to sex and I didn't, so they wouldn't call me again."

The light started to go on for Toby. "So, what you're saying is, you thought that if you didn't give yourself to me, then I wouldn't call you again?"

She shrugged. "I guess. I mean, I wasn't thinking that outright, but maybe subconsciously. I don't know that much about love."

"So, Caroline, you're a virgin?"

She laughed. "Well, yes I am, and I guess I will remain so."

He sighed. "I mean, you're a twenty-seven-year-old beautiful woman living alone in New York City. It never crossed my mind, I mean, you being a virgin."

"Well, no one ever made me want to, like, do it, ya know? Not until you. You make me feel things I've never felt before."

He smiled at the thought. When he thought she was a hooker he'd been jealous of men who didn't exist. She was his. Totally and completely. And oh how he loved her. She hadn't said anything to him about love, but all these feelings couldn't be one-sided. She'd been willing to give herself to him. Well, if she didn't love him, he will do whatever it took to make her love him, because he now knew, he could never survive another separation.

She yawned and stretched out on the bed.

"I bet you're pretty tired."

"Yeah, I am. I just want to close my eyes a minute."

He rose, pulled the blankets over her. "Rest your eyes a minute, and then I'll get you home."

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He sat at the small table, writing down the words flowing through his brain. Raising his head, he gazed at her. She'd fallen asleep. Poor thing. He knew she'd been up since five that morning. She'd worked eight hours at the diner, attended a grueling rehearsal for three hours, got all dressed up and went out with him. And she had to do it all over again tomorrow. Only tomorrow for her was not gonna be a pleasant day. She would suffer the disappointment of not making the lead dancer and he would make sure he was there for her.

He rose, straightened her covers and softly kissed her forehead. He headed back to write some more, but turned at a pitiful sound. Caroline
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was whimpering in her sleep. He reached for the light and peered down at her, touched her arm softly. "Caroline, wake up."

She drew a startled breath, sat up quickly. "Huh? Oh, Toby." She smiled and sank back onto the pillow, peeked up at him. "Hi. What time is it?"

"It's one-thirty."

She frowned. "Oh my, I need to get home."

He smiled down at her. "Why don't you go ahead and sleep. I'll take you home in the morning."

She smiled up at him. "Okay. So, then, why did you wake me?"

"You were crying."

Her smile faded. "I, uh, must've had a bad dream."

"You can't remember?"

"Nuh uh."

He sighed. She'd come a long way from the abused little girl he'd first met, but the scars were there, and he hated that he couldn't change the past. He reached down to fix the covers again.

She stilled his hand, held it tight in hers. "You really love me?"

He smiled. "You don't believe me?"

"It's not that, it's just," she shrugged. "I don't know, people say the words all the time."

"And then their actions say differently," he added.

She nodded. "Yeah. I'm not even sure I believe in love."

He pulled his hand back, turned and sat next to her. He realized she spoke of very deep pain. It wasn't love in general she was questioning, but the fact that she herself could be loved. She hadn't had much evidence of it during her life. He thought hard, searching for the words that would be right. "Princess, you must know that there are a lot of people who love you. You are an incredible person."

"Oh please."

"I'm not kidding."

Her clenched jaw told him she truly didn't believe him. "Okay so, maybe your mother didn't show you the love she had for you. Somehow, she got lost along the way. She got lost in her own pain, but that doesn't mean she didn't love you."

His own words made him suddenly realize why she'd tried to make excuses for her mother earlier, because he was doing the same thing now. It was in an effort to understand and to believe that her mother did love her somewhere deep inside.

He sighed. "I guess I was lucky. My parents were there for me. They taught me how to love and also how to receive love. Now I need to teach you how to receive love, because I do love you, sweetheart."

"You make me sound so pitiful. I hate that."

"Well, I don't mean to do that. You don't seem pitiful to me at all. You seem incredibly strong and brave and independent to a fault. I'm proud to know you. None of that involves pity. To be honest though, I do think about what happened to you as a kid, and it does make me hurt for that little girl."

"You've always been honest, Toby. I like that about you, but I feel like a freak. You know, like look at the poor little girl with the black eye, or, I heard her mother kicked her in the stomach and made her cough up blood."

Toby swallowed. "Did that happen?"

"Does it really matter now?"

He touched her face. "Everything matters." He controlled the shudder and pushed the anger down. "So, tell me, how old were you when that happened?"

She shrugged. "I really don't remember. I was pretty young, I think. It was before I met you, but you're wrong, Toby. It doesn't matter. What I went through was not nearly as bad as what others have experienced, and it wasn't a constant thing. There were good times too. I don't want you to feel sorry for me, because there are others much worse off than me."

"Sure there are, however, you're the one I know and love."

"Well, I really don't like talking about me. I don't want what happened to me as a child to define who I am as a person. Besides, talking about it makes me feel freaky."

"Okay, Princess, we won't talk about it anymore if you don't want to, but Caroline, you're not a freak. You're a survivor. There are emotional scars. There would be for anyone. The thing is, let me help you overcome them. Let me love you, and then maybe one day you will come to love me too."

She looked up at his face, surprise registering on hers. "One day? Oh, Toby, I've been in love with you since we were kids."

He smiled. "Really?"

She laughed. "I thought you knew."

"I can't read your mind. I'm just a man. A man who is very much in love with you and is extremely happy to know you feel the same way

and a man who..." He stopped.

"Who what?" she persisted.

He sat on the bed with his back against the headboard and pulled her over to sit in front of him, wrapping his arms tightly around her.

"Who wants nothing more than to hold you right now."

He'd been about to tell her he had plans to marry her and take her away to live on his farm in Tennessee. Instead, he whispered in her ear. "Give it time. Everything will work out. Just let me try to make you happy. I want that. Your happiness."

Surrendering, she leaned her head back against his chest and drifted back to sleep.

The next time she woke was because Toby was nibbling on her ear. She giggled and opened her eyes. They were still in his bed, only they were snuggled together side by side. She turned to face him.

"Good morning," he sighed.

"Yes, it is," she said with a smile.

He touched her nose. "This night has been the most wonderful night. Just holding you, watching you sleep. I could die a happy man."

"Well don't do that before you make me an experienced woman."

Toby frowned. "Unfortunately, I have to get you home and showered and delivered safe and sound to the diner or Eugene will come searching for us with shotgun in hand."

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Toby paced around Caroline's apartment as he waited for her to shower and dress. The building was a dump but Caroline had her small hole in the wall neat as a pin. Everything was in its place: two plates in the cabinet, two cups, a thick red sweater hung on a peg by the door, and just below, a blue baseball bat leaned against the doorframe—a form of self-defense, Toby speculated.

A pad of paper and sharpened pencil lay next to a phone on a small accent table. He frowned, because he remembered she'd said she didn't have a phone. Filing away the information he continued exploring her life.

The only seating was a large, worn, beige, overstuffed sofa with a throw over one of the arms. The other arm showed a heavily worn bare patch. Opposite the sofa was a table with a small portable record player. He smiled. They were coming back into fashion. There was a stack of worn albums next to it, obviously second-hand. Toby thumbed through the collection. Classical and show tunes, mostly. He found a
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Pink Floyd album. Hmmm, that's interesting, he thought. A couple of '80s dance collections, Bonnie Raitt, Lynyrd Skynyrd, soundtrack from Oklahoma, A Chorus Line, and Cats, and then Reba McEntire, and Loretta Lynn.

Two books from the local library rested in the windowsill. An old-fashioned radiator sat in one corner, which appeared to have not been used in years. A small board, painted light-green, lay on the top of the radiator where a vase of silk flowers nestled between two framed pictures. Toby lifted one and peered closely at the faces.

It was his Caro, the one he remembered. She was standing in front of a townhouse apartment building, holding Lynn Stillwater in her arms while Paul Stillwater stood proudly beside her. He touched the picture with his hand. She was so small. Barely big enough to lift Lynn. It was difficult to picture anyone laying a hand on such a delicate looking child. He had to shake himself mentally.

He picked up the second picture. A young man and woman stood smiling at the camera on a beach. In between them, a tiny little girl with a sand pail dangling from her fingers, held her other hand up to block the sun from her eyes. His heart went out to the little girl. She had no idea what life was ready to shove at her.

"Mother says the woman who took the picture is the one my father ran off with."

Toby turned at her voice. "Your mother was very beautiful."

"You think so?"

"I can see where her daughter gets it."

She frowned. "Please don't tell me I look like my mother."

"Sorry." He glanced around the apartment, looking for something else to talk about and remembered the phone. He pointed at it. "I thought you said you didn't have a phone."

She giggled. "I said I didn't have a cell phone. You didn't ask about the house phone."

"Can't argue with that," he conceded with a laugh.

She smiled. "Let's get out of here. I don't want to run into anybody on my way out."

"Run into anybody? Who are you expecting?"

She looked decidedly uncomfortable.

"You have a roommate?"

"No."

"Then who are you afraid of running into?" Toby's brow furrowed.

"There is someone you're avoiding?"

"My landlord, George. He's not a nice man. I try to have as little to do with him as possible."

"How is he not nice?"

She shrugged. "He tries to collect the rent."

Toby smiled. "Isn't that what he's supposed to do?"

"Yeah, well, I've been a little short in cash and he tries to get me to pay in other ways."

Toby's blood pressure began a steady ascent. "Has he ever touched you?"

"Come on, Toby, don't start that jealous stuff again."

"This is not jealousy. It's a matter of your rights. Has he ever touched you?"

She lowered her eyes. He tilted her face up to him. "Well?"

She rolled her eyes. "Sure," she said nonchalantly. "All the time. I mean, nothing that I can't handle. I will say this; I hate him. He has no respect for women."

Toby fought down the fury and tried to sound calm and logical. "You realize of course, he has no right to touch you, even if you can't pay the rent. Have you filed a complaint?"

She shook her head. "I don't think anyone would listen to me."

"Why would you think that? Anyone is entitled to file a complaint. Just go down to the police station and file."

"And what would that get me? They'd probably advise me to pay my rent on time."

"They might speak to him. He might think twice before he touches you again."

"No, it's more like they might speak to him and he'd come flyin' up here in a mad rage."

Toby sighed. Even after all these years she was still the abused little girl. "So is your landlord the guy I saw in the hall yesterday? Black hair, skinny dude?"

"Sounds like him."

"He was also the one who was in your seat at the music awards, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"Did you give him the tickets?"

Her eyes blazed. "No, I certainly did not. He took them."

It was all beginning to come into focus for him. "Took them?

How?" Toby asked.

"He just came in and took them from me."

"Did you let him in?"

"He doesn't seem to need an invitation, Toby. He barged his way in and demanded the rent money. When I couldn't find it, he grabbed me and, well, anyway, he took them."

"Couldn't find it? Where was your rent money?"

"I lost it."

"How did you lose it?"

She scowled, hands on hips. "I don't like being made to feel like I'm being interrogated."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to sound so pushy. I'm just concerned. I love you. I care what happens to you."

She gave a tiny smile. "All right. I suppose I can understand that. Look, if I tell you how it all happened can we go?"

He nodded, his arms folded across his chest.

She explained how some guy took her money, and how George took her tickets. And Toby found he wanted to commit murder. He fought to get control of the anger that threatened to consume him. He comforted himself, thinking she wouldn't have to deal with this guy much longer, not once he asked her to marry him.

"Hello? Earth to Toby."

"Sorry. Does this Mancini guy live in the building?"

"No. Why? What are you gonna do?"

"I was thinkin' I might have a word with him."

"No, Toby, please, don't start anything. I can handle him."

"How? By trying to avoid him?"

She looked down. "That's not fair. I'm handling the situation the best I can. I hate confrontation, Toby. I'd rather just let things be."

Of course she hated confrontation. Her life had been nothing but a series of confrontations. Pressing his lips together he nodded his head. "Okay. We'll play it your way. Just tell me one more thing. How much money do you owe him?"

She scowled up at him. "I don't owe him anything until the first of June, and if you think for one minute I would take money from you to pay my rent you're sadly mistaken."

"Okay, okay." He grinned. "You're cute when you're mad."

"Humph. If you think this is mad, you ain't seen mad."

He laughed, pulling her close to him and lowering his mouth to

hers, slowly rubbing his lips over hers. "You deny me the pleasure of fighting for my lady's honor."

"I can't think straight when you do that," she answered as she lifted her mouth for a proper kiss.

"That was my intention."

They were five minutes late arriving at the diner. Eugene was already at the door looking out for her. The men nodded at each other. Caro smiled up at her boss, kissed his cheek and strolled through the diner, humming. Toby sat at the counter and took Caroline's hand. "I have to be at the studio soon, but I'll be back here before three. Would you consider letting me come with you to your audition today?"

She nodded with a smile. "I'd love to have you there, Toby. Today is the day for final cuts. I'm sure I'll make the cut, but hoping I'll go one more and get the lead. If that doesn't happen, you'll be good for morale."

"Then I'll be here at three." He stood, took her in his arms and kissed her. She didn't want to let him go and snuggled in closer, laying her head on his chest. He stroked her hair, took a deep breath and stepped back.

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"Well, I'll be darned, boys," Jeff said loudly as Toby strolled into the studio.

The boys from Crazy 88 held off toying with their instruments to hear the conversation.

"What?" Toby asked. He glanced around at everyone staring at him. "I got hair stickin' up or somethin'?"

Jeff grinned. "I believe my man got hisself laid last night."

"Gimme a break, Jeff," Toby commanded, though he wasn't very convincing since his face was beginning to turn red.

Jeff held his hand out to all present. "That will be a hundred big ones, my darlings."

"Jeff," Toby said, "a hundred bucks? You don't pull any punches, do you?"

Jeff shrugged. "A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do."

Even the Crazy 88 band members were paying up, Toby noticed. "Well," he said sarcastically. "I'm so very glad I could oblige everyone for their entertainment, AND I'm so sorry you'll have to give back their money."

"What are you talking about?"
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"'Cause I did NOT, git myself laid, as you put it."

"Aww, man," Jeff complained.

All the guys quickly retrieved their money.

"Then what's got you lookin' like the cat that got the cream?" Jeff asked with a sly smile.

Toby shrugged. "I guess that's how a fella looks when he knows he's in love."

"When do we get to meet her?" Billy-Bob asked in unison.

"Geez, how do they do that?" Evan, Crazy 88's lead singer, asked.

Both of the young men shrugged. "We don't know. It just comes out that way."

"Don't try to understand Billy-Bob," Ace comforted. "It will make you crazy."

"Anyway," Toby continued. "I'll try to bring her by before we finish up. Now, let's quit talkin' about my love-life and get to work. I've gotta be out of here by two-thirty."

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Toby sat in the auditorium while the director and choreographer did their little speech about how everyone was good and it was too bad they couldn't use them all and how hard the decision had been and so on and so on.

The director left, leaving the choreographer to do the dirty work and make the final choices public. Toby was a little surprised that he didn't take the easy way out and simply post the list on the door. Instead he began announcing names of the lucky chosen ones, beginning with the lead position. Caroline's expression never changed when the brunette was being congratulated by her young peers, but Toby had an idea what she was probably thinking. Caroline herself had been made to work with the girl to help her get it right. The girl no more deserved the part than a tourist on the street. Yet it was hers. Toby had known Caroline would not get the part, but he thought the director would be smart enough to keep Caroline in the show and by his side. Apparently, he wasn't.

The choreographer read the list of remaining dancers. The puzzled look on Caroline's face said it all. It was more than just a surprise that she didn't even make the chorus. It was a kick in the gut, like the one she'd described last night.

Toby ran a hand through his hair. Watching her on the stage, looking lost as everyone else cleared out, was devastating. Toby
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watched as the choreographer approached Caroline and laid a hand on her shoulder in consolation. He was saying something to her, making some sort of excuse, Toby figured. Finally, Caroline turned, gathered her things and headed toward the steps. Toby met her at the bottom. She looked up into his face, her eyes moist. She said nothing. He touched her cheek and put his arm around her. "Come on."

He didn't speak another word. Didn't even try to comfort her. Anything he had to say would seem shallow. Instead, he led her down the street, around the corner to an amusement park. He stopped at the ticket booth and bought a hundred tickets. Caroline didn't speak but her eyes grew wide. He glanced down at her. "Trust me."

They started on the carousel, progressed to the Ferris wheel and then the tilt-a-whirl. She finally smiled when he smashed into her in the bumper cars. After the fun house they took time to eat sausages and chocolate ice cream cones. She leaned her head against his. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

They sat quietly on a bench watching people as they hurried by to ride the next ride. Toby observed Caroline as Caroline watched a mother with her five children. The mother was explaining that they had spent all they had budgeted for and it was time to go home. The children were trying to talk their mom into just a few more rides, all but the smallest child who was grinning up at Caroline, making her smile. The rather harried mother followed her daughter's gaze up to Caroline and nodded politely.

Caroline smiled at her. "You have a lovely family."

"Thank you. They're a handful all right."

"Hold on just a moment," Caroline said. She turned quickly to ask Toby for the rest of their tickets. He already had them held out to her. "My boyfriend got a little carried away and we were just gonna throw these in the trash. There's probably eighty tickets here. Please take them for me. I'll feel much better if you can put them to use."

"Are you sure?" the woman asked.

"Absolutely," Caroline insisted.

The woman took the offered tickets and spoke to her children. There was a whoop of glee as they were informed of the new plans. On their mother's insistence, each child came over to shake Caroline's hand and say thank you.

Toby leaned close to her as the family hastened toward the

carousel. "You are a saint."

"Oh, go on." She smiled at him mischievously. "It was your money I just gave away."

"What's mine is yours, Caroline."

She frowned. "That's not true."

He had to remember he hadn't approached the subject of marriage with her yet, even though it was now solid in his mind. He quickly changed the subject. "You're good with children. I bet you want to have a dozen of your own."

She looked up at him, eyebrows raised. "Actually, no. I don't want any children. None," she reiterated and then rose and walked away before he could say anything.

Toby puzzled over that one as he ran to catch up to her. How could a sweet, wonderful person like Caroline not want any children? She was truly complex. Life with her would never be dull. Still, the fact remained; she didn't want children—and he certainly did. He would have to get down to the bottom of this, only now was not the time. He caught up to her, took her hand and strolled quietly through the park. It was Caroline who finally broke the silence.

"I suppose you're disappointed in me."

"For what?"

"For being a lousy dancer."

"I'm sure that's not the case."

"Then what is it? I know I'm better than half the girls that made it. Or maybe not. Maybe it's like those people on *American Idol,* you know, people who think they can sing when they really can't."

"Well, now, you've already been in a bunch of shows, right? So I'm sure it's not that you can't dance."

"Then what is it? Am I getting too old?"

He sighed. "I don't know, Princess. I thought you were fantastic. What did the choreographer say to you there at the end?"

She shrugged. "Nothing that really made it any better. He was sorry. It was all simple politics. Roxanne, the girl who got the lead, is the daughter of one of the producers. Several of the girls in the chorus are her friends. There wasn't room in the budget for any extra people." She let out a ragged breath. "I trained most of those girls."

He tugged on her hand. "It doesn't surprise me. You know what they say; that's show biz."

"Yeah, right," she said bitterly, glancing up at him, her mouth

tense. "Everything seems to come so easy to *you*."

He grimaced, knowing those words meant she intended to take out her frustration on him. Oh well, he could take it if she needed to vent. He glanced down at her. "Hey, it wasn't so easy. I worked hard for what I have," he said.

"Oh, yeah. Let's see, hmmm, I think I'll be a country singer– poof– you're a star."

"It was hardly like that."

"Wasn't it? Did you have to take years of study, battering your body until you could barely stand, having blisters on top of blisters, working your way through the ranks of thousands to finally get a chance to simply audition?"

She stopped. Stood still. Slowly, her head lifted to look up at him, tears swimming in her brown eyes. "I'm sorry. I am being so mean-spirited."

"Oh, darlin', it's okay. You're hurting, and when people hurt they tend to strike out."

"No one knows that more than me." She put her hands to her face. "I'm so sorry. Of all people, I should know better. You see? You see what kind of person I am? And you wonder why I don't want children. How can you love someone like me?"

He stopped her tirade by taking her by the shoulders and giving a small shake. "Stop it, Caroline. I do love you. With all my heart. You're a good person, a wonderful person. You're being much too hard on yourself." He gathered her close and hugged her hard. Sighing, he released her and tilted her chin up. "Will you believe me when I tell you everything is gonna be all right?"

She smiled. "You've always made everything all right. Problem is, you haven't always been around."

"I can be."

Her eyebrows rose. "You're gonna move to New York?"

"New York? Uh, don't think I can do that. I need the fresh country air of home, but Caroline, when we're done with the recording session, come with me. Wouldn't you like to see the farm again? Just for a week. I'll take you out riding and we can stroll through the woods and play in the creek and have a blast. Please, come with me."

But she was already shaking her head. "I don't see how I can. Who will cover the diner for Eugene, and who will teach my Saturday class?"

"Any number of people, Caroline."

She thought, sighed. "I'll think about it, but I'm not promising anything."

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Jeremiah 29:11

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

# Chapter 6

"I thought maybe you had forgotten to come and see me," Madame Pierre began.

Caroline nodded at her friend and teacher. "I'm sorry. I almost did. So much has happened this week."

"Yes, I heard. The mother of one of my students said your name was on the radio. Some famous singer is in love with you, no?"

Caroline smiled warmly. "Yes."

The elder woman clapped her hands together. "Oh, this is wonderful. Is he very handsome?"

"Yes, he is."

"Good, because you are so beautiful, we cannot have you going around with a revolting looking man."

Caroline laughed.

"Well, then, let me tell you quickly what I want to discuss with you. You, my darling, are a teacher magnifique. The little ones respond so very well to you. To put it in a nutshell, you are a treasure. I want you to stop dancing in all those little shows and come work for me exclusively. You could be the next Madame of my school and that is no little thing. We have quite a reputation here, as you well know. Every child who seriously considers dancing as a way of life wants into our school. We have students here from all over the world. I have no children, little Caroline. You are the closest to that kind of thing that I will ever have. And I could not be more proud of you if you were my own flesh and blood. I wish you to begin working with the advanced students."

Caroline frowned. "But Maria works..."

"Maria has lost her spark and is becoming bitter. Though I give her credit for what she has accomplished, I cannot allow my students or my reputation to be harmed. Caroline, I will pay you well. Trust me, little one, you will not suffer financially. So, there. I have laid all my cards upon the table, no? You have but to think about it and bring me an

answer."

"I'm honored and humbled by this, Madame. I don't know what to say."

"Say nothing now, my darling. Go home. Think. Talk it over with your new man."

Caroline nodded then looked up, deciding to take advantage of the meeting. "Speaking of my new man– he wants to take me on a trip, a little vacation back to Tennessee where we first met."

"Oooooh, then my sweet, you must go," she encouraged. "How very romantic!"

"But..."

"No 'buts'. Go, darling. Just let me know when and we will cover your classes."

Caroline impulsively kissed the woman on her cheek. "I believe I love you, Madame. You say I am like a daughter? Well, you are the closest thing to a real mother I've ever had."

Madame's eyes misted. "Oh, pooh. Now go. You will be here to teach Saturday?"

"Yes."

"Au revoir until then, little one."

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"Hello there, little darlins," Toby crooned, greeting Caroline's trio of friends.

"Well, hello, handsome," Rosie purred back.

"Someone is in a happy mood today," Irene commented. "Feeling de-stressed are you?"

Rosie elbowed her. "Shut up, Irene."

"I'm feeling like a cup of coffee from my girl here," he said as he sat at the counter.

Caroline smiled. "Hey."

He smiled back. "Hey." They gazed into each other's eyes.

Irene broke the silence. "Well, someone say something."

"Oh, um." Toby cleared his throat. "So, you feelin' any better?"

Caroline raised her eyebrows in question. "'Bout what?"

"About that farce of an audition."

"Oh, that." Caroline shrugged. "It's not the end of the world. Life goes on."

Toby saw that as a great opening. "That's right, it does. Even when certain people go off on a little vacation."
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"Well, this person is finding it hard to let people down who've been so good to her. I've thought about it, Toby. I even spoke with Madame Pierre."

"And?"

"And she said she would get someone to cover my classes, but I still can't see how I can just up and leave. I mean, there's still Eugene to consider. I can't just leave him stranded."

"It'll be a short trip. A week. Two tops."

Her eyebrows went up at the "two" he'd casually thrown in.

"When's the last time you took some time just for yourself? I bet never. Come home with me. Please."

Toby hadn't realized everyone else had been listening. Apparently, they all felt they had to put in their two cents' worth.

"Oh, come on, Caro, what in the world is holding you back, honey?" Irene wanted to know.

Caroline placed her hands on her hips. "I can't just up and leave my responsibilities and go running off at the drop of a hat."

"What responsibilities?" Eugene asked, coming in on the tail end of the discussion.

"Working for you, for one," Caro suggested, eyebrows raised.

Eugene shrugged. "You need a vacation, little one, you just say the word. I'll find someone to fill in."

"Who? Just who are you gonna get to take my place?"

"I'll work for him if he needs someone that badly," Rosie said, surprising everyone.

Eugene smiled. "That would be great, Rosie."

"Rosie hardly knows how to run this place," Caroline countered.

"Then train me. I'll start training today. It won't be long before I'm as good as you."

Caroline looked from face to face. "Fine. I'll train you, but eat first. You'll need your energy."

While Caro's friends joked and laughed about Rosie working at the diner, Toby quietly watched. Caroline didn't think she deserved to be loved, yet all these people loved her. They were the family she never had and Toby was grateful to them. After a few more minutes, he stood.

"I have to get goin', darlin'. I'd like to come by and see you tonight, but we're trying to wrap today and I have no idea what time we'll finish so don't count on me."

She nodded. He pulled her around the counter and into his arms. "Have I told you today how much I love you?"

She shook her head.

"More than words can say, Princess." He kissed her and turned to leave. "Work hard, Rosie, so Caro can leave for our trip soon."

The women sighed with pleasure as they watched him go. "My, my, my, Caro, your life has certainly become interesting," Rosie uttered as she slowly shook her head.

Caroline smiled. "He's pretty nice, huh?"

"You mean he's nice and pretty," Irene laughed.

"Pretty? That man is too hot for words," Alice said.

"That man is your knight in shining armor. Don't you let him slip away," Irene cautioned.

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An impromptu shopping trip to buy some essentials for her impending vacation put Caroline in a happy mood. As she made her way back to her apartment, she couldn't stop smiling. Everything was working out. Rosie had been a quick study, Madame wanted Caro as a protégée, and she was about to spend a wonderful week with the man she loved.

She decided to take a stroll through the park on her way home. Why is it, she wondered, when your heart feels light and happy, the sky seems bluer, the sun brighter, even the birds sound happier? She watched the children playing in the park and her heart swelled, and then—the darkness came back. Always the darkness. Always the shadow that fell across anything beautiful.

She would never have her own children. She would never trust herself. She knew what happens to children who've been abused. They grow up to be abusers themselves. She herself started out doing just that at twelve years of age. Oh no, she would not ever put herself or a child in that position again. Allowing herself to teach was a small consolation. At least in a classroom setting, with parents watching, she would be able to remain in complete control. There was no fear there, yet the thought of being alone in a house with her own child brought her terror. What if the child did or said something to anger her? Would she haul off and slap him or something worse? Closing her eyes briefly, she breathed deep and wiped the dark thoughts from her mind. This was supposed to be a happy time.

Evening neared as she strolled through the park, down the
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sidewalk, and finally reached her apartment building. Pulling on the heavy green door, she stepped inside and started up the stairs. It was the voices that caused her to glance downward. Her eyes rested on a display she had no wish to see.

The door to the apartment just under hers was slightly ajar. Even though Caroline had never spoken more than a passing "hello", she knew the apartment was occupied by a single mother and two kids; a young boy and a teenage girl. And right now, her landlord, George Mancini, had his hands all over that teenage girl. The young girl was begging George not to go. Bile rose in Caroline's throat.

The girl seemed willing enough. Still, she was young and certainly easily manipulated by a man like George. Caroline started to say something, but stopped herself. It was none of her business. She'd never even spoken to the girl, so more than likely she would not be willing to listen to anything Caroline had to say now. She could go to the police, but from the way the girl had been begging George to stay, she'd probably deny it in order to protect him. Possibly Caroline could find a time to speak with the girl's mother and let her know what was going on right there in her own home.

She started to move on, but her toe caught the edge of the stair causing her to stumble. She held her breath as George came to the door and looked up at her. He glared at Caroline before he quietly closed the door, turning the lock with a distinct click. Caroline rushed up to her apartment, locked the door and leaned against it trying to push the ugly scene out of her mind.

Taking a deep breath, Caroline told herself she was not gonna let George or any other ugly thoughts ruin all the good things that were going on in her life today, though she would definitely have a little talk with the girl or with the girl's mother when the opportunity arose. It would help if she could remember the girl's name. Mary, or Sherry. Yes, Sherry. That's it. She would definitely have a talk with them.

Frozen dinner placed neatly in the oven, Caroline went into the bedroom to change. She felt excited and energized. Some worn jeans and a ragged T-shirt to go along with some good old-fashioned housecleaning would be just the thing to pass the time away tonight. However, when she emerged from her bedroom, George was standing in her apartment.

Startled, Caroline drew in a sharp breath and then scowled. "Get out," she demanded.

"In time," he purred, moving slowly toward her.

"It's not rent time."

"No, maybe not. However, we're just gonna have a little conversation. Just you and me. You see, I know you saw me and Sherry and I just wanna make sure that you understand that our relationship is none of your business."

"She's a child," Caroline spat.

George smirked. "Well, she's old enough. She fancies herself in love with me."

"And what about you? Do you love her?"

"Of course I do. Would I be with her if I didn't? I worship the ground she walks on. I live and breathe for her. I love her more than life itself." He laughed, seeming quite amused with himself.

"You are a horrible man."

He shrugged. "You're entitled to your opinion. However, I came up here to let you know, little miss high and mighty, if you ever tell anyone about me and Sherry, you'll regret it."

"Don't you come in here and threaten me," she said, attempting to sound brave. She tried to walk past him but he grabbed her arm and held tight.

"Let me go," she hissed between clenched teeth. "I have nothing to say to you."

"Well, I have plenty to say to you, the first being, why don't you mind your own business?"

She jerked her arm away from him. "I don't know what you're talking about. It's not my fault the two of you were standing in an open doorway for anyone to see."

He grabbed the front of her shirt and pushed her up against the wall. "Don't play me, baby. I know exactly what you're thinking. Who do you think you're gonna go tell? Her mommy? All that would do is get Sherry thrown out of the house. Is that what you want?"

Caroline swallowed hard, trying not to let her fear show. She shook her head. "No, of course not." Grabbing his fists where they balled in her shirt, she tried to pry him away, but he wouldn't budge. Show no weakness, she reminded herself. Lifting her chin, she looked back up at him. "Let go of me. The scene with the little girl downstairs is your business."

He jerked her up close to his face. "That's right, it is." He slammed her against the wall again. "And don't you forget that."

Caroline grunted as the air whooshed out of her lungs. She pushed against his chest. "You've had your say so get your slimy hands off me and get out."

He leaned close. "How do you get off actin' so high and mighty?"

She didn't answer. His face was so close to hers, her stomach pitched at the foul smell on his breath. He leaned even closer and whispered softly in her ear.

"You know, maybe someone needs to bring you down a peg or two and maybe I'm just the man to do it."

Reacting quickly, she shoved him and scrambled away. He turned and leapt over the sofa, cornering her again quickly. Caroline let out a partial scream before he slapped his hand over her mouth. "Shut up before you have the whole building coming in here," he growled.

She sank her teeth deep into the fleshy part of his palm. Cursing, he jerked his hand away. "You drew blood, you little witch!" He reared back and slapped her full force across the face. Caroline fell to the floor, stunned. Before she could move, he was on her, straddling her. "You're gonna regret that," he swore as he raised his fist.

He swung at her face but never made contact because a large hand had him by the throat. George's face turned purple as he dangled in the air. Toby set him down just long enough to drive his fist into his face. George screamed like a girl as blood gushed from his nose.

Another man helped Caroline to her feet. "There now, you okay?"

"I've got to stop them," she cried and tried to jump in between the two men.

"Whoa now, hold on there," the man said, grabbing Caroline around the waist as he calmly watched Toby work George over.

"Toby's gonna kill him," Caroline screamed as she struggled to free herself.

"No, ma'am. It'll be all right. He's in complete control. If Toby wanted to kill him, the man would be dead by now. Nope, I don't think he'll go that far."

"You don't think? You don't think?" She tried again to pull away from the man, but he had her held fast.

Toby backhanded George, sending him flying out the apartment door and sprawling across the landing. George tried to scramble away, crawling on his hands and knees down the stairs. Toby followed.

The man holding Caroline, rather than letting her go and possibly get hurt, helped her to move along to see what was happening. Besides,

he didn't want to miss the action either. Toby picked George up at the bottom of the stairs and pounded his fist into the smaller man's ribs. He opened the heavy green door and literally tossed George out of his own building.

Sherry came running from her apartment, screaming for Toby to stop. Caroline was doing the same thing. The crowd that had gathered outside the building was a bit more encouraging toward the fighters.

Caroline turned toward the man who'd been holding her. "Please, please," she cried. "You've got to stop him." The man nodded with a smile. He stepped forward and placed a hand on Toby's shoulder.

"I think that's enough, man. Don't you?"

Toby stopped, drew a breath. "If I ever catch you near her again, I'll kill you. You got it? I WILL kill you."

When George didn't answer, Toby started for him again. "I got it, I got it," George blubbered.

Immediately, Toby grabbed Caroline's hand and led her back up to the apartment, followed by Toby's friend.

The moment they were inside Toby pulled her to him, looking her over. "Are you okay, honey?"

She nodded. He wasn't convinced. She had a red spot on her cheek. He touched it. "Here, sit down. Jeff, will you see if you can get some ice."

Those words caused an old scene to flash back in Caroline's mind. She giggled. "Remember when I hit my head and you sent Ben for ice?"

He smiled at her. "You mean when *I* hit your head? Let's see if Jeff does better than Ben."

Jeff returned, the ice wrapped neatly in a towel. Toby smiled and winked at Caroline. Taking the towel from Jeff, he gently applied the ice to her cheek.

"Hello," Caroline spoke politely to Jeff.

"Oh, sorry. Jeff, this is Caroline. Caroline, this is Jeff, the world's best drummer."

"Hi," Jeff returned. "So, you are the famous Caroline. Are you sure you're okay?"

She smiled. Toby had rescued her. She'd dreamed about that. Now it was a reality. "I'm wonderful and you guys have great timing. Thanks for helping me out."

"Not so great," Toby growled as he touched her cheek again. "And

you don't have to thank me. It's not as though I see this guy forcing himself on you and had to make a decision whether I would step in or not. Tell me what happened."

She shrugged. "He wanted to make sure I knew he was in charge and he didn't like it when I gave him attitude."

Jeff interrupted. "Is something burning?"

Caroline jumped up. "Oh my goodness, I left dinner in the oven."

She ran into the kitchen and pulled her little frozen dinner out of the oven. It was indeed burnt.

*"That* was dinner?" Toby asked as he came in behind her.

She grinned. "I'm a simple girl."

That reminded him why they'd come to Caroline's apartment in the first place.

"Jeff and I came by to get you to come to dinner with us. We finished up and my band and Crazy 88 are going out to eat to celebrate. Everyone's dying to meet you, but I'm sure you don't feel like coming now."

"Of course I do. Just let me find something to change into."

"Caroline, we don't have to go. I'll go get something and bring it back. Some guy just beat the heck out of you, I'm sure you don't feel like going out."

She laughed. "I'm fine, Toby. I've taken much worse than that. Now you two just sit down and relax. I'll be out in a jiffy."

"Man, Toby, she's a looker," Jeff said once they were alone.

"Yeah, she is." He rubbed his hands over his eyes. "I wanted to kill that guy."

"I know this is where I'm supposed to tell you that killing him wouldn't solve anything, but, really, I wanted you to kill him."

Toby grinned. "That's why we're friends, Jeff. We understand each other."

"Uh, you'd better wash the blood off your hands," Jeff suggested.

Nodding, Toby went into the kitchen to clean up.

"So what did she mean by 'she's taken worse than that'?" Jeff asked when Toby returned.

"She was referring to her childhood. Remember, I told you her mother was abusive to her when she was a kid. She tends to make little jokes about it. I think it's her way of dealing with it. She says she's just being realistic. Maybe so. I don't know, though I don't see anything funny about a mom slapping around her kid."

"It don't seem right, Toby, you know, life starting out so rough and here she is, having to deal with more abuse from this guy."

"I've read that people who were abused as children tend to unwittingly place themselves in abusive situations again and again."

"Why do you think that is, Toby? I mean, it's not like she asked this guy to hurt her."

"I don't know. Maybe she's used to being treated in a certain way and that's what she expects from everyone. You know, maybe it's the energy she gives off. Maybe the bad guys pick up on that. I don't know. I do know that she won't have to deal with this guy again if I get my way."

They stood when Caroline reentered the room. She wore a lime green knit dress that clung to every curve. It was gathered to one hip, exposing her left thigh through a split in the skirt. The rest of the hemline stopped an inch or two above the knees. Tiny little shoulder straps were all that held the dress up. Both men cleared their throats. "Well, you are absolutely beautiful," Toby said softly.

Jeff only nodded his head.

She patted her face. "I put on a little makeup. You can't see the bruise too much, can you?"

Toby forced himself to look up at her face. "Hm? Oh. No. I can barely make it out."

At the restaurant Caroline was introduced to the rowdy group who accepted her into the fold immediately.

"Soo, where ya' been, Toby? We almost came lookin' for ya'," Ace asked.

Jeff laughed. "Toby here, had to get himself into a brawl before we could get back here."

"Man, I can't take you anywhere," Ace teased.

The music was loud and people were dancing and Caroline found herself smiling and happy and having a wonderful time. Billy-Bob rose. "Will you dance with me, Miss Caroline?"

Caroline was taken aback and didn't know what to say to them. They were speaking in unison. Everyone else at the table had quieted, hoping to see the brothers do something solo.

Billy-Bob turned toward each other. "I asked her first. You did not." They argued in unison.

"I believe it was a tie," Toby said dryly. "And you can't both dance with her at the same time so I suggest we flip a coin."

They did. And they both called heads. Everyone roared with laughter. Caroline finally agreed to dance with the both of them after all, which wasn't too difficult since the music was fast. She danced with Ace next, then Jeff, then a few members of Crazy 88 and finally, Toby. She leaned her head against his chest.

"Tired?"

"I suppose I am. It's way past my bedtime."

He lifted her face up to him. "I really want to spend some alone time with you. Come back to the hotel with me?"

She sighed. "I don't know. I have to teach a class in the morning."

"I'll make sure you're there." He ran a hand down her back and pulled her in close. "Caroline, I really need to spend some time with you," he whispered.

She sighed. "I want that too."

"What if I get some dessert sent to the room?"

"You think you can entice me with sweets?"

"I was hoping. Besides, I don't want you to be alone tonight in that apartment."

That sealed the deal. She had no wish to go back there either. She smiled and nodded.

Suddenly, Toby was moving quickly, paying his tab, telling his band members goodbye, grabbing his jacket, which seemed funny to her because he usually moved with exaggerated slowness. They bid goodbye to everyone, all of them very intoxicated, so Caroline forgave them for the lewd comments they were throwing her way.

At the hotel, Toby and Caroline sat across from each other at the table in Toby's room, dipping their spoons into a giant ice cream sundae. Toby was looking at her in wonder. "What did you do to me? It's incredible the way you make me feel."

She smiled sweetly. "I was gonna say the exact same thing."

They talked into the night. He filled her in on Molly, the old horse and the new Molly, her foal. He told her about his sister Molly, who wanted to be a doctor, and about Ben just graduating from college with a degree in agriculture, thinking to step into his father's shoes. The only farm-like activity Toby was involved in was the animals. The house was inundated with them. He told her it was like a mix of a scene from *Old Yeller* and *Bambi*.

She told him how she'd gone about working odd jobs to get money for dance lessons, and then about her dance scholarships, and then

about some of the shows she'd been in. She told him about a few of the foster families she'd lived with and that her mother was very ill and in a nursing facility down in Atlanta.

She spoke of the children she taught and Toby could see she'd grown to love them. It made him wonder again about her statement that she didn't want any children of her own.

He realized she avoided one subject; the Stillwaters. Every time he brought them up she directed the conversation to a different subject. He would eventually find out what the deal had been concerning them, even if he had to do some digging.

"So, Princess Caroline, may I come to watch your class tomorrow?" Toby finally asked her.

"Sure. And I can introduce you to Madame Pierre. She is so wonderful. You'll like her."

"I already do, since she said she'd cover your class."

"So, tell me," Caroline began, "when are we leaving on this little sentimental journey?"

"I'm ready now."

She laughed. "Okay, well, let me at least teach my class tomorrow, speak to Eugene and Rosie and maybe pack some things."

"How did Rosie do at the diner?"

Caroline shrugged. "She'll be okay. I still can't figure that one out. I can't believe how quickly she jumped in and offered to work my mundane little job."

"You can't figure it out? Are you blind?"

Caroline's brow furrowed. "What are you talking about?"

"Caroline my love, Rosie and Eugene are sweet on each other."

Caroline's eyes opened wide. "They are?"

Toby laughed. "Yes, they are. It's very obvious."

"I didn't know."

"That's because you're so innocent."

"Well, I don't feel as innocent now as I was a few weeks ago."

"Why not?"

"Because now I know what it means to love someone, and for that someone to love me."

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"Ah, you have brought your young man. Bonjour, bonjour, handsome man." Madame Pierre kissed each cheek.

Toby smiled at her. "It's very nice to meet you, Ma'am."
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"Oh, he is not only cute but very polite too, no?"

"Oh, yes, he is very polite," Caroline laughed.

Madame frowned. "What is this?" She moved her hand over the darkening bruise on Caroline's cheek.

When Caroline hesitated, Madame turned to Toby for the answer.

"A man attacked Caroline last night."

"Oooh no, ma petite. What man? Where is he? I will tear him apart with my bare hands."

Caroline smiled. "You're too late. Toby beat you to it."

Madame smiled broadly up at the large man. "Did you hit him very hard?"

Toby grinned. "Very."

"A knight. That's what you are. A knight. I knew I would like you." She took his arm. "You will tell me the whole story, but class is about to start. You must come sit over here so you can watch what a wonderful teacher our Caro is."

Toby was seated near the back of the class. Madame stayed at his side, offering a "play by play" as class proceeded.

"Bonjour, children," Caroline called.

Each child performed a perfect little curtsy, one at a time as Caroline approached them. Caroline returned their curtsy. She led them through warm ups and stretches, while strains of Tchaikovsky played softly in the background.

Toby was in heaven watching Caroline in her element. She was grace personified. It seemed each child was important to her. She helped them work on their technique, taught them a small choreographed dance and finally introduced them to chain turns. They laughed as the girls became dizzy. Caroline showed them how to focus and snap their heads around. When one girl fell, they moved around her and let her perform her own version of the dying swan.

"You see," Madame Pierre said proudly. "Each child feels as though she has accomplished something. Caroline makes them feel that way."

Toby nodded as he watched them curtsy to each other after the final stretch.

"Bonjour, mes petites belles," Caroline called. "Au revoir."

"Bonjour, Mademoiselle," they sang back to her.

"So now you see, Mr. Toby, she is excellent, is she not?"

"She is wonderful."

"I can also see that you love her very much."

He turned toward the woman, eyebrows raised, surprised by her candor. "I do," he admitted.

"Then go and enjoy yourselves at this farm Caroline speaks of. Take good care of her."

"I will," he promised.

Hand in hand, Toby and Caroline walked back to her apartment. The world seemed beautiful. Flower boxes were in bloom on window sills and porches. The blue sky and warm sun made even the dirtiest of streets seem bright and clean. It seemed everyone they passed was smiling and happy. A child in a stroller waved, the mother smiled, a business man on a cell phone nodded as he passed, a cab driver helped his fare out of the cab and turned to wish them a good afternoon. Magic was at hand.

Back at Caroline's place, Toby helped her pack for the trip. They would stay the night in his room at the hotel and fly out first thing in the morning.

He didn't help much, instead, he wandered around her bedroom. It was small and functional. Her bed was made up, a tattered cream-colored spread pulled tight. Several rows of dance shoes lined the wall beneath the window. In the bathroom, an assortment of tights and leotards were hung to dry over the shower rack. Hairbrush and creams were lined up neatly on the counter in front of the mirror.

He touched her personal possessions while she ran around gathering this and that. Back in the bedroom, he opened a drawer. It contained lacy under things of various colors.

"What are you doing?" she asked, hands on hips.

"Oops– busted," he said with a laugh, and then shrugged. "Didn't mean any harm. I was just snooping."

Caroline startled, turning quickly at the knock on the door.

"I'll get it," Toby offered, hating the fear he'd seen in her eyes.

"Jeff. Hey man. Come in," Toby said. "What's up?"

"Hey, Toby, I thought I'd find you here. You're not answering your cell phone."

Toby pulled out his phone, turned it on. "Sorry. I turned it off while I was in class with Caroline. What's up?"

"Just found out we gotta go back into the studio, some tracks were lost. We've reached everyone else. You're the last."

He sighed. "When do they want us?"

"Now. Right now."

Toby turned apologetically to Caroline.

She smiled. "Can I come with you?"

"Are you sure you want to? It can be very boring."

"It can't be any more boring than watching fifteen little girls walk around on their tiptoes."

He grinned. "You have a point."

They finished gathering her things and headed for the studio.

Caroline was completely enthralled watching Toby at work. He was definitely a professional. They asked him to play a portion of a song. He did. They asked him to sing. He did. If he wasn't pleased with what he heard, he did it again. If they weren't pleased with what they heard, he did it again. Every time he opened his mouth to sing, Caroline melted. He was good. He discussed minor key changes, tones, and reverb and helped pump up the other guys when they became tired. After all, most of them were extremely hung over and not pleased about having to come back in.

When it was over, it was very late. Toby took Caroline back to his hotel room. They would get a good night's rest and fly out first thing in the morning.

Toby's friends, however, had a different idea. They decided the couple was about to have plenty of time together and so could spare them one night. They arrived at the door with cards and beer.

Toby tried to block them out. "No. No way, guys. Out."

Caroline stood behind him, smiling. "Toby, don't be so mean."

"Yeah, Toby, don't be so mean," Jeff mocked.

They piled into the room and set up. Toby sulked for a few minutes and finally caved. "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em," he muttered as he pulled up a chair.

"You in?" Jeff asked Caroline.

"I'm not very good at cards. What game are you playing?"

"Poker," Ace answered. "Five card draw. Deuces wild."

She raised her eyebrows. "I'll try a few hands."

"Great," Jeff smiled.

He dealt the cards. "Ante up," Jeff commanded as he threw two five-dollar bills on the table.

"You guys are playing with money? Real money?" Caroline asked, incredulous.

Ace looked up. "Don't just sit there, Nash, give your girl there

some money."

Toby thumbed through a stack of bills and placed several in front of Caroline. Her eyes opened wide. "You're kidding?"

"That's five hundred dollars. Try not to lose it all at once," he teased. He laughed when she made a face at him.

Caroline watched as each man placed ten dollars into the center of the table and she did the same.

Raising her cards carefully, she peeked at them and slowly and meticulously began arranging them. The others waited patiently on her until she appeared to be ready.

"I'll bet twenty," Toby declared. He looked toward Caroline. She frowned– very cutely, he thought.

"I have to bet or I'm out, right?"

"Right," Toby stated with a patient smile.

"Okay. I'm gonna bet twenty too." She smiled. "I mean not twenty-two, but twenty, also."

The men all chuckled.

She shoved the money out to the center.

"Twenty," Ace muttered.

Billy-Bob said nothing, only tossed forty bucks into the pot.

"I'll see your twenty and raise you five," Jeff proclaimed.

They went around the table again. Caroline reluctantly placed another five dollars in the pot.

Toby nodded. "Call."

"How many?" Jeff asked.

"Two," Toby said as he shoved his cards at the dealer.

They looked toward the newest poker buddy.

"Um, so, what I'm supposed to do now is see if I want to trade some of my cards for some different ones, right?"

"That's right," Jeff said with a smile.

"Then I'll take five," she said politely.

"You can't have that many," Ace chuckled.

She wrinkled her nose. "Okay, so then how many can I have?"

"Well, do you have an ace?"

She frowned. "I'm not supposed to tell you what I have, am I?"

"Not usually, except in this instance, if you have an ace, you can get four cards. Otherwise, you can only get three," Jeff informed her.

She pressed her lips together. "Well that seems like a stupid rule. Okay, then, let me have three."

"I'll take one," Ace said, grinning at the look of distress *that* seemed to cause Jeff.

"Two," the twins sang, each shoving two cards at Jeff.

"And *I'll* take one," Jeff declared with a grin.

"I'm gonna raise you fifty," Toby stated calmly.

"Dollars?" Caroline questioned.

"Yes, dollars, hon. It's okay, don't worry about it. It's all coming back to me anyway."

She shrugged. "Okay, if you say so. Here's my fifty and I'll raise you a hundred."

"Whoa, wait a minute. Why did you say that?" Toby sputtered.

She smiled. "I've always wanted to say something like that. It's like in the movies."

"Well, you didn't mean it, so take it back."

"I did mean it."

"It don't matter whether she meant it or not, Toby. She said it and that's how it stands," Jeff stated.

"Give me a break, guys. She doesn't know what she's doing."

"You just said it's okay, it's all coming back to you anyway, didn't you?" she asked.

"Yes," he grumbled.

"I'll see that hundred and fifty," Ace stated, trying to forward the game. "And raise you another hundred."

"We're in," Billy-Bob chirped as they threw five hundred dollars out onto the table.

Jeff tossed his money in, grinning at Toby.

Toby threw two hundred dollars in the pot.

They waited for Caroline. She sat there humming.

"Are you in?" Toby finally asked her.

"Hm? Yes. Of course I am."

"Then you have to put in the hundred dollars that Ace raised."

"Oh. Okay." She neatly placed a hundred dollars in the middle of the table, and began straightening the mound of money.

"Uh, that's not necessary, sweetheart," Toby advised with a smile. "And now, you need to call."

"Call what?"

"That means you need to stop betting and everyone will show their cards," Jeff stated. "Or did you want to bet some more?"

"No, she doesn't," Toby insisted. "Call, Caroline."

"Okay," she sang sweetly. "I call."

Jeff laid down his cards. "Three kings," he laughed.

Billy-Bob incredibly had two pair and two pair.

Ace smiled as he laid his four of a kind—tens—ace high on the table. "Too bad, Jeff ole buddy."

Toby muttered a curse as he laid out his full house—three queens and two aces.

"What did you have, sweetheart?" Toby leaned over to peek at Caroline's cards. He started laughing.

"I don't think it's so funny," she pouted as she laid her cards on the table. "I didn't get any kings or queens or anything. Not even a one. That's hardly fair. The only thing I got was all these low cards, though isn't it sweet that they're all hearts?"

They looked her cards over and became silent.

It was Ace's turn to curse.

"I don't believe it," Jeff cried.

"What? What's wrong?" she asked.

"That..." Toby was trying to control his laughter. "That, my love, is a straight flush."

"It is?"

"Yes, it is."

"And just what does that mean?" she asked.

"It means you won, darlin'," Jeff stated blandly.

"I did?"

"The whole kit and caboodle," Toby announced.

"How much is that?"

"Oh, I'd say roughly, it's over two thousand," he said, still chuckling.

"Really?"

She could tell by the sour looks on the men's faces that Toby was telling the truth.

She began handing the money back to them. "Here, I don't want y'alls money. I was only playing for fun."

"No way, Sweetheart," Ace said, patting her hand. "We all lost fair and square. That money is yours. All of it. You take it and go treat yourself to something nice."

"Are you sure?"

"We're sure," they grumbled.

She smiled up at Toby. He was looking at her in a way that made

her want to tell the guys to go away now, but she persevered. The group wagered through the night, losing hundreds more of their favorite dollars to the girl with amazing beginner's luck.

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Caroline had never flown before and was sick with the anticipation. Toby watched her wring her hands and chew on her lower lip.

"Everything's gonna be okay," he comforted.

"I'm sure that's what they tell everyone. That's probably what they told Richie Valenz and Buddy Holly too, and what about those poor people on September 11th, and on those Malaysian flights? I think I'm gonna be sick."

"Would you rather drive?"

Her eyes lit up. "Yes! Can we?"

"I can see if they'll let us off the plane."

She frowned. "I'm being a big baby, aren't I?"

"I understand your fear, Caroline, and so do a lot of other people. Do you want me to speak to a flight attendant?"

She blew out a breath, resigning herself to her destiny. "No, I can do this." She nodded. "I can. Okay, I got this. Whatever will be, will be, right? I'll try to be brave."

He squeezed her hand. "Everything's gonna be okay." They taxied down the runway. "Breathe slowly," he whispered.

"I am gonna be sick," she moaned.

The jet picked up speed and she turned white as a ghost. Her nails dug into Toby's palm and then–they were airborne. "Oh, Lord have mercy, have mercy, have mercy," she chanted softly.

"Okay, darlin'. We're up and we're fine. In only a few hours, we'll be in Nashville."

She glanced over at him, moving only her eyes, afraid to move her head. She gave a slight nod.

By the time they landed in Nashville and collected their luggage Caroline was chattering away, releasing the nervous energy that had built up during the flight. Her constant questions and statements and comments were amusing Toby since she was usually so quiet. He smiled and nodded as she pointed out an adorable baby, made comments on some airport artwork, and laughed at how many guitars were included in people's luggage there in Nashville. He helped her read and understand a monitor when she asked about it and joined her
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when she went over to shake hands with some departing servicemen.

She had happily stopped to watch through the window as a jet took off when she heard the cry. "Oh my, y'all, look! It's Toby Nash!"

He pasted a smile on his face and held her hand tightly. "Darn, hold on, here we go."

"Oh, Toby, I have all your albums. I'm your biggest fan. Please let me take a selfie with you."

The woman didn't give him time to decline. She tried to step in between him and Caroline, only Toby held fast to Caroline's hand, forcing the girl to pose on the other side. Still, the effort was in vain. He had to let go of her hand to sign several autographs. He shook hands and received several hugs and kisses as Caroline was pushed farther and farther away.

Finally though, security showed up to help the star move through the crowd. They tried to shoo Caroline away too but Toby stopped, reached through the crowd and grabbed her hand. "She's with me," he said loudly.

Once they were safely in the dark interior of a limousine, Caroline scooted in close to Toby. "I'm sorry, Princess," he said. "That doesn't happen too often."

"Oh, sure," she laughed.

He was glad to see it hadn't affected her too much. "No, really, I'm small beans around here. I've lived here all my life. People are used to seeing me and I'm just Toby Smith. Only every once in a while does someone create a scene like that. Really, it's no big deal."

"No big deal? Then why are we riding in a limo?"

"Well, first, it's the easiest way home, since I left my Explorer at the house. Second, a friend of mine runs this company and I swore to him back when his father was driving us to the senior prom in one of the company's two vehicles that when I got rich and famous I'd always use his father's limousine service, which is now his limousine service since his father retired."

"Oh, well, that's a sweet story."

Toby smiled. "You think everything is sweet."

She yawned. "Not everything."

They'd been up all night playing poker. Add that to the trauma of her first flight, and Toby wasn't surprised when Caroline's eyes drifted shut and her head drooped to rest on his chest. He watched her sleep, puzzling over how he would convince her to become his wife. Would

being in the public eye be an obstacle? He had money, but it didn't keep him from living a relatively simple life on the farm. It was dealing with the public that he himself had struggled with at first. Would Caroline even want to put up with that situation? A larger obstacle would be the logistics. She had a dance career in New York. He traveled quite a bit and would be going on tour next summer. A long-distance marriage was out of the question. As much as he hated the big city, he'd have to join her in New York, unless they could come up with some other solution. No matter what, though, he would not let anything get in the way of them being together.

He woke her as they turned off the main road. She sat up sleepily and peered through the window. It was spectacular. The fields she'd remembered seeing were still there, divided off in a patchwork of lush greens, deep browns and gold. There were fruit trees in bloom lining the road and wildflowers everywhere. It was heaven and Caroline's eyes filled with tears. The last time she'd been on this road, she'd felt lost. She'd been leaving a handsome boy on his front porch and aching in a heart that was broken.

She turned to him now and realized he'd been watching her.

"I love you, Princess," he uttered before he lowered his head and kissed her softly.

They swung into the drive and stopped in front of what Caroline had always thought of as the glass house. Toby sprang from the car and helped her out, then helped unload their luggage, tipping the driver heavily.

Smiling, Caroline looked up at the house as she moved slowly up the porch steps and through the front door. "Wow, it's all still the same," she marveled.

"Not hardly," Toby laughed. "And Mom would die if she heard you say that. She's remodeled and refurbished and redone the place several times over in the last fifteen years."

"Well, to me, it's the same," Caroline sighed. "Only I don't remember it being three stories."

"Four actually, if you count the lower level that you can't see from the front."

"Is anyone else home?"

"No. Molly and her husband live in Georgia while she's in medical school in Augusta; and Ben is in Texas, doing postgraduate work at A&M."

"Oh, I see. And how much longer will your mom and dad be out of the country?"

"At least another six months. Why? Are you afraid of being here all alone with me?"

She shrugged. "Not afraid. It's just that, what will people say about you? I know you don't want any bad publicity."

"You're the woman I love, Caroline and I don't give a rat's behind what they say. Come on. Let's get this stuff upstairs."

They carried the luggage up to what would be her room. "I thought maybe you'd enjoy being in here again," he offered, as they entered the room she'd stayed in fifteen years earlier.

Caroline smiled at the sweet thought. The room seemed smaller than she remembered. The bed was on the opposite wall but still near the large window. Caroline gazed out over the front lawn and the beautiful landscape. She remembered Mrs. Stillwater telling her how beautiful it was here in the spring. She was right.

Toby watched Caroline as she moved slowly around the room, their long ago conversation playing through his mind. There was a stack of fresh linens on the bed, sheets, pillowcases, a comforter and towels. She laid her hand on them.

"We'll have to make up the bed ourselves. Apparently that's where Les draws the line."

"Who's Les?"

"I guess you could call him the caretaker. Mostly, he takes care of the horses and other animals and watches out for things while we're away. Sometimes he takes care of other things, like filling the fridge full of food when he knows I'm coming home. He's a good man and an old family friend. You see, his wife died of cancer a few years ago. He was a mess. Totally heartbroken. They didn't have any children so he was all alone. My parents visited him a few months after the funeral to see how he was doing and my mom decided right there and then he was coming to live with us. They built him his own little cottage here on the farm. It's a great place. He really helps us out and he feels needed so it's a good arrangement all around."

"That's a nice story. Your mom is so sweet."

"She is *and* she's a God-fearing woman. She truly tries to live as God would have us live, you know, like treating others as we would like to be treated. That kind of stuff." He shrugged.

Caroline's brow furrowed. "So, are you saying that you don't

believe in that kind of stuff?"

"Sure, I guess I do. I'm just not that good at it, ya know?"

"Not that good at what?"

He shrugged. "At being Godly, I guess."

She grinned. "Like when you're gambling with the guys?"

He gave a sheepish grin. "Yeah, I don't think Mom would look very kindly on that."

"What does God say about that kind of stuff?"

"Well, one thing He says is the love of money is the root of all evil. And as my mother has pointed out to me many times, places built specifically for gambling are usually a den for 'sin.' You know, like drinking, and carousing with women. I mean, I get it. But me and the guys, we just play friendly games of cards to break the boredom when we're traveling. It's not like we're desperate to win 'cause we need the money. Just killin' time."

"Hmm, I guess there are a lot more worthwhile things to do with your time," Caroline offered.

Toby chuckled. "Yep, I guess you're right." His brow furrowed. "Do you believe in God, Caroline?"

"I'm not sure. I don't remember ever going to church. Do you?"

"Oh yeah, I remember going to church. We went to church, every Sunday, and every Wednesday night too."

"No, I meant, do you believe in God?"

Toby sat down on the bed. "Sure I do." He stopped, thought seriously a moment. "At least I think I do. I mean, I pray sometimes. I tell Him thank you sometimes." His brow creased.

"Maybe I shouldn't have asked such a personal question."

"No, that's okay. Besides, I asked you first. I'm just thinking. I say I believe in God, I say I'm a Christian, but do I live like a man who believes? Looks like I have some soul-searching to do."

Caroline sighed and twisted her hands together, looking decidedly uncomfortable with the subject.

He smiled at her. "Come on, let's make the bed and raid the kitchen. I'm starved."

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While Toby worked away, preparing his special triple-decker sandwiches, Caroline wandered around the main level of the house. The furniture was different, but the house had the same aura to it: one of peace, love, and happiness. It occurred to her that Toby's mom,
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being a "Godly woman," probably had a lot to do with how peaceful the house felt. Caroline ran her hand over the piano and peered out the huge glass windows that gave the house the appearance of being made entirely of glass. The landscape was amazing. Slowly, she found her way to the door that led to the back hall where they had played so hard on that long ago New Year's Eve.

She ran her hand over the door, memories flooding her brain, making her feel sad.

"Looking for a dent?" Toby asked quietly.

She looked up at him and smiled. "There should be one, as hard as you hit me."

He grimaced. "I can't tell you how bad I felt about that, but it did get you out of a lot of work." He took her hand. "Lunch is ready."

After they'd eaten, Toby took Caroline on a tour of the house. She peeked in the third level bedrooms which Toby informed her were his brother's, his sister's, and two guest bedrooms. Back on the second level were his parents' bedroom, the bedroom she would be using, another guest bedroom, and Toby's room.

Glancing into Toby's bedroom, Caroline realized there was a balcony. She headed out on it, Toby right beside her.

"The swing! It's still there!"

"Yep. A body is never too old to play on a swing."

"I agree. But I don't remember the pool, and those gardens, and that terrace over there."

"Pool was put in the summer after you came. Each year, Mom adds something else."

"This is a beautiful home, Toby." She sighed. "I could never imagine having a place like this."

He turned her toward him. It was tempting to offer it right this moment, but he knew it wasn't the right time. Offering marriage so she could have a nice home wasn't exactly romantic and would be insulting to Caroline. If she had anything, it was her pride. He tugged on her arm. "Whaddya say let's go play?"

They went downstairs, through the back hall, into the game room and through the glass doors to the backyard. He lifted her into the tire swing, grabbed the swing and backed up several steps. With a running start, he pushed her hard. Caroline flew up into the air and out over the hill, her breath leaving her in a shriek of laughter.

Toby pushed again and she laughed harder, throwing her head

back, her hair flying in the wind. After several trips Toby grabbed the swing, bringing her to an abrupt halt. He lifted her, swing and all, for a giant kiss.

"Lord have mercy, Caroline, you make me want to eat you alive."

She laughed. "I suppose that should frighten me, but it only sounds intriguing."

They left the swing to roam the gardens. Walking arm in arm, they chatted, learning new things about each other. There were several subjects Toby wanted to approach. The Stillwaters, and why she broke off her relationship with them was one he thought might be important. Another was why she didn't want any kids. He also knew he should tell her about Tracy eventually. And, of course, there was the main subject: Would she consider becoming his wife?

They sat by the pool and talked until evening came but he found no opening to bring up any of the subjects on his mind. They made their way back inside, cuddled up on the sofa and talked some more. There was so much they'd missed in each other's lives. Several times during all that talking, Toby started to ask Caroline about the Stillwaters or tell her about Tracy and how he'd come to be involved with her. Tracy had been a giant mistake on his part. Now, with Caroline by his side, he couldn't even remember what he'd been thinking when he'd finally agreed to marry her. He'd had to break it off with her if he were to be honest with her. He felt bad about it, bad for Tracy, not for himself. Though, he did her a favor. Didn't she deserve to find someone who truly loved her?

Each time he'd started to bring up a subject, Caroline would say something terribly interesting that would divert his attention. He vowed to himself he would clear the air over dinner, yet as they worked in the kitchen side by side preparing their meal, he couldn't bring himself to disturb the peaceful evening.

They dined by candlelight on steaks and salad. Toby had wine which Caroline refused.

"You had nothing to drink at the restaurant the other night, and nothing during our poker game. You don't drink at all?"

"My mother was an alcoholic, Toby. You know that. I live in fear of being like her."

"You're much too strong for that, my love."

She frowned. "You don't know that. You don't know anything about it."

"Okay, okay, hold on now. I may not know what it feels like to have an alcoholic parent, but I do know you and I know you're much stronger than you give yourself credit."

"No."

"Uh, yeah, but I won't argue with you now. I have no desire to get you all riled up."

He looked into her troubled face. So many scars. He needed to smooth them away and this little scene helped him to understand what was going through her head. She was afraid of being like her mother.

"Come on, now, let's not ruin a wonderful evening. I'm sorry if I pressed too much."

She looked down. "I'm sorry I'm so touchy."

He smiled, kissed her hand. They finished their meal, did up the dishes and moved into the living room. Habit had Toby sitting down at the piano. He played for Caroline. She closed her eyes and let the sweet sounds of the piano, along with Toby's mellow voice, take her away. It did more than soothe her, though. It was an amazing aphrodisiac. No wonder all his fans couldn't keep their hands off him. She rose and moved to stand behind him, running her hands over his shoulders, bending to kiss his cheek.

"You singing like that makes me feel all fuzzy inside," she whispered in his ear.

"You rubbing my shoulders and whispering in my ear makes me feel the same way."

"How? I mean, all I'm doing is this." She squeezed his shoulders.

He stopped playing and placed his hands on top of hers, stilling them. "That's all it seems to take, just your touch."

"You mean like this?" She squeezed once more.

"Ah, sweet Caroline." He turned and quickly pulled her onto his lap. Their mouths came together. The kiss lingered. Finally he glanced up. He could see their reflection in the glass of the giant windows. It was such a lovely picture. Him at the piano, her in his lap, cuddled up against his chest. It would make a great album cover, he thought.

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Song of Solomon 1:2

"Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!
For your love is better than wine;"

# Chapter 7

Caroline had been sleeping soundly when she was abruptly awakened in the early light of dawn.

"What's happening?" she asked as Toby lifted her from the bed. Her arms reached around his neck in startled reflex.

"Remember you said you wished I would come steal you and put you on my horse and ride away?"

She relaxed, snuggling against his chest. "Yes, I remember."

"Well, wishes do come true, Caroline."

She gasped as realization dawned. "But wait." She tried to wiggle out of his arms. "I'm not dressed."

He grinned. She wore only, what he thought were adorably cute pajamas, light blue shorts and a matching top with pink ballet shoes printed on them. "Oh, no. You didn't say anything in the wish about getting dressed."

Caroline squealed as they arrived at the front door and Toby juggled her around in order to throw it open.

"Toby, being dressed is usually understood. Now let me down."

"Sorry, when being abducted, one must go with whatever one is or is not wearing."

"But what if someone sees me?"

"First of all, you are completely covered, and second of all, Les won't come anywhere near where I'm taking you and he knows where I'm taking you so don't worry. He wouldn't dream of interrupting us."

He carried her around the porch to the side of the house. There stood the largest, blackest horse Caroline had ever seen. Not that she'd seen many. "Wow, is that Molly's baby?"

He laughed at the way the question was worded. "No, this is not Molly's 'baby.' This, Caroline, is Thunder. Thunder, say hello to Caroline—and be nice."

Caroline giggled as the giant horse actually responded. He whinnied softly and nudged Caroline's shoulder. She tentatively reached out to stroke his nose. "Oh my, but you are a beautiful creature," she uttered softly.

"Now you've gone and done it. He'll get a big head for sure and never do another thing I tell him to do."

Toby tossed Caroline up and onto the horse. She gasped, terrified, but he swung up into the saddle behind her quickly and pulled her snug against him. One hand moved down to stroke Thunder while the other splayed across her abdomen. "Okay now, hold on. You're okay."

She giggled. "Are you talking to me or the horse?"

"You," he chuckled. He snapped the reins.

Caroline gasped and held on for dear life.

"It's okay, darlin', you can relax. I promise I won't let you fall."

After the initial shock, she did relax, leaning back against Toby's solid frame and letting the euphoria overtake her. It was wonderful, the cool air hitting her face, Toby's arms around her, his hand spread protectively across her midsection, holding her steady.

He leaned forward. "Listen," he said in her ear.

She shook her head. "I can't hear anything over the sound of hooves pounding the ground."

"Exactly. Sounds like thunder, huh?"

"Oohh, Thunder! Aptly named."

"Um hm. And that would be Molly's doin', since she didn't get any real people to name."

"Well, she did a great job on this one."

Toby coaxed Thunder into a canter, then a gallop. Caroline laughed out loud with the excitement and pleasure. They sped across the meadow, down a wooded path, and splashed across a stream, each twist and turn causing Caroline to squeal in delight. Just when Caroline thought her backside couldn't possibly take any more, they came to a halt in a secluded spot near the stream.

The grass was soft, the morning sun warm. Flowers bloomed along the edge of the water, birds sang, squirrels scurried. It was beautiful. Paradise really.

Toby helped her down and laid a blanket out on the grass. He grabbed a saddlebag off Thunder and swatted the horse's backside. Thunder walked slowly away, nibbling on the tender shoots of grass.

Caroline sat down on the blanket as Toby pulled breakfast out of the saddle bag like a magician. A bowl of strawberries, muffins and a thermos of coffee.

"You are amazing and so sweet," she sighed as she sank her teeth into a huge red strawberry.

He watched her reverently. "So are you," he said as he leaned over to taste her lips.

"What other surprises do you have in here?" Caroline asked, pulling the saddlebag over and rummaging through its contents. She pulled out two large towels.

"Towels? Why towels?" she enquired.

"To dry off after we go swimming."

"Swimming?"

"This is one of my all-time favorite places. I used to come here and lie in the sun and swim and work things out in my mind. There's peace here. I thought you would like it."

She stretched out. I could stay right here forever."

He took a final gulp of coffee, swung his legs in front of him and began unlacing his work boots. He stood and pulled his shirt over his head, stripped off his jeans exposing a bathing suit, and waded out into the cold water. Caroline watched him. He was definitely a specimen. His broad back rippled with muscle. His steel-like legs were long and covered with springy black hair. He had a tan, telling Caroline he spent a lot of time outside. He moved out a few more steps then disappeared as he dove under the water.

She rose to get a better view. At first she hadn't noticed a place that was actually deep enough to be able to swim, but now she could see where the water moved off into a deeper side pool, unaffected by the current.

Toby motioned to her. "Come on in."

She shook her head. "Unlike you, I don't have a bathing suit under my pajamas."

"You can go skinny dipping. I won't look," he said with a grin.

"Yeah right. I won't be skinny dipping today."

Toby shrugged. "It was worth a try. Just wear your pj's. It won't hurt them."

She pouted as she considered it. "Is it cold?"

"What do you think?"

"It looks like it's freezing."

He waved her in. "I promise to keep you warm."

She looked around her, making sure no one watched them. Satisfied, she slowly rose and walked to the bank. Toby watched intently. She was so completely adorable. Every inch of his body yearned to hold her.

Caroline concentrated on stepping over the stones in the shallow part of the stream. She looked up shivering. "Lord, it is freezing!"

Toby shook his head. "It's a lot warmer here in the deeper water. Come on in, Princess."

When she stepped to where the water deepened, she looked up smiling. "Okay, here goes!" She dove in and came up gasping. "You lied!" she squealed.

Toby only laughed.

"I'm gonna get hypothermia!"

"Swim around. You'll warm up."

Immediately she went under and swam to Toby, resurfacing right in front of him. He grabbed her around the waist and pulled her to him. She wrapped her legs around him.

"You can swim. Good. I was worried about that."

She laughed. "Well, once I'm already in the water is not the best time to be asking whether I can swim."

He shrugged. "I guess it's better late than never. So, where did you learn to swim?"

"I grew up in apartments and motels. All I did was swim from the time the pool opened in May to whenever they closed it. It was my only form of recreation." She leaned back into the water, sighing. "But I never swam in a creek, nor in my pajamas. It actually feels kinda wonderful. So free. So – liberating, I guess because a swimsuit is tight, but the pajamas are so loose, it's like they aren't there."

She floated on her back, keeping her legs wrapped around him. She closed her eyes and experienced the moment. Happy. She actually felt happy. She moved her arms slightly with the current to stay afloat.

Toby watched her, completely entranced. Her hair floated around her face like a water lily. Her cheeks glowed, her chest moved with her breath, the water sloshing over her.

"Ummm," she sighed, holding the sound for several seconds. "You're doing a very good job."

"A good job?" he asked.

"Yes. You said you would keep me warm. Well, I am warm."

He pulled her up for a kiss. She laughed, splashed him and swam away. He was right behind. They played tag until her lips began to turn blue and her teeth chattered. Toby helped her over the stones in the shallow water and rushed to retrieve their towels. He wrapped one around his waist and brought the other to her where she stood at the

water's edge. He draped the towel around her shoulders, warming her instantly. Lifting her, he carried her the rest of the way so she wouldn't get her feet muddy and laid her down on the blanket.

Taking her towel from around her, he began to dry her. He began with her hair and face, stopping to kiss her nose and cheeks and finally her waiting mouth.

He rose up, kneeling over her, drying her arms and hands, kissing each finger. Toby skipped down to her feet, massaging and drying between each toe. She giggled.

"Ticklish?"

"Very," she answered.

He finished drying her and politely wrapped the towel back around her. Sitting down next to her, he tilted her face up and kissed her with all the love he felt. Caroline purred and lay back on the blanket. Toby lay next to her then turned toward her, his lips skimming her face then moving back to her mouth. They kissed and snuggled a long time. Toby knew it was time to stop or he'd find himself granting her original request and making love to her right here in the woods. He leaned in for one last kiss, but a slight noise had him raising his head sharply, his eyes quickly scanning the area.

"What is it?" Caroline asked.

"I thought I heard something." His lips pressed together and then he smiled. "It was probably Thunder."

Toby promptly forgot the interruption and laid his head next to Caroline's to peer into her eyes. He pondered how he had come to love her as much as he did. Silently, she stroked his hair. Her touch was gentle and sweet, just like her.

"Tell me something about your childhood, Caroline."

"I don't want to talk about bad stuff right now."

"You said a few days ago that it wasn't all bad. So, tell me something good. You must have one good memory."

She thought silently for several moments. Toby waited patiently.

She sighed. "Well, I don't remember where we lived, but it was when my father was still with us. We lived in a house, not apartments. Anyway, there was this forsythia bush by the porch. Southerners call them 'yella bells.' So, I used to break off a branch of the forsythia and strip all the flowers except the one at the tip. The branch became my magic wand and I would run around the yard pretending I was a fairy and granting wishes."

Toby smiled at the picture of innocence she must have been– actually still was. "What kind of wishes did you grant?"

She shrugged. "The usual stuff. A pretty red bike for Suzie, a brand-new dress for Bonnie, a baby brother for Angie. A new doll. A bag of candy."

"Who were they? Neighborhood kids?"

"No. Just friends. Imaginary friends I guess."

He sighed. Even her good memories were sad to him. The sweet longings of a lonely little girl that never came to pass. He wanted so much to change all that. He made a silent vow that he would make them happen. All her dreams. He sat up and reached for his jeans. There was so much he wanted to do for her.

"Maybe we can come here again before I leave," Caroline suggested wistfully as she helped fold the blanket and towels.

He smiled. "Most assuredly, Princess. Your wish is my command." He gave a short whistle. "Thunder," he called.

Within just a few moments the giant horse appeared. They loaded him up and mounted. Toby guided him slowly down the path through the woods.

Toby's hand on Caroline's waist made her quiver. She'd experienced so many wonderful things today. Swimming in only her loose-fitting pj's felt positively brazen. Even now, the horse ride felt different, more intimate. She grinned as she made the decision to test her newfound brazenness. Lifting up slightly, she grabbed the hem of her wet pajama shirt and whisked it over her head, letting it fly into the wind.

Toby's body quickened. "What in the world are ya doin', Caroline?" Toby whispered in her ear.

"I found out today how it feels to swim almost naked. It felt so, um, so liberating, I guess. So, I just decided that I want to know how Lady Godiva felt."

"I've often wondered the same thing," he joked. Toby pulled on the reins, bringing Thunder to a halt.

"But really, Caroline, there's only so much I can take." His lips moved to the column of her throat.

"Toby?"

"Hmm?" he asked as he tasted the pulse point just below her ear.

"Have you ever done it on a horse?"

"Done what?" he asked, raising his head just long enough to ask

the question.

"It, Toby. You know? It."

He chuckled. "Oh– it. No, Princess, never on a horse."

"Do you think it's possible?"

He grinned. "Well, I don't know."

He thought for a moment. He was not a strong man, and he was gonna fail this test. "Let's just get you turned around here."

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It was some time later that Thunder headed slowly from the swimming hole across the pasture and toward the house. "You are gonna be the death of me," Toby muttered into Caroline's ear.

"Are you complaining?" she asked with a giggle.

"I guess no man in their right mind would. The guys in the band would love to hear about this."

"What?"

He laughed. "Just kidding."

Toby brought Thunder to a halt, dismounted, adjusted his clothing and grabbed the blanket from the saddle bag. He took time to rub his hand over Thunder's side, soothing him and telling him what a good boy he was.

He swung back up behind Caroline and wrapped the blanket around her, making sure she was covered. "Les will be back at the house to take Thunder. Wouldn't want to embarrass him."

"Him? What about me?"

Toby smiled. "I think you've become too audacious to be embarrassed." He clicked his tongue and they started across the meadow, looking innocent as two babes.

As promised, Les was indeed waiting to take Thunder when they arrived back at the house.

"Caroline, I'd like you to meet Les Carter. He's a real charmer when it comes to the horses."

With a warm smile and mischief still in her eye, Caroline smiled and held her hand out to the crusty, tough-looking old man.

"Nice to meet ya, Ma'am," he said, discreetly turning from the blanket wrapped young lady to Toby. "So then, you got the animals today or do I?"

"I've got 'em, Les, thanks. I have some phone calls to make and I'll be down."

"Down where?" Caroline questioned, as they entered the house.
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"Down at the barn. The animals, remember? I told you I have a crowd of 'em. Les has been taking care of them for me while I was out of town, but I need to go down and feed them and pet them and let them know I haven't forgotten them. Wanna come?"

She grinned. "Of course I do. Can I dress this time?"

"I suppose. You have plenty of time, because I have to make some business calls that will probably take at least an hour. Make yourself at home, and I'll come find you when it's time to go." He watched her, sighing and shaking his head as she started up the stairs. The little excursion had turned out to be nothing like he'd imagined. He wasn't sure if it was a good thing or a bad thing. Anyway, what was done was done. He would have to be stronger from here on out.

Toby had just pulled out his phone when it rang.

"Hello?... Hey!… Tomorrow?... Sure… Man, oh man, it's a real coincidence you called. You'll never guess who's here with me… Caroline… What do you mean Caroline who? Caroline Jones… Yes, Caro!... It's a long story but in a nutshell, I ran into her in New York. She was waitin' tables… Yeah, she's had a hard time... Don't know, can't get her to talk about you, I mean why she quit or what happened… No, I think it's great you're coming…Well, it may be difficult for her, but, heck, maybe it will be good for her, ya know? Clear the air… I hope so too. Why?... Because I intend to marry her... No, I'm not kidding… Yeah, well, that's all over. I came to my senses… Very funny, Uncle Jim, you always were a bucket of laughs…Absolutely, we'll see ya tomorrow."

Hanging up the phone, he sat quietly, pondering his options. Should he tell Caroline the Stillwaters were coming to visit or should he spring it on her? She'll probably be mad if he doesn't tell her, give her some warning, yet if he tells her she may refuse to see them. Of course, he wants what's best for her, but who is he to assume to know what's best? What should he do?

It's obvious she doesn't want to talk about what happened between herself and the Stillwaters, but as luck would have it, they were on their way to a family vacation and decided to stop by. He hadn't seen them in over a year. He sighed. Maybe it's fate. Maybe it's God. Maybe she's meant to see them tomorrow. That's it. I'll go with that, anyway, he thought. Whatever happens, they'll help Caroline through it. Yep, he'd go with that and that would be his excuse when she went off on him, and he was sure she would do just that.

The house seemed waay too quiet and empty by the time Toby finished his business. When he opened the door of the study, he found a note taped to it.

*I went down to the stables to find Les and talk to Molly. Love, Me.*

Smiling, he hurried down to find her, only Toby didn't like what he found when he arrived. Caroline was sitting on Molly II outside the stable, a young man standing next to her, his hand on her thigh. The guy looked familiar, but Toby couldn't place him. Caroline looked up at Toby as he approached. She smiled and lifted her hand to wave but quickly grasped the saddle horn again. The man standing next to Caroline rubbed his hand over her thigh, as if calming her, apparently not realizing that he was agitating the man who approached– then again, maybe he did.

Les emerged from the stable as Toby reached Caroline.

"Look at me, Toby!" Caroline squealed. "I'm sitting on a horse all by myself!"

He smiled up at her briefly but turned his attention to the dude who was offering his hand.

Les spoke first, though. "Toby, you remember Brett."

"Can't say that I do."

"Brett Chastain. He's been helping out here and there. Said he needed something to occupy his time and Lord knows there's always plenty to do here."

The young man was smiling. Toby, however, was not, because now that he knew the last name, he remembered where he'd seen him. "Brett Chastain?"

"Yeah, that's right," Brett stated. "Tracy's cousin. You remember Tracy, don't you?"

The sarcasm was not lost on Toby. Caroline was confused by the scowl on Toby's face and further by his words.

"What're you tryin' to pull? You know as well as I do that you don't need or want to work here or anywhere for that matter."

Brett shrugged. "Just killin' time. Besides, someone's got to work while you're off playing at the swimming hole."

Toby grabbed him by the front of the shirt, pushed him backward and slammed him up against a wall just inside the open barn doors. He kept his voice low as he asked the question. "Was that you I heard

down there this morning?"

Brett's face was pale, and fear shone in his eyes, giving Toby all the answer he needed.

Brett watched Toby's face. Truth was, he'd had quite a time checking out Toby with his girlfriend. However, the truth would earn him a few scars for sure. "No, man. I swear I only knew where you were. That's it."

Toby released him but didn't buy the story at all. He was sure it'd been Brett he'd heard during the morning's escapade. Now the question was, what was he up to? Brett was Harrison Chastain's gofer. Whatever he was up to, Toby would put an end to it right now. "Get off my land."

Brett straightened his shirt, stood tall. "No problem, but you won't get away free as a bird, Tobias, for what you did to Tracy. There's gonna be hell to pay."

"I didn't do anything to Tracy except rescue her from what would've been a horrible mistake."

"A mistake has indeed been made, Smith, and you're gonna pay."

"You threaten me?" Toby advanced, but Brett hurried off before he could be further humiliated.

Les frowned. "Sorry, Toby, I didn't know there was bad blood between the two of you."

"You couldn't have known, Les. It's okay. I didn't recognize him at first. That's Tracy's cousin. He works for her father. I met him once, the night I first met Tracy. From what she said about him, he's a lazy good-for-nothin' punk who does her father's bidding. Tracy and I recently called it quits and apparently her father is out for blood. Then again, it might be her, because she was pretty mad when we broke up."

"Oh, so, y'all broke up. I was wondering why you had this little girl here with you while you were engaged to someone else."

"Les, I'd think you should know me better than that."

Les grinned. "Thought I did, but who am I to judge?"

"You're part of the family, Les. You catch me doing somethin' I shouldn't be doin', you set me straight."

"I got no problem with that."

Toby turned when Molly snorted. He went back out to Caroline and helped her down off the horse.

"What was that all about?" she asked.

"I promise to tell you all about it, but right now, we gotta see some

old friends." He took Caroline by the hand and walked her slowly toward the old barn where his animals were waiting for him.

"So," she prodded, "are you gonna tell me why you were so rude to Brett?"

He sighed. "He's the nephew of a prominent Nashville family. His family and mine, well, let's just say we don't have the same priorities. He has no need to work and no reason to be on my land except to cause trouble."

"Why did Les allow him to work here, then?"

Toby pressed his lips together. He needed to tell her about Tracy, and he would, but he didn't want her to face too much at once. The Stillwaters were coming tomorrow. He needed to help her handle that first. "Our two families had reached a truce of sorts, we had started to come together, but recently, there was a falling out that Les didn't know about."

"I see," Caroline said, smiling up at him. "Ya know, Toby, you sure are scary when you get all mad."

His lips quirked in a half smile. He'd wanted to mutilate the man. He was pretty sure Caroline would want the same thing if she knew how her privacy had been violated. For right now though, he didn't think it wise to tell her Brett had probably been witness to their early morning activities, maybe even what took place on the horse.

At that moment, a giant golden retriever came lumbering down the path, barking madly, tail wagging. Toby stepped in front of Caroline before Rascal could knock her down and lick her to death. The dog literally jumped into his arms.

"There now, big fella, I'm glad to see you too," Toby soothed, scratching him behind his ears. The dog immediately rolled on the ground belly-up and lay still waiting for the usual. Toby laughed as he scratched him all over. "You wouldn't think he was spoiled now, would you?"

Caroline knelt to help scratch him. Giggled. "You're a wimp for such a big boy."

"That's not very nice," Toby whined.

Caroline laughed. "I was talking to the dog."

Rascal jumped up and ran off toward their destination, apparently to let the others know their "master" was on his way. Caroline couldn't believe what she saw as they approached. Two large cats, a bunch of kittens, three more dogs, a goat, a raccoon, two pigs and a three-legged

deer turned their attention to Toby as he approached.

Caroline clapped her hands in glee as she went from one animal to another, learning their names, petting and tickling and scratching and feeding. Toby told her the story behind each one. The large gray cat had been pregnant when she was found on the front porch just a few months ago. Soon thereafter, the black cat started hanging around. When the kittens were born, well, whaddya know, they were black.

She learned that Rascal had been found in the rear of a restaurant where Toby's limo had been parked during a personal appearance a few years before. He'd been just a puppy at the time and starving to death. Not anymore.

The raccoon simply appeared one day and never left. Toby supposed he knew a good deal when he saw one.

The pigs belonged to Molly, the human, not the horse. She rescued them from a fair. They were "just too cute to be eaten."

The goat was an escapee from a neighbor and when Toby took him back they asked him to keep it because they were tired of tracking him down every time he escaped. The goat had never tried to escape from Toby.

Toby answered the scratching sound at the kitchen door one day to find Rascal sitting politely, waiting to introduce his new little friend, a tiny black terrier mix. They had no idea where he came from and never did find the owners. The two other dogs were brothers, Beagles, old hunting dogs put out to pasture.

The deer, even though fully grown, was very small. It had been found in an illegal trap. Everyone had told Toby to put it out of its misery, but those big brown eyes were too full of fear. He'd needed to see them calm and happy again. Doc Richards had been called in to perform a miracle. Once the animal's leg was amputated, Doc turned the deer's care over to Toby, who meticulously followed all the Doc's advice and nursed the animal back to health. That had been over a year ago, and the deer was now happy, healthy and content. It warmed Toby's heart to see the sweet little deer, nosing around the kittens and playing with the pigs.

"What did you name her?" Caroline asked.

Toby shrugged ashamedly. "Bambi, of course. I mean, what else are you gonna name a pet deer?"

"Hmm, I suppose you're right," Caroline laughed. "Except Bambi was a boy."

They spent the afternoon, feeding and playing with the animals.

Toby smiled down at Caroline as she stroked Rascal one last time before they started back up to the house. "How would you like to get all dressed up and go out? I'll show you some of the clubs in Nashville that actually let me sing before anyone knew who Toby Nash was."

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They ate first, at an old country restaurant that had been around since Toby was a kid, and then started hitting the clubs. They made it to the third one before Caroline started yawning.

Toby leaned down to whisper in her ear on the dance floor where they swayed slowly. "I'm sorry. I forgot you're used to going to bed early and waking up at the crack of dawn."

She smiled up at him. "I suppose I'm just a little country girl at heart, after all."

"Now that *is* music to my ears." Making a snap decision, he tugged on her hand. "Let's go. There's something I want you to see."

They left the club and a few minutes later Toby pulled his Ford Explorer up in front of a three-story, large brick building. It was an older building, with beautifully carved trim. Instead of gargoyles, it was guarded by cupids at the top of the concrete steps, at each corner of the roof, and near the entrance.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"I think it's a neat old building. Why?"

"I'm thinking about buying it. I think it would be a great place. Put a recording studio on the top floor. Maybe lease the next two floors to a business of some kind. Do you like it?"

"Sure," she agreed. "It could be really nice with some fixing up."

"I'm glad you like it." He smiled. He would wait until later this week, after he asked her to marry him, to tell her about maybe turning the building into a dance school. A dance school run by Madame Caroline Smith.

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Caroline woke the next morning feeling warm and cozy and pampered and mostly, content. She was in the small bedroom but didn't really remember how she'd gotten there. The day before had started with an abduction, gone onto a wild first experience, and it was on a horse! Then there was playtime with a bunch of sweet animals and finally, dinner and dancing with the man she loved. What's more, that man was also the boy she'd fantasized about most of her life. Could she

be any happier right now? It was like a dream from which she had no wish to wake.

She pulled the covers over her head, closed her eyes and relished the wonderful feeling of love, security and safety, only partially aware of the slight pain that intruded into her world. She'd reveled in Toby's touch yesterday, almost couldn't remember what it had been like before he taught her how it felt to be loved.

"Rascal's not the only one getting spoiled around here," Toby said from the door.

Caroline threw the covers off and grinned up at him. "Good morning!"

"Mornin' Princess."

"It's your fault, ya know. You spoil me like a princess."

"I love spoiling you," he said softly as he came forward to give her a quick kiss. "I came to wake you for breakfast. Are you hungry?"

"I am really hungry! Yesterday was so amazing, I think I must've worked up an appetite."

Toby's lips pressed tightly together. "We didn't really talk about what happened yesterday. You were sleeping so soundly by the time we got home last night, I just carried you up here to bed."

"Sorry about that."

"About what?"

"About falling asleep on you."

"No problem, Princess. It was a long day." He sighed. "So, shall we talk about our, uh, escapade on Thunder?"

She smiled. "I don't see a need to talk about it. It was amazing, it was wonderful, and I want to do it again."

Toby frowned.

"What?" Caroline asked. "It wasn't good for you?"

Toby chuckled and shook his head. "You have a lot to learn about men. No, it's not that. It's just that I wasn't expecting for our relationship to go down that road just yet. But I guess you were my Bathsheba and I lost all thought."

"Bathsheba?"

"It's a story in the bible."

"I'll be sure to look it up."

Toby nodded.

"So what are you saying? Are you feeling guilty?"

He sighed heavily. "I think I am. Just two days ago I was talking

about doing some soul searching. The very next day I break one of God's biggest moral laws."

"Which is?"

"Hmm, well, I can't remember the exact scriptures. There's a bunch of them. But nutshell version, sex outside of marriage is frowned upon by God."

"Oh. Well, that IS disappointing."

Toby chuckled. "I didn't mean to take advantage of you. But, I mean, it's not like I'm some paragon of virtue."

"Meaning you've had other women?"

He sighed. "Well, sure."

"So why are you all worried about it now?"

"Because," he stopped to think. "Because, like I said, I haven't been acting like a real Christian man oughta act, and what makes me want to do that, is you. You make me want to be a better man, to live up to what I know a good man is, like my father. I decide THAT one day, and the very next day I'm doing what ought not be done." He shook his head.

"Well, I'm not upset about it at all," Caroline confessed.

He took her hand. "I want you to know that I respect you, regardless of my action, and that you're not just any girl to me."

She nodded. "Thanks, Toby, I believe you, but I think you're being way too serious."

He only sighed because he realized that she didn't understand because she'd never read the Bible. Immorality was a serious thing and there were consequences. There were always consequences. However, this was not the time and place to argue about it. Besides, he was a little rusty on all of that stuff anyway. "Okey dokie then, let's go eat some breakfast."

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Later, she turned to him as they cleaned the breakfast dishes. "So what's the plan for today?"

"Actually, I have a surprise for you."

"Really?"

"Yes," he said, wringing his hands nervously. He was worried about what was soon to take place, and having second thoughts. Something had happened between Caroline and the Stillwaters. Something she had no wish to talk about. What didn't make sense was the Stillwaters themselves didn't know what it was. Maybe he should
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have told them this wasn't a good time. Maybe he should've asked Caroline if she would like to see them. He hadn't asked though because he knew what she would say. Well, what's done is done. It's too late now to turn back. They would be here soon.

"So?" Caroline asked. "What's the surprise?"

"It's not ready yet. We need to go feed the animals. When we get back, it may be ready."

She was puzzled but went along with him. They fed and played with the animals. Toby watched her with them. She was calm and loving. She had such a good heart. He loved everything about her.

"I smell like a dog," Caroline complained when they returned from the barn.

"Tell ya what, why don't you go pamper yourself with a bubble bath?" Toby began. "And I'll check on the surprise."

"Okay," she giggled. "I love it when you act so mysterious," she said as she ran up the stairs.

She may not love this, he thought as he pulled out his phone and called the Stillwaters' cell phone number. "Where are you, or how close are you?" he asked anxiously.

"We're at the exit. Be there in about thirty minutes. Why? Is everything okay?"

"I don't know. I'm having second thoughts. She seems so vulnerable. I haven't told her you were coming. I was gonna surprise her, but maybe I'm goin' about this all wrong. Then again, if I tell her, she'll probably refuse to see you." He paused. "You have no idea what happened? No idea why she ran out on you that day?"

"None whatsoever," Jim Stillwater stated. "Look, Toby, I'm thinking it'll be good to clear the air after so long. Besides, it's out of our hands now. Sylvia is so frantic she would walk through fire right now to make sure this meeting happens. She's not gonna let you cancel. But don't worry, Toby, I have a feeling it will all turn out."

"I hope you're right," Toby said apprehensively.

Caroline was still upstairs when the Stillwaters pulled up in front of the house.

Toby hugged the woman he'd always known as Aunt Sylvia even though they weren't really related. Next he shook hands with Uncle Jim, also just an honorary title and then he turned to Paul.

"So, how's it feel to be all graduated from high school, Paul?" he asked as he shook the young man's hand.

Paul grinned. "It's heaven, Toby. Freedom, man."

Toby turned his attentions to the adorable girl at Paul's side. "Lynn? This just cannot be little Lynelli. How old are you now? Thirteen? Fourteen?"

She placed her hands on her hips. "Funny, Toby. You know I'm only a year younger than Paul."

Toby hugged her. "I swear, Lynn, you get more beautiful every time I see you."

Lynn blushed. Sylvia was wringing her hands, nervously. "Why don't you kids go out back and make yourselves scarce for a while?"

Lynn frowned at her mother. "If she used to take care of us, won't she want to see us too?"

"Yes," Toby affirmed. "But not at first. She's been through some hard times and I don't want her to be overwhelmed."

Lynn nodded with a smile. "C'mon, Paul, you can push me on the swing for old time's sake before you head off to college and I finally get the big room."

"When pigs fly," Paul jeered as they walked around the back of the house.

Caroline stood at the glass door to the balcony in Toby's room. They had visitors. The two young people out on the swing were a handsome couple. The young man had light brown hair, trimmed very neatly and a lean but muscular build. The girl also had brown hair, maybe a shade lighter than the boy's. It was very long and very curly. What a lovely girl, Caroline thought as she turned away. Wondering who'd come to visit, she hurried down to find Toby.

He met her at the bottom of the stairs, his expression somber.

"Is something wrong?" Caroline asked immediately.

Toby pressed his lips together, reached his hand out to her. "No. Nothing's wrong. Someone has come to visit."

"Yes, I saw some kids out back. Who are they?'

"You'll see. They're in the kitchen."

He took her hand and ushered her into the kitchen, where the Stillwaters awaited, thinking it would be less formal there. They could all sit around the table and chat.

Caroline came through the swinging door and looked up to see a man and woman. She smiled pleasantly at them.

"Hello, Caro," Sylvia said softly.

It took a moment for her to realize who spoke. When it hit her,

Caroline's smile faded completely. Her heart rate jumped into high, her hands shook as she reached for the counter top to steady herself. Mr. Stillwater stood behind his wife, smiling kindly.

Caroline didn't speak as she tried to comprehend the situation.

"It's good to see you again, Caroline," Jim said.

Caroline looked up at Toby, her eyes brimming with tears. Her hands visibly shook as she reached up to smooth an imaginary hair from her face. He was pretty sure he knew what she was thinking. *Traitor. You knew I didn't even want to talk about them, and now you've brought them here.*

He was wrong. Caroline's thoughts weren't pinning blame on Toby. The Stillwaters are actually here, she thought. The people she'd betrayed so long ago. The only people in the world who had trusted her and she had betrayed that trust. They finally had her cornered. They're gonna want to know what had driven her away. The truth is gonna come out because she has nowhere to go and nowhere to hide. What are they gonna think of her? Oh, God, what is Toby gonna think? He'll be so ashamed of her. Toby with his soft heart who saves deer and dogs is gonna be absolutely disgusted with her. And the kids out back, oh, Lord, that must be Paul and Lynn. Caroline opened her mouth to speak, but there was such a buzzing in her head she could barely force the words out. "How did..."

She never finished her sentence. Toby caught her before she hit the floor.

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry," he muttered as he scooped her up and carried her to the front room to lay her on the sofa.

Jim laid a calming hand on his wife's shoulder as she went about wetting a cloth. He turned her to him and wiped a tear away. "It will be okay."

Sylvia shook her head. "I feel like I've found a lost daughter. We should have tried harder to find her back then. She's so beautiful and so sad."

"Maybe we can help her now," her husband comforted. "All is not lost."

Sylvia smiled, wiped away her tears and headed out.

Caroline's face was deathly pale. Sylvia placed the cloth on Caroline's head and turned to the men. "Out."

They didn't question her. They were all too willing to let Sylvia handle it.

When Caroline opened her eyes the woman she had so admired was smiling at her in that sweet way she had smiled at her own children so often. Her hand stroked Caroline's.

"I don't know, Caro, what is going through that head of yours," Sylvia began. "I never did, but I intend to find out." She sighed at the look of misery on Caroline's face. "Oh, Caroline, we've missed you so much. I've wondered about you and worried about you. When Jim told me that day that you'd quit, I was so upset. I marched myself right over to your apartment but I couldn't get anyone to answer the door. Caroline, you were like a daughter to me. I knew there were some problems and I was hoping that one day I would get you to open up and confide in me, but I never got the chance. I've lived with so much guilt, letting you slip away like you did."

Caroline didn't even try to hold back the tears. "You don't know, Mrs. Stillwater. You would never want me as a daughter."

"You're right, Caroline, I don't know. I have no idea what made you separate yourself from us, but whatever it was, we could have talked it out and worked through it. When you care about someone, Caroline, you don't let little things get in the way."

"It wasn't little," she blubbered. "If it had been a little thing, I would never have left."

Sylvia stroked her cheek. "I don't understand, sweetie. Please, help me to understand."

"I can't," Caroline sobbed. "I just can't."

"It hurts me, Caro, that you don't trust me enough to know that I would understand."

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to hurt you." She cried harder. "I never meant to hurt anyone."

"Then tell me, hon, what happened? Was it something we did? Did we get too personally involved? I know I was always trying to get you to eat and I was always asking you about your grades. It's just because I cared so much."

"No, no it didn't have anything to do with you. Y'all were always so nice to me."

"Then what was it, dear? What happened?"

"I, I can't tell you. Don't you see? It's just too bad."

"No matter what happened to you, Caro, it would never change the way we feel about you."

"Not me. It didn't happen to me."

"Then who? Tell me, Caro. Tell me what you think is so bad."

Caroline shook her head. "I did something. Something terrible. I didn't mean to. It just happened. I can't talk about it."

"Oh hon, whatever you did, I'm sure we can find a solution. Now, you've made a good start. Tell me. What did you do? Whatever it is, we can work through it. I'm sure of it."

"I can't." She tried to rise, needed to escape but only got as far as a sitting position as Mrs. Stillwater held her arm fast.

She spoke to Caroline firmly now, like a mother would discipline a child. "Caroline Jones, you sit right here and you tell me what you did that you think is so bad. Whatever it is, young lady, if it's been bothering you all these years you must realize it will never stop hurting you until you own up to it. It's the only way to overcome it. You can't keep running away."

Caroline looked down, considering Sylvia's words. Maybe she's right. Maybe I should have confessed a long time ago. What a coward I am. The very least I could do is take my medicine. She would lose their trust. Worse, she would lose Toby's love, but she didn't want to live any longer with the dark cloud hanging over her, constantly reminding her of what she was. No more. Taking a few deep breaths she braced for the worst. As tears dripped down onto her hands where they were holding Mrs. Stillwater's hand she drew a deep breath and said it quickly. "I hit him."

She'd spoken so softly that Sylvia could barely make out what Caroline said. "What did you say? Did you say you hit him? Who, honey? Who did you hit?"

Caroline pulled away, stood, paced away and swung back. "I hit him," she cried. "Do you hear? I hit Paul. How do you like me now? I got angry and I slapped your baby. Just like my mother. Just like her!" She threw her hands to her face. "I can't stand the thought. I hate myself for it. You see, now? I had to leave. It was the only way to make sure I never hurt anyone again."

In the kitchen Toby leaned his head back against the kitchen door where he and Jim stood. "What have I done? I shouldn't have brought this on her. I should have talked to her first. She's gonna have a freakin' nervous breakdown."

"I think you're wrong, Toby. I think what's happening in there is a good thing. If she's been harboring feelings of self-hatred all these years– she must be miserable. Now she'll be able to work things out

and she'll feel a thousand times lighter."

"I hope you're right," Toby whispered.

Sylvia Stillwater gazed at the beautiful young woman who had already punished herself more than she'd ever deserved. Caroline had just finished telling her the entire circumstances surrounding what had happened all those years ago. Sylvia felt sick to think what Caro had been through, and she hadn't been there for her. Hadn't seen it. Hadn't stopped it. The poor child, little Caro, had been suffering in anguish right under her nose. How self-centered she must've been to not have seen what was happening to the poor thing. Sylvia shook her head. Somehow she had to make things right. First things first. She needed to help Caro see that no damage had been done. "Come sit down."

Caroline slumped back down on the sofa, looking defeated. Sylvia took her hand. "First of all, let me assure you, Caro, that you smacking Paul was not the first time he'd ever been punished and definitely not the last. Paul was a trying child to say the least."

"No, that's not true. Paul was an angel," Caroline argued. "You're only saying that to try and make me feel better, when what you should be doing is telling me you never want to see me again."

"Oh, honey, please listen to me. Paul was a terror. Ask Jim."

"It doesn't matter. He didn't deserve what he got from me."

Sylvia laughed softly, hoping to make light of Caro's concerns. "Oh, I'm sure he did."

"How can you say that? He was your baby. I'm sure you never hit him in the face."

"No, I didn't. That was a mistake and I forgive you for that, Caro. Still, one little mistake is not worth suffering over for a lifetime. If you had stayed, we could have talked all these things out."

"No, I couldn't have stayed. I've read about abused children. They grow up to be abusers. There is no escaping what my mother has made me into. I'm a monster."

"You are nothing of the sort," Sylvia comforted. "I didn't know, Caro. I'm so sorry I didn't figure it out. Just realizing what you were going through back then, I'm the one who should feel guilty. I do feel guilty. I didn't know, Caroline. I knew you and your mom weren't very close. I knew you struggled financially. How could I have been so blind as to not see what you were going through?"

Caroline used the cloth from her head to wipe her face. "I don't want you to feel bad about anything," she said, shaking her head. "I

was really good at keeping it hidden. I mean, a real pro. I was so ashamed that my own mother couldn't love me and I didn't want anyone to know. Especially not you and Mr. Stillwater. You were the only security I had."

Sylvia hugged her hard. "Bless your heart, to have to go through that all alone."

"Not all alone. Toby knew."

"He did?"

"He guessed right away."

"I should wear him out."

Caroline smiled through her tears at the thought. "I made him swear he could never tell anyone."

Sylvia nodded. "You trusted him and he was worthy of that trust. I suppose that's a good thing." She smiled, then focused back on Caroline's problem which in a nutshell was self-hatred. "You said a moment ago that Jim and I were your only security. Do you realize what strength it took for you to remove yourself from the only security you knew to make sure the children were safe?"

Caroline shook her head. "I don't see that as strength. Fear maybe. Fear of getting caught."

Mr. Stillwater chose that time to enter the room. He approached the sofa, knelt down beside it. Caroline cast her eyes downward, feeling ashamed.

"I heard, Caro. I want you to know I agree with my wife and I think you didn't finish reading about abused children, because it's the knowledge that will keep you from becoming what your mother was. Only when we don't know what is happening around us are we victims to circumstance. Knowledge is power. Your knowing and understanding what your mother did will help you to be a better parent, not a worse one."

When she didn't respond, Jim took her hand. "Do you understand what I'm saying, Caro?"

"You're saying there's hope for me," she said softly.

"Yes, Caro, if you can only forgive yourself. You've done nothing that warrants a lifetime of punishment."

"Oh, Caroline," Sylvia cried, "you have to see what a wonderful person you are. So loving, so kind, so conscientious. Toby told us all about what you've accomplished and about the kind of person you've become and the things you've done, and all of that against great odds."

"Toby," Caroline mumbled. "I don't want him to know what I did. I can't bear for him to know. I'm so ashamed."

"I'm afraid he already knows," Jim said. "He was in the kitchen with me and we heard everything. He's worried about you and worried that he overstepped his bounds arranging this surprise meeting with you. He loves you a great deal."

They raised their heads at the sound of the kitchen door swinging shut. Toby stood by the door, the look on his face told of the love he felt. "Forgive me," he pleaded.

"There's nothing to forgive." She shook her head. "I didn't want you to know about this. You see? Now you know. How can you...?" She stopped as Toby approached.

"What? How can I love you? How could I not? You're the strongest, most loving person I know. The sacrifice you made because you thought the children were at risk is incredible. What you did was not such a bad thing, at least I hope not, because I've been a lot more violent than that and I don't have an abusive parent to blame it on."

Caroline sniffed. "Don't make light of this, Toby. You didn't hurt a child that you love."

He laughed. "I'm sure my brother Ben would disagree with that."

"Paul has no recollection of what happened, Caroline," Sylvia said. "I'm sure of it. He never said anything to us about it. Probably because he knew he was in the wrong. There was no damage done, except to yourself."

"You really think so?"

"Yes, I really do, so please, sweetie, come back into our family. Be the elder sister the kids always heard about."

"They know about me? They remember me?"

"They remember. We had a few pictures and whenever they looked through the picture albums they'd ask about you. They're out back waiting to see you."

Caroline looked panicked at the thought and Toby quickly pulled her up. "Why don't you go upstairs and freshen up. Splash some water on your face. Everything is gonna be all right. You'll see."

She smiled up at him. "You always say that, and it always seems to be true."

Mrs. Stillwater took her hand. "Come on, Caro, why don't we ladies go on up together."

By the time Caroline came back down the stairs she was calmer

and much more at peace with herself. Only the tears came again as she met and spoke with Paul and Lynn.

"Y'all are so grown," Caroline cried. "I missed so much stuff. Like your first day at school, and your first girlfriend or boyfriend."

"Believe me," Lynn quipped, "you didn't miss much where Paul was concerned."

"Funny, sis. At least I had a first."

"Oh, are you talking about the one with the mustache or the one that was 'pleasantly plump'?"

Caroline listened to them banter back and forth. She put a shaky hand to her mouth. "Oh my goodness, so much time has passed." She turned and ran back up to the bathroom.

Lynn sighed. "Sorry, Mom. I was only trying to make her laugh."

"It's okay, Lynelli. I think she's just sad that you grew up so quickly. I'm pretty sad about that myself."

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Once Caroline had control of her emotions, the rest of the day was beautiful, like the calm after a storm. They played in the pool, gave Caroline a riding lesson, and filled her in on Lynn and Paul's lives. The men grilled out by the pool while Sylvia and Caroline fixed potato salad and beans in the kitchen.

Toby watched her as she carried a tray of utensils to set out. Her face was glowing. She was finally at peace and that gave him enormous pleasure.

After an early supper, all six people worked side by side in the kitchen, putting it to rights, then adjourned to the usual place, Toby at the piano. This time however, Lynn sat next to him and they surprised Caroline by singing a duet for her. Caro thrilled at Lynn's beautiful voice. After several songs, Sylvia turned her attention to Caroline.

"Will you dance for me, Caro? Please?"

"I'd love to, but I didn't bring any music," she said with a shrug.

The piano changed suddenly to Tchaikovsky's *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy*. Toby grinned. "Bet I can play anything you want. There are dozens of books filled with sheet music on that shelf over there, both classical and show tunes, and if you don't like any of those, I can download any piece of music in a few seconds, so, no excuses. Whaddya want?"

She went to the shelf and thumbed through, finally settling on *Odette's Variation*, from *Dance of the Swans* in *Swan Lake*. She
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handed it to Toby. "Can you play this?" she challenged.

He looked it over, nodded and set it on the piano. "Give me a minute to practice."

"You practice. I'll go change. I can't dance in these jeans."

She came down a few minutes later in some shorts and a knit top, her feet bare. "Y'all are just gonna have to pretend you see a pretty white tutu."

The men quickly cleared the floor of tables and chairs and rugs. Caroline could clearly see herself in the glass in front of her and it made her feel right at home, as if she were in class.

Toby began to play and Caroline to dance. The Stillwater family was highly impressed. She may be a self-described unemployed dancer, but in their eyes she was a prima ballerina. They marveled at her grace, her skill, her beauty. She was breathtaking.

"I am so proud of you," Jim said as she finished. "You've accomplished so much and against such great odds."

Toby smiled as they heaped her with praise. He'd wanted to see the healing. He'd wanted to see the three-legged deer find happiness. It seemed to be coming true.

The evening was quickly coming to an end. The Stillwaters had to catch a late evening flight out of Nashville headed to Arizona for a family camping nature excursion. Within only a few minutes of her performance, they were hugging and kissing each other goodbye, promising that this time they would stay in touch.

When they were alone again, Caroline and Toby pushed the furniture back in place. Toby took her by the hand. "Have I told you how beautiful you are?"

"You make me feel as if I really am," she sighed. "May I tell you how impressed I am that you can play the piano so well?"

He grinned. "Thanks. Music, it really is my bliss."

"I can tell. We make a good couple."

"Yeah, we do," he agreed, his heart soaring.

While he went to lock up and turn out the lights, Caroline was surprised to feel the pain again. A slight pain in her lower abdomen. She'd felt it when she danced and thought it was because she hadn't properly stretched out. She rubbed her hand over the area as she waited for Toby to return to her side. She'd been participating in activities she definitely wasn't used to. She was probably gonna have some new aches and pains. She hoped it was nothing serious, because she had no

medical insurance and couldn't afford to be sick or injured. Besides no way was she gonna let a little pain ruin the vacation of a lifetime. She'd sooner cut off her legs.

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That night, Toby escorted Caroline to her own room. He could tell she was disappointed, though she didn't say anything. He kissed her goodnight. He held her for a long time. He made sure she felt how much he loved her. Then he went to his own room and his own bed. He'd wanted to make love to her. Badly. Even more though, he wanted her to know that what he felt wasn't just about the carnal side of things. He wanted her to know he valued her as a person; that she was important. He also wanted God to know, that he was trying to be a better man.

Apprehensive about the question he planned on asking her in the morning, he was having a hard time falling asleep. It was almost one o'clock in the morning when he heard the soft knock on his door.

"Come in," he said as he sat up.

Caroline peeked in. "Hey."

"Hey darlin'. Something wrong?"

"I had a bad dream."

"How bad?"

"Bad enough to wake me up and have me not wanting to close my eyes again."

He lifted the covers and patted the bed beside him. She came quickly and scooted in next to him. He put his arm around her and pulled her close against his side.

"Wanna tell me about it?"

"Well, I would if I could remember it. I only know I woke up with a start."

"Hmm, maybe it was something brought up from the recesses of your mind by seeing the Stillwaters."

"Maybe." She laid her head on his chest. "Whatever it was, I feel all better now that I'm with you."

He kissed the top of her head. "Sleep now," he whispered. "I've got you."

She did. As he lay there holding her, he thought of all the conversations they'd had on this little trip to the farm. They'd discussed religion, politics and world events, music, art, dance, TV and movies. He found she was a treasure trove of contradictions and even
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though he didn't think it was possible, he'd grown to love her more. Tomorrow, or rather, in a few hours, in the early morning, when the sun rose and the birds sang, the time when Caroline was in her element, he would ask her to share her life with him.

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Proverbs 28:13

"Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper,
but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy."

## Chapter 8

Toby lay awake most of the night imagining life together with Caroline and trying to decide just what words he would use to go about popping the question. He watched as the gray of early dawn played across Caroline's face and she began to stir. She was indeed an early riser. She must have thought he was sleeping when she rose and tiptoed into the bathroom, for she softly closed the door as if trying not to wake him.

Inside the bathroom, Caroline gripped the edge of the sink. What had begun as a slight pain had grown considerably during the night. Kneading her abdomen, she wondered briefly about appendicitis. Which side was supposed to hurt? Dismissing the thought, she took a deep breath and pushed her concerns away. She'd lived with pain before. Hopefully, whatever the problem was, it would clear up by itself. She freshened up and crept back to bed.

"Hey, darlin'," Toby crooned softly.

"Hey." She smiled. "I love the way you say that."

He pulled her close. "Come here and give me a proper mornin' kiss," he ordered.

She obeyed.

He brushed his lips back and forth over hers. It was several moments before he raised his head. "I can't seem to get enough," he complained. "I keep thinking just one more kiss, just one more, but it's never enough. I want you so much."

"I want you too, Toby. I want you to love me."

"I do love you."

In the quiet, she sighed. "I feel like I did all those years ago when you took me out on Molly and told me goodbye. I dreaded leaving. It's so wonderful here, like heaven on earth and just like back then, I wish I didn't ever have to leave."

"You don't have to leave, Caroline. Not ever."

"I wish that was true."

He stroked her arm. "Let me tell you, Caroline, back when I was

fourteen, I was powerless to keep you here, but we're grown now, Caroline, and I have the power."

She rose up to look at him. "What are you saying, Toby?"

"Stay with me, Caroline. Stay here with me. What I'm trying to say, Caroline, is, well, will you..."

"Well, well, well."

Their heads jerked up at the intruder who stood in the doorway to the bedroom.

"What the — Tracy! What are you doing here?"

"So this must be the little slut you dumped me for."

At the gasping sound, Toby glanced over at Caroline. Her eyes were wide, her mouth open, her fists balled in the sheet.

"She's not much to look at, is she, Toby, darling? So very, what do you call it? Plain?"

"Get out of here, Tracy."

But Tracy was apparently in no mood to take orders. She turned her attentions to Caroline. "You look surprised, honey. What? Didn't Toby tell you about me?"

Toby watched as Caroline turned slowly to look at him, then back to the intruder.

"Tracy, I'm not playing around. Get out of here. You want to talk? Fine. We'll talk. But not here, now get out." He swung his legs over the side of the bed.

Tracy ignored him. "I can see he didn't. Well, let me do the honors. Ya see, up to a few days ago, sweetie, Toby and I were engaged to be married."

Caroline's indrawn breath told Toby that her response to that piece of news was total shock.

"Tracy, I'm warning you," Toby threatened. "At least have the decency to allow us to get up and get dressed."

"So? Get up then, Toby. It's not like I haven't seen it a hundred times already."

A soft moan had Toby glancing in Caroline's direction again. Trembling and pale, her chest heaved as she tried to take in air.

"What's the matter?" Tracy addressed Caroline. "Shocked? Stunned? Don't be, honey. He's a womanizer. One of the best. Let me guess. Did he take you swimming down at the swimming hole?"

Toby sprang from the bed. "Dammit, Tracy. What are you tryin' to pull? I never..."

"And I bet he fed you strawberries," she continued.

Toby pulled his jeans on and turned towards Caroline. "I never took..." But she wasn't listening. She was trying to get out from under the covers. Finally standing, she turned toward the bathroom. Toby had never taken Tracy swimming, nor fed her strawberries, but he knew where she'd gotten her information. Brett had done his job well. Toby realized from the look on Caroline's face, he could deny it till the cows come home. She would never believe him. Never again. Caroline moved toward the bathroom but stopped by the door.

He charged Tracy, but she was not intimidated and stood her ground. He grabbed her by the elbow. "Get out of here, Tracy," he ordered sternly. "I'm not sure what you think you're gonna accomplish, but it's not gonna work."

She wrenched her arm free. "I'm just trying to protect what's mine. So, before you do something you'll regret, you might want to know—I'm pregnant."

Silence. The house was utterly soundless. Toby could hear only Caroline's breathing. He'd been careful. He was always careful. Yet he suddenly realized there were indeed consequences for not living in the way God had set forth. Still, he knew it couldn't be his child.

"Whose child is it?" he asked snidely. "Because it's not mine. I'm guessing it could be any number of guys."

There was a reverberating crack as she hauled back and slapped him with all her might.

They turned at the sound of a wrenching sob. Caroline slipped into the bathroom, turning the lock with a resounding click.

Toby lunged, grabbing Tracy and dragging her out of the room and down the stairs.

Caroline could hear Tracy screaming obscenities and Toby's heated return. She covered her ears. She couldn't stand it. The confrontation. The violence. She doubled over. The pain. She couldn't decipher whether it was the new pain in her abdomen or the old pain in her heart. Grabbing the sink to steady herself, she tried to think, but her mind wouldn't work. She had to get out, out and away. She had to breathe. Her mother had warned her about men many times. Really, hadn't she beat it into her? Caroline hadn't listened though. She hadn't wanted to believe the things her mother had so graphically articulated. This can't be happening. Toby lied to me. Not Toby. "I've got to get out of here," she whispered. "I have to go now."

She ran to her room and dressed, moving around the room, haphazardly gathering what she could, leaving what she couldn't. She stumbled back into Toby's room. Toby's keys lay on the dresser. It wouldn't be theft, she thought. She would leave it at the airport. While Toby and Tracy fought and yelled at one another about who did who wrong, Caroline stole stealthily out the back door, jumped in Toby's SUV and drove away.

At the airport, she found a pay phone and called Toby. He answered immediately. "Where are you, Caroline?"

"I'm at the airport. I have to go. Your car is..."

"No, baby, please, wait. Don't go. Don't hang up."

"Your car is in all day parking, space number thirty-one. Keys are under the mat."

"I don't care about the car," he yelled. Then softer, "Sorry. Sorry, I'm not yelling at you. Caroline, please, you have to believe that this is all a misunderstanding."

Caroline could hear Tracy's laughter in the background.

"Please, Princess, don't leave me. It can all be explained."

His voice was thick with emotion and Caroline had to steel herself against its pull.

"I love you, Caroline. Don't do this."

Her entire body trembling, she quietly replaced the receiver.

He had to choke back the tears. He would not give Tracy the satisfaction of seeing how badly she'd hurt him. He turned to her. "I ought to break your scrawny neck and I'm not promising I won't lose control and do just that."

He moved toward her. She backed away. "Don't you dare touch me, Tobias Smith."

"Not if someone paid me," he shot back. "Get out of my house and off my land."

"Toby, really, you're not thinking clearly. You must realize you're throwing away a fortune."

"What I'm doing is thinking clearly for the first time in a long time and I don't need your money."

"Of course you do. You can never have too much money."

He ignored her statement. "You know, I tried to tell myself I was doing a good thing, helping you out. I thought, I thought, ugh, I don't know what I thought, but I was lying to you and myself. I didn't love you, Tracy. You knew that. I did, however, care for you. How could I

not see what you really are? Even when I found Caroline, I felt bad that I hurt you and I wanted to be honest with you, because I felt you deserved more than a farce of a marriage. But now..." He stopped and shook his head.

"Now what, Toby? You can't blame me for trying to hold onto you. You can't blame me for fighting for the only good thing that ever happened to me."

"Oh, I can blame you, Tracy. You barge in here, spewing your lies. I don't care what happens to you now. I'm sure you'll be fine. You'll find some other chump willing to marry you so that you don't have to lift one of your manicured fingers to help yourself. You deserve everything you get."

"You owe me," she spat.

"I owe you nothing." Grabbing her by the arm, he ushered her out forcefully. Out on the porch she pulled away from him. "Are you forgetting about your child?"

Slowly, he ran a hand through his hair. "I don't know whose child it is or if there even is a child. What I do know is, it's not mine."

She turned and stormed away. He watched her go. Once she was completely out of sight, he went inside, moving silently up the stairs and into his bedroom.

Caroline was everywhere. She'd left her hair brush. A pair of shorts. A sock. Her scent. He sank down onto the bed, lay back, and covered his face with his arm. How could he have made such a mess of everything? His parents and siblings had been dead set against him marrying Tracy. His mother had wanted to know where she'd gone wrong to make him not believe in love. He'd told her he did believe in love– for everyone else– just not for him. He'd been through so many relationships, he'd thought there wasn't anyone out there for him. He realized that's because he'd been ruined. He'd never found anyone who could compare to Caroline. Well, he certainly wasn't gonna come this far and let it end this way. He would go to New York and win her back or die trying.

If only he hadn't been so prideful. If he'd only listened to and even obeyed his parents. "Honor your father and mother," he'd been taught that. He'd been taught many things. Things he hadn't purposely shoved aside, but things he'd allowed to quietly slip away. And if he hadn't had sex with Caroline, then maybe she would've believed him when he said he didn't make a baby with Tracy. But because of his actions,

Caroline knew he was weak. He'd made a conscious decision to do it, and there were indeed consequences.

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Caroline pulled into the rest stop and rushed to the restroom. She hadn't been able to bring herself to fly again, not without Toby. So she'd used some of her gambling winnings to rent a car. Now, she was having trouble staying awake. What's more, the constant motion of the car was wreaking havoc on her system. It seemed as soon as she relieved her bladder she had to go again. And then there was the pain that had started small but was now occupying much of her attention. That was okay though, because the suffering matched her mood and she welcomed it.

What should have taken her a day and a half at most to drive ended up lasting three tortuous days. Tortuous in both body and spirit. As she drove, she went over everything in her mind again and again. Her mother had been right. You can't trust men. No! No. She didn't want her mother to be right. What she wanted was to go back in time to the long talks and the passionate kisses and sweet ignorance of a few days ago. He'd seemed so real. How could it all be a lie?

She arrived in New York in the early morning hours, turned in the rental car at the airport and took the subway the rest of the way home. Desperately needing the comfort of her friends, she headed straight for the diner. Rosie hugged her fiercely.

"Where have you been? We've been so worried about you."

Caroline's brow wrinkled. "What are you talking about? I wasn't even due back for another few days. I'm early."

Eugene came out of the kitchen to hug her. "I was gonna file a missing person's report today if you didn't show," he exclaimed.

"I don't understand. I told you I wouldn't be back until Monday or Tuesday. It's only Friday."

Before Eugene had a chance to speak, the answer came through the door. The bells rang softly as the door shut behind him. Toby stood at the threshold.

"Thank God you're okay."

Caroline whirled around, the situation becoming clear. He'd beaten her there, spoken to her friends. She frowned and spun back to Eugene. "I don't want to talk to him. Don't want to see him." Her eyes asked Eugene where his loyalties lay.

He didn't disappoint her. Grimacing apologetically, he shrugged
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at Toby. Toby opened his mouth to plead his case, but stopped. After all, he'd already explained to them what had transpired. He thought they would help him try to explain things to her, but apparently, that's not how it was gonna be. Frustrated, he ran his hand through his hair, started forward but Eugene stepped in front of him. Toby's eyes met his. Sighing, Toby turned and walked silently out of the diner.

Caroline watched him go. He looked terrible. Obviously shaving had not been a priority, nor had wardrobe, she thought, eyeing the rumpled clothing. There was no time for contemplating Toby's condition. The pain was there again, consuming her every waking thought. Breathing hard to control it, she told Rosie and Eugene she wasn't feeling well and would be at her apartment, resting.

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For several days, Toby shadowed Caroline, following her around like some lost puppy. He rented a car so he would have a place to sit while she was inside her apartment. He sent her flowers. He wrote her long letters of explanation. Nothing worked. He cornered her one evening as she crossed the street from the diner headed home.

"Did you get the letter?" he asked as he reached for her arm to stop her progression.

She pulled back. "If you're talking about the envelope addressed to me, it's in the trash."

"You didn't read it?"

"What will it take to make you see? I want nothing to do with you, Tobias Smith." She drew a deep breath. This pain. It wasn't just in her abdomen anymore. It was covering her body, front, back, even her legs had begun to ache.

"Caroline, you can't just throw everything we had away because some girl you don't even know tells you a bunch of lies."

"I can if..." She turned, bent over, bracing her hands on her knees.

Toby stepped forward. "What's the matter? Are you sick?"

She breathed deeply and shook her head. "It's nothing. Nothing. Now leave me alone."

Eyes narrowed, Toby studied her. Perspiration ran down her face which seemed swollen. Her hands trembled, her complexion appeared pasty white. He reached out and touched her face. "Good Lord, Caroline, you're burning up."

She pushed him away. "Don't touch me. Don't you ever touch me again." She ran.
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Once she was in her apartment, she let the pain take over. It had moved. It was now more in her back than her abdomen. She knew she was ill. She'd hoped it would get better on its own, but it wasn't happening. It wasn't going away. She fell into bed, praying sleep would come and ease the misery in her body and in her heart.

Notwithstanding, the next morning, both were back. Caroline considered not going into work, but she knew they would all come to check on her and she just wanted to be left alone. Better to work her shift and get out of there. Somehow she would get through today, and maybe after work, she would go to the clinic for those who couldn't afford to see a doctor.

At the diner, Toby strode in. He was absolutely determined to see her. Caroline immediately called for Eugene, who came lumbering out of the kitchen.

Toby held his hand up to stop his progress. "Okay, man- you wanna take me on? Fine. If we gotta go before I can say what I need to say, then let's do it. Though, if you care for her like you say you do, you'll let me talk to her. Just let me speak to her. Afterward, if she still wants me to go then fine, I'll go. I'll go and you won't see me again."

Eugene stood a moment considering Toby's words. The words of an honorable man willing to fight for his woman. He backed off.

Toby turned to where Caroline stood by the counter, her knuckles white, her breath labored. The explanation he'd been planning slipped from his brain at the sight of her. "Look, you're not well and I'm taking you to a doctor, like it or not."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Listen to me," he shouted. When her eyebrows rose at him, he decided the explanation may have to come first. "Look, I met Tracy almost a year ago. Tracy made herself out like the 'Cinderella' of the family. Poor little misunderstood girl, treated like the unwanted stepdaughter. She made me think she was good and honest and unloved by her family. I think I wanted to see that. We had a relationship. My parents objected to that relationship, but I wouldn't listen. After all, I'm a grown man. How dare anyone try to tell me what's best for me, right? Wrong. Even Jeff said I was crazy. Maybe I was. I never really asked her to marry me. It was more like an arrangement just to help her out.

"She wanted me to marry her and save her from the 'wicked' family. You see, I have this weakness. I can't stand for people to suffer. I was so stupid. I couldn't see what she was. I agreed to marry her. That

was six months ago. From the moment I agreed, she changed. She became the shrew she really was. She hated my band members, hated my lifestyle, hated my home, and hated my parents. She made life hell and I don't think I would've actually gone through with it even if you hadn't shown up. But you did and I realized, Caroline, I couldn't ever marry Tracy because I loved you. Always had. That's it. Sounds idiotic, I know. And other than being an idiot, what did I do that is so wrong you won't even speak to me?"

She put her hands up to her face, shook her head. "I don't know. I can't think right now. I don't want to hear any more."

He grabbed her hands, pulled them down. "Please, Caroline, you have to. If you don't, you'll throw away something that is extraordinarily special. Do you think this kind of love happens to just anyone? It's been unique from the very first day we met, from the day you broke a glass in the kitchen."

She stilled and he jumped right in while he had the chance. "I spoke to Tracy immediately after I found you, because I thought it best to be honest with her. How is that a bad thing? We broke it off. I told her it wasn't fair for her to marry a man who was in love with another woman. What else was I supposed to do? Was I supposed to forget about you and marry her? Nothing good would have ever come of that. I felt bad for her. At first. Not anymore. She's showed her true colors. She's deceitful and conniving. And she was lying, Caroline. I never took her swimming. I never fed her strawberries."

"Then how did she know?" Caroline cried.

"It was Brett. I thought I heard something that morning down by the creek. It had to be him. He was spying on us, getting her any bit of information that would help her cause damage to our relationship."

"That's crazy," she panted.

"Exactly," he agreed.

Toby moved toward her, but she backed away. "No. Then why didn't you tell me about her? Why did you keep her a secret?"

He slammed his hands down on the counter. "I wasn't keeping her a secret. I would've eventually gotten around to talking about her. But she wasn't priority. We were discovering ourselves. There wasn't enough time to talk about everything that needed to be talked about. Then the Stillwaters came and we had to handle that. The next morning, just before Tracy interrupted us, I was about to ask you to marry me. I think you know that."

"But how could you do that, Toby? How could you ask me to marry you when we'd only been together a few weeks?"

"As far as I was concerned we've been together fifteen years."

She shook her head madly. She couldn't think straight. The pain. If the pain would just ease up, maybe she could put together a reasonable thought.

"Caroline, please, I want you to think back to all the conversations we had. I couldn't have made all that stuff up. Those are the words and actions of a man who loves you with every fiber of his being. You have to believe that."

"I, I don't know what to believe."

He raised his hands in frustration. "Why?"

"I don't know," she cried, then softer, "I don't know. My mom, she said she loved me too– just after she hit me. My father said he loved me– just before he left us. People lie all the time."

Toby began to understand and his frustration disappeared. Caroline wasn't being unreasonable. The abuse she'd suffered as a kid had caused trauma that hadn't healed. It was making it difficult for her to even believe in love. She'd started to believe, with him, but it was a rickety tower and Tracy had neatly toppled it. Nodding his understanding he reached toward her. "I get it, Caroline. I understand. Still, I want you to think about how different our love is than what you've experienced in your life. Think, please."

"I don't know what to think. Right now, I can't think at all." She held her hands to her head, moaning.

Toby stepped forward, concerned. "Caroline, you're ill. Let me take you to a doctor."

She looked up at him, then over at Eugene and Rosie and Irene and Alice. She really was very ill. Their faces all showed concern, and kindness. They also were blurring together. The room spun. She doubled over and cried out.

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They'd been waiting in the small room for over an hour. Eugene stood against one wall, Toby the other. Madame Pierre was there along with Rosie. Finally a nurse emerged from the double doors.

"Miss Jones has been taken to ICU. Which of you is her immediate family?"

"I am her mother," Madame Pierre lied without batting an eye.

"And I'm her father," Eugene added, making the lie seem less
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plausible since Eugene was much younger than Madame.

The nurse raised her eyebrows.

"Well, I am actually her grandmother. Her mother is dead and I am the only mother she knows," Madame clarified.

The nurse turned to Toby. "And you, I suppose, are her brother, and you," she turned to Rosie, "her sister?"

"How did you guess?" Rosie answered sweetly.

"Um hm. Okay. Follow me." The nurse led them to a small waiting area just outside a glass-encased room where Caroline lay hooked up to tubes and wires. Her eyes closed, she appeared to be resting comfortably.

Toby pressed his forehead against the glass. He needed to touch her. Needed to make sure she was okay. He turned abruptly. "What's wrong with her?" he asked the nurse.

"The doctor will be out shortly to speak with you."

Shortly turned out to be another thirty minutes. The doctor, a no-nonsense kind of guy, spoke abruptly.

"She has a severe kidney infection. It's a good thing you got her in here. She was close to renal failure. Apparently, it started as a bladder infection which she ignored. It progressed and moved up into her kidneys."

Toby turned and watched Caroline as the doctor went on to tell what the treatment would be and how long she would be in the hospital. He watched a nurse adjust the IV and check her vitals.

"How does someone get a bladder infection?" Toby asked without turning around.

"In this particular case, from what the young lady told me, it's possibly from her recent sexual activities. We call it 'bride syndrome.'"

Toby whirled. "Bride syndrome?"

"Yes. When a woman first loses her virginity she's not used to the increased activity in that area. It's not uncommon for a minor bladder infection to occur."

"Virginity?" Rosie blurted. "Caroline was a virgin?"

Toby glared at her then turned to peer through the glass again. So, he had done this to her. His mind went over the love they'd made. They'd been swimming in a creek, made love on a horse. He shook his head. He deserved to be punished for his immoral behavior. He knew better. But not her. She didn't know better and she didn't deserve this. He's caused her so much pain.

He glanced back up at the glass. Caroline's eyes were open now. They met his. She turned back to the nurse, gesturing toward him, obviously agitated. The nurse left the room and approached Toby.

"Are you Toby Nash?"

"Yes, ma'am," he answered.

"Mr. Nash, I'm afraid I'm gonna have to ask you to leave."

His face paled. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He glanced through the glass at Caroline.

"I cannot have you upsetting the patient. She doesn't want you here. Please leave, or do I need to call for security?"

"No. No, of course not." His voice was thick with emotion. His lips trembled as he looked at Caroline through the glass one more time. He turned and looked from face to face at the people who were there for her. Toby nodded at Eugene and Madame Pierre. "Whatever she needs, she gets. Money is no object, you understand?"

Madame placed her hand on his shoulder. "I understand, handsome man. Do not worry. She will get better and she will come around. I'm sure of it."

He didn't dare speak again. He merely nodded his head and turned to leave. Inside his car, Toby leaned his head against the steering wheel. He didn't think he could ever hurt this bad. She was life to him and even after he'd told her the entire truth, she still didn't want him. He'd lost her. In one month's time he'd found the only woman he'd ever loved, experienced the most happiness he'd ever experienced, and felt more pain than he'd ever thought possible. Why wouldn't she listen to him? Why can't she see reason?

But she'd told him why, hadn't she? She'd said her mother had loved her and hurt her. Her father too. She didn't know about love. She didn't trust it. Now, she didn't trust him. He blew out a breath. This was all his fault in so many ways. Not just his lack of control that day on the horse, but his turning his back on his religion.

He'd already admitted to Caroline that he wasn't living like a true believer. Consequences. If he had been living right, he wouldn't have had a relationship with Tracy, or a number of others. Tracy wouldn't have been able to say she was pregnant. He would have honored his father and mother when they objected to his ways. Now Caroline suffered because of him. There was no way he could just turn his back. Somehow, he had to make things right.

No way would he give up this easily. No way would he let her

throw away what they had. He would wait for her to get well, give her some alone time. Rehearsals for the Nashville July fourth celebration were scheduled to begin soon. He would totally focus on that, keep his mind on business and give Caroline time to consider all he'd told her. And he would pray. Really pray. Not for himself, but pray for her healing, both physically and emotionally.

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Within twenty-four hours, Caroline had responded so well to the antibiotics she was moved to her own room. By the end of the week she was released. She went about her life as she had before, only the contentment was gone. She went back to work at the diner. Rosie decided to stay on and moved to mid-shift. Caroline rarely smiled. Seldom spoke. She had to force herself to speak with the customers simply to avoid hurting Eugene's business.

It was much more difficult to teach her dance students. There was nothing inside her heart to give. She dropped her night dance classes. She'd lost the joy they gave. She was only glad about one thing; she hadn't run into George since she'd returned from Tennessee.

Even though her days were joyless, the nights were worse. Dreams of Toby ran through her mind when she was awake and through her dreams when she slept. As if someone had died, she had to force herself to focus on eating and bathing and dressing and working and simply breathing.

"You don't have to feel this way," Rosie insisted one day. "He loves you. He wants to be back in your life."

Caroline didn't answer her, because she loved him and wanted him back too. If she was truly honest with herself, she had to admit that. So why couldn't she do it? What was she so afraid of? She was afraid of being knocked in the head with the phone receiver.

Madame Pierre called her to ask about her decision to teach for her school. Caroline told her she was very close to accepting. Eugene didn't really need her at the diner anymore, not with Rosie there. Caroline just needed a little more time to think. Not that there was anything to think about. Why wouldn't she accept such a lucrative offer? It's just that she was having such a difficult time making decisions lately. She was pondering this particular issue while at the park one hot summer afternoon as she sat on the swing, rocking back and forth, her feet drawing circles in the sand.

"Hello, Caroline."
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Her head jerked up. Toby stepped back immediately, trying not to scare her away, but she stood, obviously intending to turn tail.

"Please wait, Caroline. Please. Just talk. Just for a minute."

She stopped, looked up at him. His strength drew her, touched her at her innermost being. With Toby standing right in front of her it was hard to deny how much she'd missed him. Nodding, she sat back down on the swing.

"How are you feeling?" he asked. "I mean, the kidney infection."

She nodded. "I'm much better, thank you."

"Good. That's good." Silence. The conversation reminded him of their first one all those years ago where he'd had to think hard to find something to say. "Uh, so, how are your classes going?"

"The ones I teach, okay. The ones I take, I quit."

Surprised by that, he stared at her, waiting for an explanation.

She shrugged. "There's no joy in taking dance anymore."

"Well now, I'm sorry to hear that." The stab she'd intended for his heart hit home.

The swing creaked as it swayed back and forth, and Caroline, avoiding eye contact, looked down at her feet.

"Thunder told me to tell you 'hello.'"

She lifted her gaze. "Oh, really?"

"Yes. And Rascal says he misses you, too."

"I see," she said, not able to stop a tiny smile.

"You miss them too, I can see it in your eyes."

Her smile disappeared and she stood abruptly. "Don't tell me what I feel."

He backed off. "Sorry. Don't leave. Please."

Conceding, she walked slowly down toward the small lake and sat on a bench, watching children feed the ducks.

Toby purchased a bag of popcorn from a vendor and brought it to her. When she raised a questioning eyebrow at him, he shrugged. "It's for the ducks."

She tossed some their way. Immediately the entire flock left the children who'd been feeding them and waddled over to get their share of popcorn. Caroline felt bad about stealing the ducks from the kids and motioned for one of them to take the bag from her. She watched with a smile as the ducks surrounded the kids again. Caroline and Toby made their escape up the hill and onto the path that surrounded the park.

"So, what are you doing back in New York?" she finally asked.

"I came to see you."

"No other business?"

"Is that so hard to believe?"

She only shrugged.

"I had to come and see if you would talk to me about what happened, if you would give me a chance to explain."

She was silent for several moments. "You hurt me," she began.

"I didn't," he dared to argue. "Tracy did. She meant to hurt you. It was calculated and it worked."

Silence again while Caroline considered his words. He'd been about to ask her to marry him. That is not a hurtful thing. It *had* been Tracy who did the hurting. Caroline had fallen for Tracy's lies, if they really were lies. "How do I know what you say is the truth?"

Toby's heart skipped a beat because it sounded as if she was at least taking things into consideration. "I really don't know how to convince you that I'm telling you the truth. Follow your heart, Caroline. It will tell you what is true."

Her head snapped around. "Well, MY heart tells me that loving someone is dangerous. It tells me that I'm safer on my own where no one can hurt or lie or hit."

Well, now, that had been the wrong answer, Toby thought. He'd better come up with a better one. He stopped and leaned against a tree, took a deep breath. "There's a hymn I remember from church, Caroline, that I always loved. It goes, 'No man is an island, no man stands alone.' I don't think we're meant to go through life alone, not loving, for fear of being hurt. We can't live in fear. And I'll tell ya, Caroline, if I were afraid of being hurt, I sure wouldn't be here right now, because you hurt me, Caroline. You hurt me worse than I ever thought anyone could."

She looked up into his face. "I hurt YOU?"

He nodded. "The day you sent me away from the hospital was the most devastating time in my life."

She truly hadn't meant to hurt him. She wouldn't hurt anyone if she could help it. "I— I was in so much pain, I just couldn't think about anything else. I wasn't in my right mind. I was so confused, Toby. I'm really sorry that sending you away hurt you so badly. That wasn't my intention."

He smiled. The simple words healed the wound immediately.

"That is so good to know," he said quietly.

She smiled up at him, and just like the very first day they'd met, it took his breath away.

Caroline was also thinking about those first days together. She wasn't ready to jump right back in yet, but she decided she could test the waters a little. "So, Thunder misses me?"

He grinned. "And Rascal too."

"Anyone else?" she prodded.

His smile faded. "And me. I miss you, Caroline. My whole being yearns for you every minute of every day."

She turned to him. "Is that so?" she asked, trying to sound flippant, though how could she when she was being drawn to him like a giant magnet? Her body was being pulled toward his. She tried to fight it. Leaning forward, she placed her hand against his chest to push away. Really. She'd meant to push away. Instead, she was being drawn, closer and closer.

"That's so," he whispered against her ear. His hands were on her face. His thumbs, lifting her chin then skimming over her lips. "I want to kiss you," he begged, his voice rough. "But I won't, not if you don't want me to, Caroline, but Lord, please, tell me yes. One kiss. Just one. Say yes, Princess."

There was that rushing sound in her head again. The one she heard whenever she was about to do something that took courage. "Yes," she whispered.

He wasted no time. He pressed his lips to hers. Her kiss was the sweetest nectar, water for a dying man, food for the starving. He'd been doing both. He'd promised just one kiss and wanted to break his word immediately, but he wouldn't, not when it might put everything at risk. He stepped back. "I have to leave New York tomorrow."

She was looking at him. He couldn't tell what she was thinking. Couldn't tell if she even cared. "I've been working on a big July fourth thing," he explained. "I have to get back."

She nodded her head. "It's probably for the best."

"What's for the best?"

"You having to leave."

He frowned, took a deep breath, trying to control his frustration. What would it take? What is it gonna take to get her back in his life? She seems to understand what happened with Tracy, so, why does she keep punishing me? He didn't know what else to do, or, what else to

say. Maybe they needed to start completely over, but they couldn't do that if she wouldn't even see him, so, he had to get her to see him.

Drawing a deep breath, he ventured onward. "Would you like to celebrate the Fourth in Nashville?" Before she could refuse, he hurried on. "It's gonna be a huge country festival sort of thing. Some of the biggest names are gonna be there."

She smiled. "You included?"

"I said the biggest," he joked.

But her smile weakened. "I don't think so, Toby."

"Caroline, we need some time together. Look, there's no pressure. You don't have to come out to the farm. You can stay in Nashville. I swear I won't talk to you about anything except the weather if you don't want me to. Just spend some time with me."

She was shaking her head. "No, I don't think it's a good idea."

He could feel the frustration and the anger rising. He was tired of begging. "What do you want from me? Do you like seeing me like this? I'm a broken man, Caroline. You broke me. You're destroying me. What do you want? What will it take? I don't understand why you won't listen to reason."

She got angry right back. "I don't know. I don't know what I want. I don't know what it will take. Everything seems so confusing. And easy. It seems too easy for you. No matter what happens, you send a few flowers, write a few poems, sing a few songs and you think it will make everything all better."

He ran a hand through his hair. "It's not been like that, Caroline. That's not fair. I've suffered. I am suffering."

She shook her head. "Oh, Toby, that's not what I want. I don't want you to suffer. I don't know what it is I want. I guess— I guess I want to be sure of love. Of your love. And I don't know how to do that. How can I be sure?"

"You can't."

The honesty of his answer surprised both of them.

"I wish I could tell you what you need to know, Caroline, but I can't. No one can be sure from one day to the next what will happen, what will change." He drew a deep breath, took her hand. "I do know that you can't live in fear. You can't hide away because you're afraid to love for fear of getting hurt.

"I'm not sure that I know what true love is anymore than you do, Caroline. Jesus taught love. That was his main thing, you know? Love.

They say that the greatest gift we can give is to give our life for someone. That's what He did. Well, I want you to know I would give mine for you, Princess. In a second. I would run into a burning building to save you, throw myself in front of a bullet, I would even..." He hesitated, not sure if he should say what he was about to say. He decided to go with it. "I would even stay out of your life if I thought it would be the best for you. But it wouldn't, Caroline. Because the best for you is me. And the best for me is you. Look, you don't have to marry me, you don't have to see me next month. Just spend the fourth of July with me. That's all. We'll take it one day at a time."

She looked down at her hands while she thought, then looked back up. "I don't want to fly."

His heart leapt. "Then, I'll drive you," he said quickly. "I can pick you up a few days early and we'll drive. And when we stop for the night, you'll have your own room. No pressure. Just time together."

She smiled. "One day at a time, right?"

"Absolutely."

She drew a deep breath, nodded. "Well, then I guess it's a date."

"July second, early?"

She nodded. "Yes. How early?"

"It'd be good to get on the road early. How about five?"

"Okay."

He felt like running and yelling and laughing for joy, but he calmed himself and simply smiled instead. They walked silently toward her apartment where his car was parked. Toby gazed up at the ugly building. "Has Mancini given you any more trouble?"

"I haven't seen him since I've been back. I think he's afraid to show his face when I'm around."

Toby nodded. "Good. Seems he took my warning seriously." He was watching her face. She smiled up at him. She was so beautiful. There was something about those big brown eyes with her blond hair and that smile. It lit up her face. It reminded him of a video of a flower blooming in time lapse. When Caroline wasn't smiling, it was like a closed bud, but then she smiles and the flower opens in beautiful, breathtaking, radiant hues. It was an amazing phenomenon.

"Well," she said softly. "Goodbye for now."

He took her hand. He wouldn't dare press for another kiss. "Goodbye, Princess." He brushed his lips across her hand.

She stood on the sidewalk studying him as he got into his car and

drove away. She realized she didn't think of him as a celebrity. He didn't present himself that way. He was down to earth and humble. He'd worn jeans, a pullover shirt, and athletic shoes that were old and scuffed. He'd had at least a two-day growth of beard. She remembered the kiss and sighed. The softness of his lips, the hardness of his body, the clean masculine smell that was him, even the feel of his calloused fingers as they touched her face, she would hold on to those memories until Independence Day. She found she was looking forward to that day with great anticipation.

"Caro! Caro, come here!"

Irene was calling her from the doorway of the diner, waving her arms and jumping up and down. She was grinning from ear to ear, making Caroline smile as she ran across the street to see what all the commotion was about.

"What in the world is goin' on?" Caro asked.

"Come in here, girl. You gotta hear this."

Irene grabbed Caro's arm and ushered her inside. Rosie and Eugene stood arm in arm, grinning at each other and they turned as Caroline approached.

"Well?" Caroline prodded.

"Rosie is off the streets for good," Alice announced.

"We're getting married, Caro," Rosie beamed.

"Married? You and Eugene?"

"Yes, me and Eugene," Rosie laughed.

Caroline smiled with pleasure. "Oh, Rosie, I'm so happy for you. And you, Eugene. Oh, my. I just can't believe it!" She hugged Rosie hard and reached up to kiss Eugene's cheek.

"When did all this happen?"

"It's been happening for a long time," Irene said. "But Rosie kept spouting stuff about not being good enough for Eugene."

Caroline frowned at Rosie who only shrugged with a smile.

Eugene smiled. "I was finally able to convince her that life is too short to waste any more time."

"So, have you set a date?" Caro asked.

"Today! We are not gonna waste another minute," Rosie declared.

"But don't you have to have blood tests and a marriage license?" Caro asked.

"All that's been taken care of."

"We'll be closing down the diner for a week to go on a short

honeymoon," Eugene added.

"Where are you going?" Alice asked.

"Niagara Falls, of course."

Caroline smiled. "Well, now, since the diner's gonna be closed for a bit, I suppose now is as good a time as any to tell you that I've decided to work full-time for Madame Pierre," Caroline announced.

"Good for you, girl," Irene said, with a nod as Caroline accepted everyone's congratulations.

Alice nodded. "Awesome, now, let's get this show on the road."

The entire group plus a few of Eugene's friends attended the short ceremony at the office of one of the district magistrates and returned to the diner for a giant celebration. Caroline and the girls decorated with flowers and crepe paper and cooked up a storm. They played loud music and before the evening ended the entire neighborhood had involved themselves in wishing the new couple all the happiness in the world.

Caroline, as usual, worked hard behind the counter, waiting on everyone, making sure all enjoyed themselves, yet there was an emptiness inside her. She wished Toby could be there to help celebrate. He was the one who had pointed out to her that Rosie and Eugene were an item. More than that, though, she realized, she was wishing the celebration was for her and Toby too. She sighed. Maybe Eugene is right, she thought. Life is too short to waste. Maybe she should go for it. Maybe she'll get hurt and maybe she won't. It would be better than going through life alone and sad, like her mother.

She decided right then and there that when Toby arrived on July second, he'd find her very receptive.

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Romans 5:5

"And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love
has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit
who has been given to us."

# Chapter 9

Caroline anxiously went over her list, making sure she hadn't forgotten anything. Everything was packed and ready to go. In the morning, Toby would arrive to take her to Nashville. She checked off the last item as the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Hey, darlin'. Just checkin' in. Makin' sure you aren't having any second thoughts."

She smiled. His voice was deep and beautiful and listening to him was comforting. "I'm all ready."

"Great. My flight is due to arrive in the morning a little after four. I have a car reserved. I should be at your place right on time."

"I feel kind of bad, making you go to all this trouble for me just because I'm afraid to fly."

"You, Princess, are not any trouble. I'm looking forward to the drive. See you soon. Oh, and Caroline, I'm not tryin' to pressure you to say anything you don't want to say, so don't feel like you have to answer me, but just in case my plane goes down, I want my last words to you to be this: I love you with all my heart." He hung up.

She was very excited. If Caroline hadn't been up since the crack of dawn, cleaning and doing laundry and teaching dance classes and shopping and a final check-in with her friends at the diner, she probably would have had a hard time falling asleep. However, the moment her head hit the pillow, she was gone.

It seemed she'd only been asleep for a few minutes when the phone rang again. She smiled as she stretched and reached for the phone. Toby's flight must be in, she thought.

"Hello?" she answered.

"I'm calling for Caroline Jones."

Caroline sat up quickly. The female voice on the other end was unfamiliar. She glanced up at the clock. It was only twelve-thirty. She tamped down the panic she'd begun to feel. "This is Caroline Jones."

"Miss Jones, my name is Rita Warren. I'm the duty nurse at Sterling Care Home."

Caroline stood by her bed. "Yes. What's happened? My mother– is she okay?"

"Well, Miss Jones, I'm afraid she's taken a turn for the worse. The doctor said she probably won't make it through the night. She's developed pneumonia."

"Oh, no. Why did you wait so long to call me?" Caroline cried, her hand flying to her mouth.

"I'm very sorry, Miss Jones. It all happened so fast. Virginia is asking for you. I told her I would contact you and ask you to come. If you can't make it down here, I'll help her to understand."

"No! No, I'm coming. I'll, uh, I'll grab a flight. I'll leave right now. I'll be there by morning."

"Good. I'll tell her. Maybe knowing you're on your way will help her to hold on. She seems desperate to see you."

"Okay. Tell her I'm coming. Tell her–no matter what she thinks–I love her. And tell her– tell her I know she loves me too."

She hung up and immediately tried to call Toby, but it didn't go through. She put the phone down and tried to figure out what to do next. At least she didn't have to pack. Quickly, she penned a note for Toby and taped it securely to her door. She choked back the tears. He would be disappointed, but he would understand. Grabbing up her purse and luggage, she ran out into the night.

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As Caro sat on the plane waiting for it to taxi down the runway, she tried to control her fear of flying. She wouldn't be flying at all if not for the urgency of the situation. Her anger at having to shell out almost eight hundred dollars for the last-minute flight was helping overcome some of the anxiety. Between the car rental she paid for between Nashville and New York, the extra rent and now this, she had only a few hundred dollars left from her short gambling experience.

Wringing her hands, she tried to think of anything but flying. Toby came quickly to mind. She should've tried him again, at least left him a message instead of a note. She'd never owned a cell phone. At first it was because she couldn't afford one. Now, her friends said she could get a monthly pay plan as cheap as her landline, but she'd never bothered to do it. It would've been nice to let him know what's going on and hear the comforting words he would've undoubtedly spoken.
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The plane began to move forward and her thoughts scattered. Eyes closed, she recited prayers as they flew down the runway and lifted into the air. "Oh, dear God, please help us to arrive safely."

Once airborne, Caroline leaned back and tried to relax. Her mind went to the words she'd spoken on the phone. She'd surprised even herself. *Tell my mother I love her? And I know she loves me?* Where did those words and feelings come from, she wondered. There had been a time when she thought she hated her mother. Then a time when she felt nothing at all. Lately she'd had compassion for her. But love? Is that what the reality of death does to you? Does it make you see past all the pain and the problems to the simplicity that's left? The simplicity of love. She drew a breath. *Yes, Momma, I guess after all is said and done, I still love you*. Suddenly, she desperately wanted her mother to know that, and she felt panicked that she might not make it to her side in time.

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At the convalescent center, Caroline rushed down the hall, pulling her wheeled luggage toward the attendant's station. "I'm Caroline Jones. Is my mother, I mean, may I see my mother, Virginia Jones?"

The woman nodded with a smile. "Have you been here before?"

"No," Caroline said softly. "I've just flown in from New York."

She picked up a phone and dialed. "Rita? Virginia's daughter is here. Okay." She turned back to Caroline. "Rita is on her way out to show you back."

Caroline nodded her thanks. Having to admit she'd never been here created a giant ball of guilt twisting and turning in her stomach. She hadn't visited her mother since the transfer from the older facility. She really hadn't had the money to travel or the time to take off from work, but is that really a good excuse, when it's family? No. Especially not when it's your mother.

"Miss Jones?"

Caroline turned. "Yes. How is she?"

"She's hanging in there. Follow me. You can leave your luggage there, if you'd like. No one will bother it."

"Thank you." Caroline followed the nurse past several doors and around a corner to her mother's room. Caroline found herself feeling more and more ashamed that she hadn't been to visit. It seemed as if there was never any time. And definitely no money.
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Passing door after door she saw so many old, lonely people. So many. Sleeping alone. Living alone. No one from their "real lives" to see or talk to. This is what their *real* lives had become. This was their reality. Was the remorse she felt, her punishment for not coming sooner?

They entered the room quietly. The nurse approached the bed first. "Virginia? Virginia, look who's come to see you."

The old, frail woman in the bed opened her eyes. Caroline started to ask Ms. Warren if she was sure she had the correct room. This woman looked nothing like her mother. Couldn't be her mother. Her mother was stout. Large. Very large. And strong. Caroline was sure of it. Her mother was only fifty-three years old. This woman looked much older. Why, there were seventy and eighty-year old customers at the diner who appeared younger and more vital than the woman lying there in the bed.

"Come here, Caroline." The voice was softer, but it was the same voice. Slowly, Caroline moved close to the bed.

Her mother held out her hand. Caroline had the urge to shrink back, to flinch, but controlled it. How stupid to think that there was any danger here. Toby was right. Caroline had been conditioned. She bravely placed her hand in her mother's.

"Hello, Mama."

"Hello, daughter."

"I hear you're not doing so good, Mom."

"No. I'm not. I won't last much longer, so I'm not going to mince words. I have things I want to say to you."

"Yes, Mom. I'm here now. We can talk all we want."

"No. No we can't. Not all I want. Too late for that. So you listen now, you hear?"

Caroline nodded, finding her heart pounding with– what? Fear?

"I know I was a horrible mother to you."

"No, Mom. It's okay."

"It's not okay. Stop arguing. You're wasting my time."

Caroline became silent. Was her mother actually going to apologize for what she'd put Caroline through as a child? And why, now that it was happening, did Caroline feel it wasn't necessary? Why did she feel like stopping her, like telling her not to worry about it? No problem. All is forgiven.

"I wanted to forget, Caroline. I wanted to pretend it never

happened. But it did, didn't it? I mean, when you were a kid, I know I— hurt you."

"It's okay, Mom. Well, I mean, that was a long time ago. I'm all grown now. I'm..."

Virginia jerked on her hand to stop her. "If I ever teach you anything, girl, I want you to remember this one thing: be honest, with yourself and with everyone else."

Caroline nodded. "Honest. Okay."

"That's what I'm doing now. I'm being honest. I was horrible to the only person in this world that I ever loved."

Caroline drew a sharp breath. "Me?" The word, uttered so softly was barely audible. A tear made its way down Caroline's cheek.

The bony hand covering Caroline's squeezed hard. "I took everything out on you. For the longest time I tried to blame you and him, but the truth is, Caroline, I'm to blame."

"No, Mom, it wasn't your fault. You couldn't help it."

"Lies. Honesty, remember? You're giving me back the same lies I told you when you were growing up. I've lain here a long time..."

"I know. I'm sorry, Mom," Caroline cried.

"Stop it. I'm not complaining about that. I'm trying to tell you that I've had a lot of time to think about things. To sort things out, ya know? I took my anger and bitterness out on you because you were so much like your father. You had his eyes, full of dreams. I let the alcohol dictate my life. I gave myself over to it, let it consume me." She stopped to cough. It was several minutes before she started again.

"I know it's late. Too late to make anything better."

"But it's *not* too late. I swear it's not. You sayin' what you're sayin' right now makes it better."

"I have no right to ask, but, do you hate me, Caroline?"

"No!"

The bony hand pulled on her again. "Honesty, Caroline. Remember, nothing but honesty."

Caroline looked down, a full minute passing before she raised her eyes to meet her mom's. "Okay, honesty. Honestly, there were times I hated you. Times I wished I could run away. Even times I hoped you'd...," hesitating for just a moment, she forged on, "...you'd die. But I didn't mean it. Not really."

"Of course you did, and I can't blame you." She squeezed Caroline's hand. "I have no right to ask this of you, but it seems I'm still a selfish woman. Can you forgive me?"

"I forgive you, Mama. I wish I'd been able to help you. I knew you were sad, but I didn't know what to do for you. I'm sorry I left you and went to New York. I should've been here for you."

She was interrupted by another fit of coughing. Ms. Warren had to step in and use a suction tool to help clear Virginia's passage way. Caroline thought she would be sick. When her mother was silent again, she squeezed Caroline's hand.

"Not very pretty, huh? I did this to myself, Caroline. There wasn't anything you could have done to help. You were just a kid. You know, it's not so much the booze or the cigarettes as the bitterness. Bitterness will eat up your soul, Caroline. I was bitter. And I hurt you. I know I did. For a while I didn't remember all the things, but lying here, thinking, it's come back to me in flashes. Tell me, Caroline, tell me you won't let what I did make you bitter."

"No, Mom, I'm not bitter. Sometimes, I'm sad. I wondered why you didn't love me. I wondered what was wrong with me."

"I'm telling you now, there's nothing wrong with you. You were loved. I– love you." She squeezed Caroline's hand then pulled away. "I'm so tired."

"Rest, Mom. I'll be here."

Virginia closed her eyes and smiled, giving Caroline a glimpse of the woman she'd been before everything went bad.

"I already feel better, now that I've said my piece. I have to say, thank you. For coming. For the forgiveness. Caroline, I want you to be happy. I don't want your life to be ruined because of me."

She said the words just as another round of deep coughing began. While the nurse took care of her mother, Caroline stood aside. By the time she moved back, her mother was sleeping. Caroline took her hand. She hadn't been here for her mother for a long time. She would be here for her now.

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Toby wore a huge smile as he swung open the green door and ran up the steps to fetch Caroline. After weeks of agony, he was finally about to be reunited with the love of his life and he was looking forward to their road trip. He arrived to find Caroline's door slightly ajar and he pushed it open. "Car— oh Dear Jesus."
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He felt the blood drain from his face as his eyes scanned the room. Tables lay on their sides, a lamp smashed to smithereens. The vase of silk flowers and framed pictures lay in bits and pieces near the radiator. Most notably, the blue baseball bat Caroline kept by the door now rested in the middle of the room, its barrel pointing to the pool of blood that ran from the head of the man who was sprawled across the floor, face down.

"Caroline?" he said, barely able to force the lone word from his throat. Panicked, Toby rushed through the apartment, searching for her, terrified he would find her lying hurt or worse, but the apartment was empty, save for himself and the body in the front room.

He knelt beside the body, moving the bat slightly, so he could turn him over. George Mancini. Toby felt for a pulse. There was none. He was dead. Bile rose in Toby's throat. "Oh no," he whispered. "How can this be? Caroline, where are you? What did he do to you?" He stood, taking in the room, trying to make out what had happened.

Caroline and Mancini must have had another confrontation and Mancini lost, big time. He picked up the bat, pictured her taking a swing at him. She must have hit him with it. So where is she? She probably swung and took off. Maybe she doesn't even know he's dead. Maybe she thinks he's coming after her. Maybe she's hiding somewhere, unsure of what to do. Caroline is in big trouble, he thought. And she's probably terrified.

What will happen, he wondered, when both she and the authorities find out she killed him? Will they arrest her? Will she have to stand trial? No, of course not. It was self-defense. Surely they'll see that, and there will be no problems. But Lord, is there a possibility things could go wrong and she could end up in jail? Things like that happen all the time. As a matter of fact, they'd just released a man from prison after twenty-seven years for a crime that DNA evidence finally proved he didn't commit.

Toby shook his head as he imagined a jury pronouncing a guilty verdict. He saw Caroline's gasp of surprise, and saw himself jump to his feet indignantly. He sighed. No way could he take the chance that something like that could happen to Caroline.

His mind went to the night he'd walked in on Mancini smacking Caroline around. Why is she always having to fend off people who

want to hurt her? And mostly, how could anyone *want* to hurt such a sweet person. He drew a decisive breath. No. She will not suffer again because of someone's violent act toward her. "Not when I can easily do something about it," he declared softly.

He hadn't noticed the scratching sound coming from the open door behind him. Too late, he did hear the woman talking to her dog as she came down the stairs from the third floor. "Come back here, Munchkin. You come here right now! You wait for me or I won't take you out at all."

If Toby had been thinking straight, he would have closed the door, but it seemed everything was happening in slow motion. The woman arrived at Caroline's doorway, saw the man lying in a pool of blood with Toby, bat in hand, bending over the body. She began to scream. There was instant commotion.

The dog was barking madly. Toby dropped the bat, rose slowly and turned to stare at the old woman. There was blood on his hands and he absently wiped them on his jeans. Suddenly, the hallway outside Caroline's apartment was filled with people. It seemed only a few seconds later, sirens announced the arrival of New York's finest. It had to have been longer than that, but Toby had been occupied, thinking, planning.

"That's him," the woman was pointing at Toby. "He said he'd kill him and now he has. What is the world coming to? Oh, my poor Munchkin, what are we gonna do?"

Toby drew a deep breath. Caroline had paid all her life. She was not gonna take the blame for this. He was happy she'd been able to get away and hoped she would go to her friends. They were streetwise enough to protect her and to make her keep her mouth shut. Assuming, he thought grimly, that she is okay.

His mind raced over the consequences of what he was about to do. So much for headlining the Nashville Fourth of July festivities. The guys in the band will eventually find other work. His business manager is gonna have a heart attack. His parents—he shook his head—but this couldn't be helped.

Two detectives shoved their way into the apartment. Toby immediately held his hands out to show he wasn't armed and that he would be cooperative.

"What happened here?" the elder detective asked, while the other moved slowly around the room, surveying the evidence.

Toby looked him straight in the eye. "I killed him."

"Any particular reason, or just for the heck of it?"

"Self-defense."

The man's eyes met Toby's. It seemed he peered into Toby's soul. More cops poured through the door. Two approached the detective. The detective nodded toward Toby. "Cuff him."

Roughly, they turned Toby around, pulled his hands behind his back and secured the handcuffs. When he turned back, the detective was speaking again. "I'm Lt. Veranza. I'll be down at the precinct to take your full statement as soon as we finish up here, but I have a few questions for you now. Is this your apartment?"

"Yes, sir."

"Liar. He don't live here. A girl lives here." The old woman was keeping up with the stereotype perfectly. Nosy Karen.

The Lieutenant frowned. "Ma'am, what is your name?"

"My name is Ruth Grier and I've lived here almost thirty years. Seen some things in my day but never anything the likes of this. I swear, my husband, God rest his..."

"Williams, will you please escort Mrs. Grier back to her apartment?" He smiled at the woman. "Someone will be by to take your statement shortly."

She left in a huff as Lieutenant Veranza turned back to Toby. "Well? I'm gonna find out the truth, so you may as well come clean. It'll be best for yourself and anyone else," Lt. Veranza warned.

Toby grimaced. He'd been trying to figure out a way to keep Caroline's name out of it which is why he'd said the apartment was his. He'd already messed up. Jeff had always said that the best way to lie was to keep to the truth as much as possible. Toby had better be more careful in the future.

"Caroline Jones lives here," he finally said.

"I see. And she is?"

"My girlfriend, sort of."

"Sort of?"

"Yes, sir. We broke up. We were supposed to spend the next few days together to see if we could work it out."

"And this guy, he's the competition?"

Toby's eyes flashed. "Not hardly."

"So, where's the girlfriend now?"

"I don't know. She wasn't here when I arrived."

"And your name?"

"Toby. Toby Nash."

Lt. Veranza looked him over. *"The* Toby Nash, as in country music's Toby Nash?"

"Yes, sir."

He blew out a breath. "Howard, Staley— seal off this building, clear the area and try to keep any media away. Wallace, tell forensics we have VIP status." He looked back up at the large man in cuffs. "You know there's no way I'm gonna be able to keep this quiet."

Toby nodded as a uniformed officer approached the Lieutenant.

"Rental car out front, sir. Looks like our friend here was about to go on a trip."

"That true?"

"Yes, sir. We were on our way to Nashville. I was supposed to perform on the Fourth."

The young officer laughed. "Well, I don't think you're gonna make it."

The lieutenant shot him a look to shut him up. "Let's go." Veranza motioned to the ones who'd cuffed Toby. They each took an elbow and ushered him through the crowd.

As they guided him to a waiting patrol car he glanced across the street to find Rosie and Eugene making their way toward him.

"Toby, what's happened? Where's Caro?" Rosie asked.

"I don't know where she is. Mancini is dead," he said quickly as they pressed him through the crowd. He caught Eugene's eye. "Find her. Keep her safe."

Eugene nodded.

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Toby used his one phone call to contact Jeff. Jeff would handle all the details for him. He was ushered into a room where he waited the better part of an hour for Lt. Veranza and his partner, Sgt. Sommers, to question him. There were some rough times when Toby had to come up with the exact way and reason he'd hit George Mancini in the head. Toby knew it seemed weak that someone as big as he is would have swung a bat at the smaller man. They finished the first round of questions and put him back in a cell.

The officer in charge was pleased to have a celebrity in his jail. Not because he was a fan. After several hours, the officer gave in to the temptation. He walked down to Toby's cell, looked the big man
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over. "Youz in some big trouble, huh, fella?"

Toby wasn't sure how to respond. It was obvious the man was looking for trouble. The officer whacked the bars with his stick. "I'm talkin' to ya, big boy."

"It appears I am," Toby confirmed, mockingly.

The man seemed pleased he'd been able to get a response out of him. "Don't go thinkin' just 'cause youz some kind of celebrity, youz gonna get any special treatment."

Toby sighed and shook his head. This is too classic. "I wouldn't dream of it," Toby taunted.

"You a wise guy? Well, we got ways to fix someone like you."

Toby turned away. Best, he thought, not to listen or respond. Another whole hour passed when Toby finally heard another officer call to his tormentor.

"Mac, bring Nash. Lieutenant wants to see him again."

Mac gleefully opened the door to the cell, turned Toby around and cuffed him. "You try anything and I won't think twice about shootin' a giant hole right through your head."

Toby started to answer but thought better of it. He had no intention of riling this guy, though apparently Mac had intentions of riling Toby. A few steps down the corridor, Mac stuck out his foot. Toby went down hard, smacking his cheek bone against the tile floor.

"Oh, man, you gotta watch where you're goin'. You okay?" Mac asked sarcastically, as he pulled Toby to his feet.

Toby looked down at him. "Tell ya what, little man." He stopped to let the last words register and from the narrowing of Mac's eyes he could tell they did. "Go ahead and do what you gotta do. There's no pain you can cause that could make me feel worse than I already do. Whatever you can heap on is fine with me."

"Oh, yeah? Well, how's this?" Mac grabbed Toby by the shirt and kneed him in the groin.

Toby doubled over and fell groaning to the floor.

"Mac," the other officer approached. "Stop messin' around, man. This isn't some nobody. The really famous ones like this guy have the power to put your head in a noose. Now get him in there. The Lieutenant's waiting."

Together, they helped Toby to his feet and led him to the interrogation room.

"Have a seat," Sgt. Sommers said.

Toby sat.

Lt. Veranza sat in front of him. "I just want to clarify a few things. You say you got to the apartment about 5:00 AM?"

Toby nodded.

"You walked in to find Mr. Mancini in the apartment. He was agitated. Screaming and yelling."

"That's right," Toby answered.

"What was he doing there? Did he give a reason he was there so early in the morning?"

Toby shrugged. "Looking for trouble, I suppose."

"And I guess he sure found it when he found you," Sommers said, somewhat sarcastically.

"Look, I told you, we had a history. He assaulted Caroline. I kicked his butt."

"And you threatened to kill him, correct? Several of the neighbors say you threatened to kill him."

"Yes."

"How did Mancini act when you confronted him?"

"I already told you. He was very agitated. Angry."

"Anything else you can tell us about him?"

"Like what?"

"Like maybe about the fact that he was drunk? Why haven't you told us he was very intoxicated at the time? Because he was, you know. Blood alcohol level was over .24."

Grimacing, Toby ran a hand through his hair. "Uh, I figured that went without saying."

"Uh huh. So you walk in about five, see no sign of Ms. Jones and ask Mancini what he's doing there? And he tells you, whatever he wants, it's his building."

"Yes."

"Now, tell me again. What happened then?" the Lieutenant prompted.

Toby sighed. "I asked him where Caroline was and he said he didn't know. I told him to leave the apartment and he refused. I went to grab him and he picked up the bat. He swung it at me a few times. Finally, he threw it at me. I caught it. He came at me. We wrestled around the apartment, knocking things over. He grabbed a piece of broken glass and tried to cut me. I swung the bat. I didn't mean to

kill him. I was just tryin' to get him to back off. I misjudged the distance."

"I guess baseball's not your game," Sommers interjected.

"I guess not."

"Except that we know you were an all-American for Tennessee," Veranza added.

Toby pressed his lips together. "It's been a long time." Stick to the truth, he reminded himself.

"And then, just a few minutes later, Mrs. Grier came down the hall and screamed."

"Yes," Toby said as he scrubbed his hands over his face. He was tired. He'd been up almost thirty-six hours straight and he was worried sick about Caroline. Where did she run off to? Rosie and Eugene hadn't seen her which is where he thought she would've gone. Jeff would be doing everything he could to find her which was the only thing keeping him halfway calm right now.

"And where did you hit Mr. Mancini?"

"In the back of the head."

"Well, you got that one right," Sgt. Sommers mumbled.

Lt. Veranza shot Sommers a look before he returned his attention to Toby. "Any idea where Caroline Jones could be?"

"No."

"And you don't think it strange that she's nowhere to be found?"

His face turned red. "Hell yes, I think it's strange! Can't you see I'm worried sick about her?"

"Maybe Mancini got to her before you got to him."

Toby could feel the blood drain from his face, and the quick jump of adrenaline in the pit of his stomach.

"Toby, we're gonna have to bring you up on murder one."

Toby swallowed hard, the reality of his situation beginning to sink in. He was expecting this from the moment he made the decision, but actuality was much worse than imagination. He hoped his lawyer and good friend, Sam, was as good as his reputation.

"Too many witnesses say the same thing," the Lieutenant continued. "You threatened to kill this guy. You're a big man. You didn't have to kill him to subdue him. You got a good lawyer?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. You're gonna need one. He coming in from out of

town?"

"Yes, sir. From Nashville."

"Well, if he doesn't get here by the close of business today I'm afraid you're stuck until after the Fourth."

Toby only nodded. He didn't care about that. He would be behind bars a lot longer than a few days if things went against him and he was beginning to realize that was not so far-fetched. Murder one? So much for thinking self-defense would get him off easy enough. He shook his head. He was worried about Caroline. Where is she? The Lieutenant was right. Mancini did get to her and she made short work of him, but what did he do to her? Is she injured? If she'd gone to a hospital the cops would have heard by now. They opened the door and had Toby escorted back to his accommodations where Mac was only too happy to have his celebrity back.

In the squad room, Sgt. Sommers turned to his partner. "This guy's lying through his teeth. He no more committed that murder than you or I."

Veranza nodded in agreement. "Thought maybe the murder one would shake him, but he seemed pretty cool. Still it may give him something to think about. Maybe he'll come clean. Nothing he says matches the preliminary forensic evidence we have. He's protecting someone. I assume this Caroline Jones."

Sommers nodded. "One thing is for certain. He doesn't know where she is. Did you see the look on his face when you mentioned something might have happened to her?"

"Yes, I did. He's definitely worried about her, but I think he knows she's okay."

"Ya know you're gonna have to cut him loose," Sgt. Sommers said. "Preliminary time of death was set at 1:30. He's on the flight roster. He didn't even arrive in New York until three hours later."

Lt. Veranza sighed. "Yeah, well, we're gonna sit on that piece of information for as long as possible."

"You're courting disaster messing with a celebrity."

"I know, but I'm hoping the girlfriend is gonna feel bad enough to come forward."

"Think she will?"

"Unless she's got a cold heart."

"He'll be out on bail tomorrow, unless his lawyer doesn't get here in time. Even then, he'll be out on the fifth for sure."

"Concentrate on finding the girl."

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Toby's lawyer, Samuel Wolfe, a good friend of the family and hotshot lawyer to boot, did not get to the courthouse in time to arrange a bail hearing. He did, however, arrange to talk to Toby.

"Sorry, Toby, I swear, it was like everything in the world was trying to keep me from getting here. First, I couldn't find a flight out, finally did, then it was cancelled. A seat opened up going to Philadelphia and I took it and rented a car."

"It's okay, Sam. I needed some time to think, anyway."

Sam eyed his client. One cheek was bruised and his upper lip was swollen. "You look terrible, Toby. You get into a fight?"

"Several."

"I've never seen anyone be able to get to you like that."

"Well, it's easier when my hands are cuffed behind my back." Toby smiled at the distressed look on Sam's face. "It's okay."

"It's not okay. I intend to file a complaint."

Toby shook his head. "Please, Sam, don't ruffle any feathers. It'll make me look like a crybaby. I don't need any more bad publicity."

"Speaking of bad publicity, yours is up there with Jeffrey Dahmer. You're all they talk about on every news station across the country. 'Toby Nash commits murder.' 'Country singer turns murderer.' 'Not the good ole' boy everyone thought.' It's terrible."

Toby drew a deep breath. It hurt more than he'd thought it would. His career was over. Still, he'd said he'd take a bullet for her and he would darn well do it without complaining or looking back. Caroline's life was worth any distress he had to face. The thought of her facing what he had thus far, made him more determined than ever. He cleared his throat. "Are you gonna be able to get me out of this?"

"First things first. We have to get your bail set. That won't happen for two days, maybe longer. Sometimes the celebrity status helps and sometimes it hinders."

"Tell me about it."

"Once you're out, we'll build a case for self-defense. For now, tell me exactly what happened."

Toby filled Sam in on every detail. At least every detail he'd given the police. When he was done, he sat back. "So, what do you
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think?"

"I think they don't have squat. Murder one? Ridiculous. Sit back. Relax. And let me do my thing."

Toby nodded. He had nothing else to do. He was weary and his heart hurt. He'd been so happy. He and Caroline had been about to spend four wonderful days together. He'd been sure that they would have reconciled. He looked up at Sam. "Is Jeff with you?"

"Yes. He's just about made himself sick over you. He told me to tell you he hasn't found her yet, but he won't give up."

"Tell him I'm sorry about everything. Tell him I know I've screwed everyone."

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As July fifth dawned, Toby was awakened from a fitful sleep by a kick to his stomach. He rolled over, clutching his midsection.

"Let's go, Nash."

He rose slowly. "How 'bout when I get out of here, you take that badge off and look me up."

Mac grinned. "Well now, thanks for the invite. Just may take you up on that."

"Yeah. You do that."

Sam must have arranged his bail, Toby thought as they walked down the corridor. And Toby was truly happy about that. He hadn't eaten a decent meal in three days, hadn't slept and hadn't been able to bathe. It was pretty bad when your own smell makes your eyes water. He entered the small room, and his heart dropped.

"Mom? Dad? What are you doing here?" His voice broke.

"Oh, Toby!" His mother threw her arms around his neck, crying and hugging him.

"Son." His dad hugged him. Nodded at him.

"I'm sorry, Mom. Dad, I didn't mean to bring this on you."

"What happened, Toby?" his mother asked.

"I don't have time to tell you everything. There's so much. Go to Eugene's Diner. Talk to Eugene and Rosie and find Jeff. They'll tell you everything."

His dad took him aside. "They say you've admitted to killing a man. I just need to know, son, if it's true. Look me in the eye and tell me you did it."

Toby looked at his father's face. He'd never lied to the man before. He opened his mouth to tell him that he did indeed kill
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George Mancini, but the words wouldn't come. He couldn't lie, not to his dad.

The solemn expression on his father's face told Toby he understood the decision, whether he condoned it or not. "We're here for you, son. I presume you already have lawyers working on this?"

"Yes, sir, Sam's here."

"Good. Molly and Ben are with us. Molly's been cryin' her eyes out for hours and Ben is about as gloomy as I've ever seen him. He looks almost as bad as you," Joe said, as he touched his fingers to Toby's bruised cheek. "Fightin' for his brother's honor, he said."

Toby closed his eyes, ran a hand through his hair. "I can't handle this," he uttered. "I can't face them right now."

"You don't have to," his father stated.

An officer opened the door. "Sorry, but time is up."

His mother threw her arms around him once more. "It's okay, Mom. Everything's gonna be okay."

They took him away.

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Caroline stood by the graveside long after the few attendees left. Her mind was numb and she wanted to share her grief with Toby. She'd tried to call him several times now, but it kept going straight to message and then it said his mailbox was full. So much for the convenience of cell phones.

The funeral had been short and sweet. Caroline stood, letting the tears run down her cheeks. A very long time ago, when she'd been a small girl, they'd attended her grandfather's funeral. Her mother had told her it's okay when people die. We celebrate the life they had, and don't cry over the death, her mother had said. Caroline couldn't find much to celebrate. There'd been no time to make amends, no time to get to know the person who was her mother.

Rita Warren took her hand. "You okay, sweetie?"

Slowly, Caroline raised her head to look at the wonderful person her mother had been blessed with to watch over her in her last days. Caroline smiled. "Thank you, Rita, for all you've done. I'm so glad someone like you was here for her. People like you are certainly angels sent to take care of lost souls."

Rita shrugged. "I don't know about being an angel, it's just what I do and I was happy to be there for your mom. I'm sorry for your loss, but at least I know Virginia suffers no more."
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When Toby walked from the jail, he should have felt free and happy to finally be out, but his heart was heavy. The press was out in droves. Some were kind and understanding, giving him the benefit of the doubt and others were not so kind. He maintained that it was an accident and he apologized to the public. His family was also there giving statements and showing their loyalty. Jeff stood on the courthouse steps, arms outstretched. When Toby pulled away from the giant bear hug he stepped back and shook Jeff's hand. "Better be careful or the next headline will have us as lovers."

Toby was surprised to look past Jeff to see Ace, Billy-Bob, Eugene, Rosie and Madame Pierre. He had a good many friends. Real friends. He was a lucky man, notwithstanding, the one he sought was not there. Caroline had not been seen since July first. Toby was worried sick. Had Mancini hurt her so badly that she'd wandered off to—he couldn't even think it. Where is she? Hiding? She had to be in hiding. When his cell phone rang he answered it quickly.

"Nash," he said anxiously, hoping someone had word of Caroline.

"Rick Kino," the voice on the other end said.

Kino, the famous martial arts movie star, met Toby the previous year at a charity function and they'd hit it off immediately. Since then, they'd met up occasionally and kept in touch. Toby had immense respect for the younger man.

"Listen, Toby, I'm not gonna keep you. I'm sure you have a lot to handle right now. I just wanted to call and let you know that I'm not falling for it."

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't kill that guy."

"You're wr..."

"Don't even try it, Nash, but don't worry. Whatever reason you have for lying, which I'm presuming is to protect someone you love, I got your back. I'm just calling to let you know, you need anything, you call me. I have connections, really good connections. Got it?"

"Got it," Toby conceded with a sigh.

"And hey, don't you worry about the press. They're fickle. You'll get it all back, just like Job."

"Ya think?"
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"I know. Listen, I gotta be out there in New York next week, I'll check in with you then."

"Thanks, Rick."

"No prob." He hung up.

Toby was not allowed to leave the city. He and his family and friends went back to the *Grand Marquis Hotel* where Toby cleaned up and got some much needed rest.

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Caroline arrived in New York nearly a week after she'd left. In the wee hours of the morning, she slowly made her way back to her apartment. She climbed the steps and stared. Bright yellow crime scene tape crisscrossed her door.

"What's going on?" she whispered. Afraid of what she would find on the other side of the door, she turned away and tiptoed out. She crossed the street, set her luggage down in the doorway of the diner and sat on top of it to rest.

It was an hour later when she heard Rosie's voice. "Caroline?" Rosie whispered.

Caroline woke. "Rosie. What's happened? What's going on?"

"Come inside." Eugene was opening the door to the diner. "Where have you been? We've been worried sick about you."

"Didn't Toby get my note?"

"I don't know anything about a note," Eugene stated. "Toby has been frantically trying to find you."

Caroline swallowed. "What's happened? Why is there police tape across my door?"

Rosie sighed. "Oh good grief, Caro, you really don't know, do you? Where have you been?"

Caroline looked down. "My mother died. I got a call the night before Toby and I were supposed to leave for Nashville. She was dying and asking for me. I left a note for Toby and flew to Atlanta. She died two days later."

"Oh, love, Caroline, I'm so sorry," Rosie cried.

"It was okay, you know? We made our peace. Really. I'm okay."

Rosie and Eugene thought about what they were about to tell her and knew in just a minute she wasn't gonna be okay. "You'd better sit down," Rosie offered.

It was Eugene who spoke. "I don't know no other way to say it other than to just blurt it out. That scumbag landlord of yours was
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found dead in your apartment and Toby has been arrested and charged with his murder."

Her eyes wide, her mouth open, Caroline looked as if the life drained out of her completely. "It can't be. It just can't be."

"Well, it is. We've been living the hell for a week," Rosie assured her. "And it would help him a great deal to know you're safe. He's been out of his mind. He's at the Grand Marquis. I'm gonna call him right now and let him know you're here."

"No. Wait. Let me go there." Caroline's mind was working fast. She was consumed with guilt. Toby wouldn't even know who George Mancini was if not for her. She didn't know why they had tangled, but she did know Toby was definitely strong enough to kill a man, easily. And there was definitely no love lost between the two of them. She couldn't let this ruin Toby's career and his life.

"So, does that mean that Toby didn't sing at the Nashville Fourth of July Celebration?"

"Not unless he was singing 'Jailhouse Rock.' He was still in jail then. He didn't make bail until two days ago."

"No!" Caroline buried her face in her hands. "I can't believe it. Has it been on the news?"

"I can't believe you haven't heard anything. It's been the headlines for a week."

"Her mother just passed away, Rosie. I imagine Caroline's been in her own little world."

Caroline calmed herself. She had the power to help Toby, but she had to be smart. She had to think, organize her thoughts. "Tell me how it happened," she demanded. "Tell me how Toby killed George."

By the time Eugene finished speaking, Caroline had her plan. She left her luggage at the diner and told her friends she was going to the hotel to see Toby and she'd come back for the luggage later. She was lying. She wouldn't be going to see Toby at all.

She arrived at the precinct by seven that morning and asked for the detective in charge of the George Mancini homicide. She was led to a desk with 'Lt. Veranza' on the nameplate.

"He's probably getting coffee. He'll be here in a minute."

The man who appeared was older, fiftyish, graying hair, mustache, nice build. He had kind eyes and for some reason, Caroline trusted him immediately.

"May I help you?" he asked as he settled himself behind the desk.

"Yes, sir, you can. You see, I know something about the George Mancini homicide."

Lt. Veranza leaned back casually in his chair, something he habitually did to keep from looking too eager, because looking eager tends to make the suspect clam up, and he was pretty sure she was a suspect. She had an adorable southern accent. This must be his missing girl. "You do?"

"Yes, sir."

"And just what do you know?"

"I know that Toby Nash didn't do it."

"And you know that, how?"

"Because, I did it."

"Did you?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you are, let me guess— Caroline Jones?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, how about that."

✝✝✝

John 15:13

"Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."

# Chapter 10

He rose and ushered her into another room.

Sgt. Sommers caught up to him just before he went in to question her. "Sir, I've found Caroline Jones."

"You have?"

"Yes, sir. She flew in to LaGuardia from Atlanta just a few hours ago. I was about to have her picked up."

"No need. She's here."

"She is?"

"Yeah, came to tell us she killed Mancini. I was about to question her. Wanna join me?"

Sommers nodded. "Well, this should be interesting."

In the room, the detectives sat and asked her to state her name. Her voice trembled for just a second. "My name is Caroline Jones."

"Okay now, Miss Jones, I want you to tell, in your own words, what happened early on the morning of July 2nd."

"I, um, I couldn't sleep. Toby and I were gonna go off to Nashville the next day. I was excited, so I couldn't sleep. I got up and went for a walk. When I..."

"What time did you go for a walk?"

"Umm," she paused. She hadn't thought about times, but she knew it had to be well before Toby arrived. "It was about one o'clock in the morning. When I got back, George was in my apartment."

"And why was he in your apartment?"

"He used his master key to come in whenever he wanted."

"And why would he want to come in?"

"He wanted to— um— he wanted me. He wanted to have– me. He tried before. Once. Toby caught him and beat him up pretty badly."

"He tried to have sex with you?"

Caroline's face reddened. "Well, I think that's what would've happened. He hit me and jumped on top of me. That's when Toby showed up."

Lt. Veranza nodded. "So in your words, he tried to have sex with you against your will?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's called rape."

She looked down quickly. "Yes, sir. He was..."

"He who?"

"George. He was probably still mad about that. I mean about Toby beatin' him up. Anyway, when I got back from my walk, he was there, in my apartment. He tried to force himself on me. I grabbed the bat that I keep by the door and hit him with it. I didn't mean to hit him so hard. I got scared and I ran and I've been hiding ever since."

"And that's it?"

She nodded.

"How long was your walk? Where did you go?"

"Oh, um, I went a couple of blocks, up toward the hotel. I got back probably between one-thirty and two."

Lt. Veranza sat with his hands together as if in prayer, hitting them against his pursed lips.

"Have you spoken to your boyfriend?" he finally asked.

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

She searched quickly for an answer. "I couldn't. He was in jail."

"He's been out on bail for two days."

"Yes, but, um, I was afraid."

"Of him? Is he easily agitated?"

"Oh! No, sir," she said quickly. "No. I was just afraid of, you know, the whole situation."

"But you faced your fear and came to see me today."

"Yes, sir."

"Does Toby know you're here?"

She hung her head. "No, sir."

"Where have you been?"

"I, um, I can't tell you that."

"Why not?"

"I just can't."

"Are you protecting someone?"

"I was staying with someone," she lied. "And, uh, I promised them I'd keep their name out of it."

Lt. Veranza sighed. "Uh huh. I see. Okay, let's back up a second.

So, Mr. Mancini made some advances toward you, and then you picked up the bat and hit him."

"Yes, sir."

"Nothing else? You didn't try to get him to leave you alone? You didn't fight with him first?"

"I did," she finally raised her voice. "Okay? I yelled at him to get out. He grabbed me and I tried to get away. He slapped me." She was describing the previous incident, but it was good enough for her to use. "I fell down and he jumped on me. I got away and ran to get the bat. I pulled it back and swung it as hard as I could. I hit him in the back of the head and he fell down and I ran. That's it."

When it was clear Caroline had finished speaking, he looked over at Sgt. Sommers. "Book her."

Sommers raised his eyebrows in question. "Sir?"

Veranza shrugged. "Do it." He watched her as the detective ushered her out. She at least had the time of death correct. She was lying, just like Toby Nash, but doing a better job of it. Of course, she didn't know that Sommers had discovered she'd flown to Atlanta and returned just this morning. Who were they protecting? He could have sworn Nash was protecting her. So, that means Nash really thinks she did it. Only she didn't. Who did? Now that they had the forensic information, they knew the time of death was definitely set at one-thirty. He doubted this little girl could swing a bat hard enough to kill a man. She's a good girl, sweet and completely in love with Toby Nash. She'd do anything for him. That much was obvious. So who's protecting who? Is she protecting Nash, or someone else? Maybe a night in jail will make her think twice about what she's doing. Just maybe he could get the truth out of one of them.

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Toby's parents were in his hotel room, his father shaking him awake. "Son. You'd better wake up and listen to this."

Toby sat up sleepily as his father switched on the TV.

"A new twist in the case of country singer, Toby Nash. Caroline Jones, the woman alleged to be having an affair with the singer, has been taken into custody and placed under arrest for the murder of George Mancini. All charges against Toby Nash have been dropped."

Toby flew from the bed. "No, Caroline."

He charged around the room, gathering his clothes and dressing as he ran.
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He'd told his family of the relationship with Caroline. He'd told them that he loved her and would marry her, if the couple could ever get past this. Still, Joe and Ellen Smith had no idea Toby was as blown away as he appeared to be. It took him only seconds to dress. He headed for the door, then stopped and turned. His father threw him the keys to his car.

Once Toby was gone, Ellen turned to her husband. "Finally, our Toby is really in love."

"Yeah," Joe answered. "Let's just hope it doesn't kill the both of them. Well, I guess we'd better wake up Jeff and Sam and tell them about the newest development."

Meanwhile, Toby rushed into the squad room, demanding to see Lt. Veranza and he was led to him immediately.

"Sit down, Toby," the Lieutenant commanded from where he stood behind his desk.

"Where did you find Caroline?"

"Sit down and lower your voice."

Toby got control of himself and sat. "Sorry. Please. Tell me."

"We didn't find her. She turned herself in."

"Oh, no." The emotion in his voice touched even the hardened detective on the other side of the desk. Toby's head snapped up. "She's lying. She's lying to protect me."

Veranza never batted an eye. "Funny. She said the same thing about you."

"Then it's her word against mine."

"That's right. Only her word is a little more credible than yours."

Toby ran a hand through his hair. "Why?"

"Her story got a little closer to the evidence than yours did."

"Look, I did it. You can't let her take the fall for me. Don't you want to see justice done?"

Veranza leaned forward. "As a matter of fact, I do. I really do."

"And?" Toby demanded.

"And I don't believe your story."

Toby slammed his fists on the desk out of pure frustration. "Can I see her?"

The Lieutenant sat quietly, thinking.

"Please, sir. I need to see her. I need to talk to her and make sure she's all right."

"I guess I can arrange a meeting."

Toby almost wept with relief. "Thank you, sir."

"You still got your lawyer in town?"

"Yes, sir."

"She's gonna need one."

The statement was said with genuine concern instead of sarcasm and had Toby taking a closer look at the Lieutenant. He reminded him of his father, honest and straightforward and he was grateful for that. "Thank you, sir," Toby said.

Veranza nodded. "Yeah," he said abruptly. "You southerners are way too polite. Gives me the creeps. Come on." He stood and led Toby to the room where he'd given his original statement. "Wait here," he said, and left the room.

Toby glanced up at the mirror. He knew they would be watched and recorded but he didn't care. All he cared about at the moment was seeing Caroline. Arms folded across his chest, he leaned against the wall and waited. When the door opened, a tired, sad face looked up at him. The flower bloomed. Neither waited on the other to move. They charged across the room. Toby scooped her up into his arms. Caroline wrapped her legs around his waist and their mouths melded together.

Veranza watched from behind the two-way, pulling at his collar uncomfortably as the kiss went on and on. He was relieved when Toby finally set her on her feet. His hands were touching her face, running up and down her arms, coming to rest on her shoulders.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

Toby took a step back, drew in a deep breath. "What in the world do you think you're doing?"

She raised her chin. "I'm facing up to what I did."

"You mean, what I did."

"I don't mean that at all."

Veranza rubbed his hand over his chin. Oh, they were good. He looked over at his partner who only shook his head.

Toby grabbed her firmly along her upper arms. "Caroline, *you* can't do this, but *I* can. Please, baby."

"I won't let you, Toby. This would never have happened if not for me. I won't let you throw away your life, your career, because of me."

"It's done, Caroline. The career is over. You may as well let me go through with it."

"No, Toby, your career is NOT over. The public is already behind

you again."

"What makes you say that?"

She unfastened her pants and lowered them slightly. He glanced up at the mirror.

"He knows we're here," Sommers muttered.

"Yeah, but she doesn't."

Toby stopped her. "What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to show you how loyal your fans are." She lowered the waistband to expose a giant bruise on her thigh.

He knelt down beside her. "How did that happen?"

"A fellow prisoner kicked me."

"Kicked you? Why?"

"Because, I let the Toby Nash go through an entire week of suffering for something he didn't do."

He went right back to the lie. "But I did do it."

She smiled and shook her head. "They believe me, not you." She fastened her clothing.

"They believe a lie."

"Not a lie," she argued.

He pulled her into his arms again. "Please, baby, let me do this."

She softly mocked the words back to him, emphasizing the "me."

Lt. Veranza shook his head. Nothing. They were giving him nothing. "Take her back," he ordered.

Caroline looked up into Toby's eyes. "Toby, in case anything happens, I want the last words you hear me speak to be this: I love you, Tobias Smith."

He touched her face. "And I you."

The door opened. He held her tight for a second longer. She was led from the room. Toby looked up at the mirror. Lt. Veranza frowned. Now what? His instincts were good, and they were telling him that these two kids had nothing to do with what happened to George Mancini. Lt. Veranza sat down at his desk. He would have to speak to Caroline again. She'd been in Atlanta. Why? There was more to this story.

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Sam was down at the courthouse in a flash arranging bail and by five the next evening, Caroline was free. Toby was there, waiting for her with open arms. Unfortunately, so was a crowd of Toby's adoring fans and the media.
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"Excuse me, sir," one reporter said as he worked his way in. "What are your plans?"

"To get some rest," Toby answered flatly.

"Will you stand beside your girlfriend?"

Toby looked at the man as if he had horns. "Of course."

The man shrugged. "It's just that some of your fans will find it difficult to accept you standing behind a woman who is a murderer and who almost let you take the fall for her."

Toby looked down at Caroline's face. The tears were there, welling up in her eyes. Why wouldn't she let him do this?

"I'm not supposed to discuss specifics of the case with you. Now if you'll excuse me, we're tired." He shoved Caroline inside the waiting car and they sped back to the hotel.

He showed her to her room. She frowned and stood at the door.

"What's wrong?"

"I want to stay with you."

He nodded slowly. "Oookay. But..."

"Don't worry, I'm not saying this so that we can mess around. I just want to be near you."

His heart soared. "Okay, so then, does that mean we are back to where we were before Tracy messed everything up?"

"We are," she murmured as she wrapped her arms around his neck. "I only wish I hadn't been so stupid and wasted so much time. I've learned time is precious."

He leaned down to kiss her softly. "One more day," he sang the popular country song in her ear. "I thought those words over and over when you left me. All I wanted was one more day."

She smiled. "And now we have it."

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Caroline sighed as the hot water coursed over her body. She was tired, sore and hungry, but free, at least for a while. As Toby waited in the bedroom for her she indulged herself. Never had she thought that shampoo and soap could smell so heavenly. She watched the bubbles slide away under the running water. Forcing herself to step from the shower, she snuggled into a thick robe and then went in search of Toby.

He was staring out at the bustling city, but turned as she emerged from the bathroom. He smiled as he looked her over. "Hey, darlin', feeling better?"

"Sooo much better, but I didn't dress because I left my luggage at
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the diner."

He nodded. "I'll see about it." He went to his suitcase and pulled out a clean T-shirt. "You can put this on until then."

She accepted it, slipped back into the bathroom for a few seconds and came back, sniffing the air. "Something smells delicious."

He turned her around to show her the pizza on the table.

"Ooh!" she cried with glee. "I knew I smelled something." It took only a few seconds before she was stuffing a slice in her mouth. "Mmm, Lord this tastes so good. I've never had pizza this good. Where did you get it?"

Toby laughed. "It's an old favorite called 'the best pizza in the world that tastes so good because you just got out of jail'."

She scarfed up another piece and guzzled some soft drink. "I'm in heaven."

He laughed, because he was there in heaven with her. Watching her, speaking to her, seeing her happy. Heaven. He wondered how long it would last. He watched her eat until she pushed back from the table with a soft groan.

"Ugh, I made a pig of myself. Aren't you gonna eat?"

"I'll get something while I'm out."

She frowned. "You're going out?"

"I was just thinking that I need to run some errands. I'm not sure if they'll let anyone into your apartment yet, but while I'm out I can pick up your luggage at the diner."

"That would be great."

"In the meantime, I imagine you'd like to get some rest. I won't be long." He held out his hand. "C'mon, I'll tuck you in."

Scrubbed, fed and slipping between cool, clean sheets, she could immediately feel the tension leaving her body, draining away. Her eyes closed in contentment.

Toby leaned down, kissed her forehead. "Sleep. I'll be back before you know it."

He left the room, but she jumped up immediately and quickly dialed Eugene's Diner. "Rosie?"

"Caro? I'm mad at you! You lied to me! You said you were going to see Toby and instead you went to the police."

"I'm sorry, Rosie. Please try to understand. I did what I had to do to help Toby."

"Oh, fine. And now who's gonna help you?"

"I'm gonna be fine. Toby's lawyer can get me off on self-defense. If anything, I'll face manslaughter. If they hadn't dropped the charges against Toby, he would be facing murder charges. That's a big difference. You have to understand."

"I'm trying, Caro. Really, I am."

"Rosie, I have to ask something of you and Eugene. You're the only ones who know where I went. You can't tell anyone. Not a soul. If you do, Toby might be in real trouble."

"I don't know, Caro."

"Rosie, are you my friend?"

"Of course I am."

"Then I have to be able to trust you. Friends trust each other. Please, tell me I can trust you and Eugene to not say anything. Please, Rosie. Toby's on his way there to pick up my suitcase. Talk to Eugene before it's too late. Will you have any trouble convincing Eugene to keep quiet?"

"Oh, please. Eugene will do anything I say."

"Then you'll do it?" Caroline pressed.

There was silence.

"Rosie!"

"Okay! Okay, but I don't like it. Not one little bit."

Caroline smiled. "I'll make it up to you. I promise."

"Humph," Rosie vocalized as she hung up the phone.

Business taken care of, Caroline snuggled up on the pillow and fell fast asleep.

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"Take a look at that," Sgt. Sommers said as he slapped records from Caroline's phone onto the desk.

Lt. Veranza studied them briefly and looked up. "*Sterling Care Nursing Home*? Have you contacted them?"

He was nodding. "The call was from a woman named Rita Warren, a nurse at the facility where Virginia Jones was a patient."

"Virginia Jones? A relation of Caroline Jones?"

"Her mother. That's why Miss Jones flew to Atlanta in the middle of the night. She was in Atlanta the entire week. Buried her mother on the seventh. Flew back that night. In here bright and early on the eighth, telling us her bullcrap story."

Veranza nodded. "Playing the system. The question is, why?"

"I get really mad when people waste my time," Sommers said.
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"Calm down, Carl, and think about it. Toby Nash arrives to pick up Caroline. He finds Mancini, thinks she killed him and decides to take the rap for her. She gets home, discovers he's in jail for killing Mancini and comes in to confess."

"And yet neither one of them is guilty. Why didn't Nash just tell the truth? How stupid is that?" the sergeant asked.

Veranza shrugged, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Well, now, love does things to a man, Carl. I guess in some skewed way of thinking, he thought he was protecting her. Why he thought she needed protecting, I don't know." He shook his head slowly. "With hardly a moment to think about it they were willing to throw their lives away for each other. You don't see that kind of love every day. I mean, people say they love each other all the time, but not often do they prove it in such a way."

"You're getting to be a soft touch in your old age, Lieutenant."

He frowned and straightened his shoulders. "Whatever. The question remains; what happened to Mancini?"

Sommers blew out a breath. "I'm thinkin' maybe accidental death. He was drunk, he could have slipped and hit his head."

Veranza nodded. "Yeah, maybe went there looking for Caroline, got a little crazy when he found her gone, broke up the place and slipped in his drunken stupor."

"Right, and Nash confesses because he doesn't know where Caroline is, though I'm not sure why she didn't try to let him know where she'd gone. So, he thinks she's killed Mancini and taken off."

"Yep. And there's a history. Mancini roughed her up at least once before. The logical conclusion..."

"Captain wants to see you guys."

Veranza nodded at the officer who delivered the message. "Well, let's see how the story stands with the boss."

They found him staring through the slats of the mini-blinds. He turned as they entered. "Have a seat."

Both Veranza and Sommers sat and waited while the Captain pressed two fingers to his forehead, drew a deep breath and sighed.

"Just got off the phone with the mayor's office. Seems people are out for blood. They want to make sure there's no special treatment just because this Toby Nash guy is a celebrity. We've been ordered to come down hard. So tell me, what's the status on the case."

"There's nothing and no one to come down on," Veranza stated.

"Both Nash and his girlfriend are innocent."

"Alibis?"

"Strong. They weren't even in the state when Mancini died."

"Go on."

The Lieutenant took a few minutes to fill him in on the story, while the Captain listened with raised eyebrows. Finally Veranza concluded, "So, the two of them threw us off by confessing to killing Mancini, but now that we know the truth there, we're thinking possibly accidental death."

"The public is not gonna buy that," the Captain said firmly.

Veranza frowned. "Well, they'll have to, won't they? I don't care what the Mayor says, we are not gonna roast a couple of innocents."

"Of course not," the Captain said as he thought. "Still, they lied to us, and when the public finds that out, supposing they don't already know, they're gonna want retribution for it."

"What are you saying, Captain? You want me to bring these kids in on obstruction charges? I mean, we're not even sure a crime has been committed."

"Make the arrests."

"Ya know, these kids were trying to protect each other."

"I understand that. Look, I got a lot of people to smooth over. Make the arrests. We'll find a way through the maze that won't cause too much damage to any of the involved parties. We have to make sure we don't appear to be playing favorites because Nash and Miss Jones are celebrities. Think about it, Lieutenant, if this were some kid off the street who lied to protect his friend, we'd be tough on him."

Veranza blew out a breath. "Maybe, depending on whether the friend was guilty or innocent, but be honest, you know as well as I we can't and don't arrest everyone who has ever lied to the police."

"We will in this case, end of discussion."

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Caroline didn't open her eyes again until morning. She peeked up at the clock beside the bed. Nine-thirty. She sat up quickly. Nine-thirty? In the morning?

"Hello, there, sleepyhead."

Toby sat in the wing chair, watching her. He stood. Freshly showered, shaved and dressed in khaki slacks and a polo shirt, he looked like a GQ advertisement. She found her heart beating faster as he approached the bed. "Good morning," she answered. "I can't believe
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I slept through the entire night and half the morning without waking up."

"You were exhausted, and with good reason."

"Where did you sleep?" she asked.

"Right beside you, darlin'."

"Oh." She frowned and patted the bed. "Well, do I get a morning kiss?" she asked coyly.

"You most certainly do," he murmured as he knelt on the bed by her side. She sighed in pleasure as he kissed her.

"I love you so much," she whispered. "I'm so sorry I let that Tracy person get into my head."

He nodded with a sigh. "I remember a Sunday school teacher once saying that Satan is very good at what he does. I didn't understand. How can a thing so evil be called good, you know? Well, Tracy is one of those people who is very good at deception. And I can now see how her being good at something bad can cause a great deal of destruction."

Caroline nodded. "So, you *do* remember some of the stuff you learned when you were going to church."

He smiled. "I'm beginning to remember, thanks to you. You got me thinkin' 'bout the person I thought I was, compared to the person I'd become. Or I guess, the person my father is, whom I always wanted to emulate, compared to who I am, well, it's a big stretch. The day you left me, Caroline, I got on my knees for the first time in a very long time, and I started praying. It took a while, but I slowly started to feel the door open. I realized that much of my adult life I'd pretty much turned my back on God, but He didn't turn his back on me. And now look, here you are safe and sound, right here with me."

Caroline smiled sweetly. "And I'm pretty grateful for that. But something you said kinda bothers me."

"What?"

"Well, I mean, it's about Tracy. I mean you as good as compared her to the devil."

"Well, as far as I'm concerned she's evil."

Caroline shook her head. "But I was thinking, Toby, she was probably desperate, afraid of losing the most amazing man. I can't really blame her for that, bless her heart. I mean, yeah, what she did, lying to break us up, that was bad, but I forgive her, because if I did something really bad, I'd hope that person would forgive me."

Toby shook his head in wonder. He thought maybe the something

really bad she was talking about was her having to kill Mancini. He sighed. "You're doing it again, Princess."

"What?"

"You're teaching me how to be a better man. You, the one who says she doesn't know about God, are the one closest to His light."

She shrugged. "I just know that there are things I've done in my life that I'm not proud of and I hope I'm not considered evil. And, by the way, it's not that I don't know about God, 'cause my mom talked about Him all the time. Though she painted a picture of God being harsh and mean, but that was just from her perspective. She never did take me to church, so back then, I guess I didn't think He was real."

"That sounds like you're saying that your thoughts have changed. Have they? Because I WAS taught about God's unconditional love, and not that He was harsh or mean. He does, however, want us to not sin. So, are your thoughts changing, Caro?"

She shrugged. "Maybe they are."

"Well, that is cool, very cool, but as much as I'd love to continue this conversation, we have to get a move on. Hop up and get dressed."

"Whhyyy," she whined.

"My family is gathered two doors down, waiting for us to have breakfast with them."

She frowned. "Your family?"

"They're looking forward to seeing you again."

Her eyebrows rose in trepidation. "I don't want to do this now, Toby. I'm not ready."

He patted her leg. "Everything will be okay. They love you."

"Oh, sure. They love the girl who totally messed up their son's life, sent him to jail for murder, and oh, let's not forget, ruined his brilliant career."

"They love the girl their son has fallen in love with."

"Why don't we stay here and you show me some of that love?"

He rose, clapped his hands together. "As good as that sounds, there's no time, darlin'."

"Make time," she insisted.

"They're waiting as we speak."

She rose to her knees and reached out to him. "Okay, but how about just one more kiss?"

He obliged her. However one kiss led to two, three. It was several minutes before he pulled away.

"Oh, man, Caroline, what am I gonna do with you?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"First you help me to be a better Christian, then the next thing I know, you're tempting me almost beyond my ability to resist."

"Are you mad about me making you late for breakfast?"

His brow creased. "Lord, you made me completely forget. We gotta go. Get dressed. Mom is gonna be either worried or mad and Dad is gonna know why we're late."

She giggled as she ran into the bathroom. "Oh, poor little Toby. I got him in trouble."

He smiled. "I will get you back."

Luckily, it didn't take Caroline long to get ready. They walked hand in hand to the suite. Toby opened the door and ushered her inside. The room was much larger than theirs, with a dining area, formal living room, and a bedroom off to each side.

"Wow," Caroline uttered as she entered.

Toby's family sat around a beautifully laid table covered with an amazing buffet. His mother rose immediately.

"Toby, what took you so long? We started to come after you."

Caroline glanced worriedly in Toby's father's direction. He was smiling and Caroline blushed.

Toby's mother turned to Caroline. "This just cannot be the same little girl that came to visit all those years ago," she exclaimed.

"Hello," Caroline said softly.

"Hello nothing, you give me a hug," Ellen insisted.

Caroline did. The woman was the same. Maybe a bit older, but the same. Dark hair, deep blue eyes and still as overbearing as ever.

Mr. Smith greeted Caroline next, telling her she'd grown into a beautiful young lady. Jeff moved close to give her a kiss on her cheek and Sam nodded from his place by the window. Caroline finally turned to the two youngest people in the room. "Molly?"

A lovely young girl smiled and came to take Caroline's hand. She looked more like her father, while Toby resembled his mother. Molly had curly red hair, green eyes and a sprinkling of freckles across her nose. "I suppose you don't remember me," Caroline began.

"Well, sure I do. It was probably the most fun New Year's Eve I've ever had. I remember you telling us scary stories, and stealing cokes. And I remember you hitting your head. We've talked about that night many times."

"Really?" Caroline asked, stunned.

"Sure. And we used your scary stories later at sleepovers and played hide-and-seek in the dark all the time."

Caroline looked up at Toby, her eyes moist. He smiled at her, and brushed his hand over her cheek.

"Do you remember me?" a handsome young man asked as he approached. He resembled Toby, only his hair was lighter and he wasn't quite as large.

She smiled at him. "Of course I do. You're the mean one."

The family laughed as Ben held his hands to his heart as if stricken. "I was hoping you wouldn't remember that. Can you ever forgive me?"

"I was only teasing," she said with a smile. "Besides, there's nothing to forgive, you were just a kid."

The large group sat around the table eating bagels and sweet rolls, fruits and omelets, bacon and sliced Polish sausages. Caroline laughed as they told her stories about Toby and Jeff and some of their misadventures and thrilled at the accomplishments of Molly and Ben. She was surprised to learn Toby graduated from the University of Tennessee with a degree in music.

"You've all done so much with your lives," Caroline commented.

"You've accomplished quite a bit yourself," Toby assured her.

"Not hardly."

He looked up to address his family. "Let me tell you about this lady. She wanted to be a dancer but things at home were not optimum. They barely had enough money to buy food, much less pay for dance lessons. So she went to her local library and studied books on dance. You know, the ones with pictures of dancers in the different positions and stuff. She practiced and practiced and when she felt she looked enough like a real dancer, she went to a local dance school and asked for a scholarship. They granted her an audition and the teacher was so impressed with what she'd taught herself, she not only offered her a scholarship, she gave her private lessons. But wait, because that was only the beginning.

"That dance teacher was so impressed with Caroline's dedication and perseverance, that she rewarded her by talking to an old friend, Madame Pierre, who owns the *New York School of Dance*. Caroline became Madame Pierre's protégée and an accomplished dancer. You should see her dance, Mom. It will bring tears to your eyes."

"Oh, stop, Toby," Caroline said, embarrassed. She leaned toward Toby's mother. "I'm not that good. He's biased."

"You'll see," Toby assured them. "Anyway, now Madame Pierre has offered Caroline a position as lead ballet instructor at her school. It's a very prestigious position and highly respected."

Ellen Smith smiled genuinely. "That's wonderful, Caroline. You *have* accomplished a great deal."

Caroline's eyes met Toby's. His glowed with so much pride. Everyone was being so nice to her, she thought. And so polite. No one spoke of the trouble that hung over her head.

"Okay, Toby," Ben said, as if reading her thoughts. "I have to ask a question."

"Ben," Ellen said, her voice issuing a warning.

"It's okay, Mom," Toby soothed. "Let's get this talked about so we can move on."

"We would all like to know the answer, Toby, so, which is it? Did you really kill this Mancini guy and Caro's covering for you, or did Caro do it and you were taking the rap for her?"

The couple looked at each other briefly. "I did it," they claimed in unison.

"Come on now," Ben pleaded. "We're family. You can tell us."

Toby looked toward his father because they'd had a long talk and his father was the only one who knew Toby really didn't do it and was covering for Caroline. That was the way Toby wanted it and that's the way it would stay. He smiled at Ben. "I've told you the story and that's the end of it," Toby stated firmly.

But all eyes turned straightaway to Caroline. She smiled nervously and shook her head. "Toby is trying to protect me."

"She's lying," Toby insisted immediately.

"Okay, okay, I get it," Ben gave in.

The knock at the door gave finality to the conversation. Jeff rose to answer it.

Two uniformed officers stood in the threshold along with a female officer.

"You Toby Nash?" one asked.

"Um, no, sir."

Jeff turned to the family. Toby was rising. They all were rising.

"I'm Toby."

The officers entered the room and approached him. "We have a

warrant for your arrest. I'm afraid we're gonna have to ask you to turn around and place your hands on the wall."

"I don't understand," Toby began.

One of the officers grabbed Toby by the arm. "You don't have to understand, just do as you're told."

Toby shook him off. "There must be some mistake. I just..."

"There's no mistake."

"May I see the warrant?" Sam asked.

The officer handed him the papers.

Caroline found her voice. "There must be a mistake. He's had all charges dropped."

The female officer addressed her. "Are you Caroline Jones?"

Caroline nodded.

"Face the wall, please," the officer demanded.

Caroline's mouth dropped open. "But, why? I'm out on bond."

The male officer who'd just finished cuffing Toby, took Caroline by the shoulders and turned her toward the wall.

Toby moved forward. "Don't hurt her."

The other officer laid a hand on Toby's shoulder. "Step back."

Once cuffed, Caroline turned to look up at Toby. His eyes met hers. There was fear there and he hated that. He looked around at his family. They were devastated, all but his father, who was calm. Toby was grateful for his father's quiet strength.

"I don't understand, Joe," Ellen said softly. "The charges were dropped, I mean, at least for Toby they were. And Caroline's bond was legally set, right?"

"Sam?" Toby said, looking to his lawyer for answers.

"You're being arrested for obstruction of justice."

One officer opened the door. "Let's go."

"This is ridiculous," Toby muttered.

The female officer ushered Caroline through the door. Toby was right behind.

Joe Smith looked around at the shocked faces of his family. "Stop worrying, it's not the end of the world. Everything will be fine. Toby's a big boy. He can take care of himself."

"Oh, yeah," Ben retorted. "Cuz, he's been doing a fine job of it so far, right?"

"So, what does that mean, exactly?" Jeff asked. "I mean, obstruction of justice?"

Sam sighed. "It means the police believe Toby and Caroline were interfering in an investigation in some way. My assumption is they've discovered that either Toby or Caroline, or possibly both, are lying."

"Well, we know one of them is lying," Ben said.

"But the way they came and arrested them like they were criminals," Ellen said. "That seemed a little strong, don't you think?"

"Yeah well, that's just bullcrap cop stuff," Jeff said angrily. "Oh, sorry," he said as he nodded at Mrs. Smith.

"More than likely someone was furious when they discovered the lie and decided to teach them a lesson," Sam said.

"Well, ya know what? I think this stinks. This just really stinks," Molly said bitterly.

"Well, Sam," Joe said, "time to go to work."

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The arresting officers stopped by the squad room and sat their prisoners down on a bench just outside the door. "Stay put," the larger officer ordered. He and the female officer went through the door to speak with the Lieutenant.

"We've got your prisoners. You wanna speak to them now, or you want us to park 'em."

Lt. Veranza looked out the window to the couple sitting on the bench. The man looked angry. The woman looked terrified. His eyes met those of Toby Nash. Veranza let him know with a glance that he was onto them. The younger man lost some of his arrogance. Veranza returned his gaze to the officers. "We've got a homicide on 53rd. It won't hurt those two to sit and stew for a couple of hours."

"You got it."

Veranza watched as they moved the couple to a cell. He shook his head with a sigh. They were good kids. He stopped and corrected himself. No, they weren't kids at all.

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Toby thought he would go crazy when Caroline was separated from him. It crushed him to see the fear on her face, only, he was about to face his own fear.

"Well, well, well, I got my celebrity back after all," Mac taunted.

"Well," Toby jeered right back. "If it isn't my good friend, Mac. Miss me?"

"Been no fun without you here," Mac admitted as he playfully smacked Toby in the back of the head with his club.

Toby's vision went black for an instant and he felt suddenly sick. He'd received several knocks to his head over the last few days and held up pretty well, but this one broke him. He realized this particular time, Mac hadn't even been trying to inflict any damage. The pop to the back of his head had been almost in sport. Yet, this time Toby became dizzy, nauseated and he sincerely hoped he wouldn't be there long enough for Mac to get the chance to torture him any further.

He sank down on the hard seat, thoughts of the beatings Caroline had endured during her life flashing through his mind. He thought she'd probably been through worse than what he'd faced lately. Her mother had actually knocked her unconscious a few times. He would have thought that it wouldn't bother him at all to be smacked around, yet it WAS bothering him. Besides fueling his temper, it made Caroline's life seem much more real.

He lay there gratefully motionless for almost three hours before Mac came to get him. Mac hadn't bothered him the entire time. Maybe the man knew to stop just before the signs of abuse became evident. "Lieutenant wants to see ya'," was all Mac said.

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Caroline sat on the floor of the holding cell, cross-legged, slightly rocking back and forth. No one bothered her. No one spoke to her and she was glad. She had to think. Why had they arrested her and Toby again? Had they found evidence that actually linked her to the crime? Or worse, did her stepping forward somehow backfire on Toby? Had she done more damage than good? Not knowing was driving her mad and she was relieved when she was finally sent for.

They led her to the interrogation room. Her heart leapt when Toby appeared beside her. Their cuffs were removed.

Lt. Veranza nodded at them. "Have a seat."

Toby swallowed as he and Caroline settled themselves. What kind of game was about to take place?

Caroline looked apprehensively up at the Lieutenant.

"You know why I've brought you in?"

"My lawyer says obstruction of justice."

"Do you understand the charge?"

"Yes."

"No."

Veranza directed his remarks to Caroline, who'd given the negative answer. "It means we've discovered that you lied to us and
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have intentionally misdirected the investigation into the death of George Mancini."

The room was silent except for Toby's labored breathing.

"So, does anyone have anything to say?" The Lieutenant gave them a full minute to speak before he took over. "Fine. Then we'll do it this way." He walked away then turned abruptly. "We've had some new facts presented to us on the case," Veranza began.

Caroline glanced over at Toby. He seemed angry. Of course he was, she thought. He'd been free. All charges dropped. Now he had to go back to facing who knows what.

"We're gonna go over what happened again, Caroline."

"She needs her lawyer present," Toby snapped.

"We can wait for him," the Lieutenant stated. "Do you want to wait, Miss Jones, or would you rather get this over with?"

Nervously she glanced at Toby. His face seemed pale. He had sweat on his upper lip.

His eyes bore into hers. "Wait," he demanded.

Veranza nodded. "That's fine. We can wait, though there's no telling how long it will be before I have time to speak with you again."

"That's bull," Toby muttered.

Caroline spoke quickly before Toby got himself into more trouble than he was already in. "Let's just get it over with. You already know everything anyway."

"We'll see about that. So, let's start at the beginning."

She nodded, licked her lips.

"You were sleeping."

"Yes, sir."

"Then what happened?"

She cleared her throat, took a deep breath. She was confused and not quite sure what to say or not say.

"I woke up."

"Why?"

"Why?" she repeated.

"Did you hear something?"

"No, sir. I just couldn't sleep. I was anxious about the next day."

"Anxious because you and Toby were going on a trip."

"Yes, sir."

"Is this really necessary?" Toby asked through clenched teeth. "She's already told you her story."

Lt. Veranza turned on him. "You two are in trouble. I gave you a chance to come clean. I'm not the enemy. I want to help you."

Toby realized the man probably knew the truth now. He probably knew the time of death and the fact that Toby had come in on a red-eye, but for some reason, he couldn't bring himself to 'fess up and just leave Caroline hanging out to dry. That combined with the fact that he wasn't feeling well enough to think clearly kept him from responding.

Veranza turned back to Caroline.

"You couldn't sleep, and…"

"And I went for a walk, down toward the hotel and back. It took about twenty minutes. When I got back, George was there. We scuffled, I hit him with the bat, he fell and I ran. End of story."

"What time, Caroline?"

"Time?"

"What time did you wake up?"

"About one-thirty. No, I mean about one o'clock."

"Try again," the lieutenant demanded. "You were sleeping…"

Her voice began to shake. "I was sleeping and I woke up and went for a walk and then came back. George was there. He hit me and I hit him with the bat."

"Tell me again," he demanded.

"Is there any point to this?" Toby dared to ask.

Lt. Veranza momentarily shifted directions. "Oh, so, you want to tell *your* version?"

"Yeah, sure. I got to her apartment at five, she wasn't there, George was. We fought. I hit him with the bat."

Veranza dismissed the statement without a word and turned back to Caroline. "Where were you when Toby was killing George?"

"I was in..." She stopped, shook her head. "I was sleeping."

"You were sleeping while Toby was killing George?"

"No, Toby didn't kill George. I was sleeping."

He raised his voice. "And then what?"

A tear escaped, made its way over her cheek. "I, uh, I couldn't sleep. I walked."

"Where did you walk, Caroline? Did you dress first, or were you sleeping in your clothes?"

"Um, I, was sleeping."

"Then what?"

"I went for a walk."

"Start from the beginning please. Tell me everything. Tell me what time. What you wore. Did you get a shirt out of your dresser, your closet or your suitcase? Which one?"

"Out of my..."

"From the beginning."

The tears were now coursing down her cheeks. "I was sleeping and I woke up about twelve-thirty."

"Twelve-thirty? Just a few minutes ago, you said it was one."

She wiped her nose on the back of her hand. "I meant one. You're confusing me."

"You're confusing yourself. From the beginning please."

She sniffed. "I, I took a walk, I mean I was sleeping, I woke up."

"What time did the phone ring?"

"About twelve..." She stopped. "I didn't say the phone rang."

"You didn't say it, but it did, didn't it?"

She looked at Toby. "Did I say something about the phone?"

He shook his head. "It's okay, baby. It's okay."

"Did you answer the phone, Caroline?"

"No, there was no phone call," she sobbed.

"When it rang, did you think it was Toby calling you?"

"Yes. I mean, no. I didn't know who..."

Toby put his arm around her. "Stop this, please, sir, can't you see she's on the verge of a breakdown?"

"Does that bother you, Toby? Maybe if you come clean, it would help her. Maybe you're the one causing the distress."

He sighed and shook his head. "I don't know what to say."

Veranza nodded. "Okay, we'll end this. Caroline, who was on the phone? Who called you at twelve-thirty?"

She was shaking her head. "No!"

"It was Ms. Warren from the nursing home, wasn't it?"

She looked up, surprised.

"Tell the truth, Caroline. You'll feel so much better. Wasn't it Ms. Warren from *Sterling Care Nursing Home*?"

She found herself nodding her head.

"And what did she tell you, Caroline?" he asked, gently this time. "What did she say?"

Caroline spoke between great gasps. "She, she said my mother was dying."

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1 Corinthians 13:7
"Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

## Chapter 11

Toby's mouth opened in astonishment. He stared at her, the blood draining from his face. *Her mother was dying?*

"Your mother wanted you to come see her before she died. Isn't that right, Caroline?"

"Yes, sir," she whispered.

"Did you fly to Atlanta?"

She nodded, her eyes downcast.

"Caroline, did you even see George Mancini the night he died?"

She looked over at Toby. "I'm sorry. I wanted to help you so much. I thought I could do this."

Lt. Veranza spoke softly now, kindly. "Caroline, when was the last time you saw George alive?"

"Back in May."

"That's what I thought." He was silent a moment, while he waited for Caroline to collect herself and watched as Toby put his arm around her. "Miss Jones, I know your mother died and that you just buried her a few days ago. I'm sorry for your loss."

She sniffed again. He handed her a tissue.

"Caroline, why didn't you tell me?" Toby asked.

"I was trying to help you, Toby. I couldn't stand the fact that you were being charged with murder. You would never have had any dealings with George Mancini at all if not for me."

"You would do that for me?"

"I'd do anything for you."

Lt. Veranza turned to Toby. "She won't be in trouble now, so you can tell the truth."

Toby looked into the detective's eyes and nodded. "I'm guessing you already know the truth."

"Yep. The truth is, you two have been wasting the taxpayers' money. The time of death for Mancini was put at one-thirty. At that time, Caroline was on a plane headed for Atlanta and you were at the

Nashville airport, getting ready to board a plane to New York."

Caroline gasped. "You didn't kill George?"

He turned to look at her. "I found him in your apartment when I came to pick you up. I thought he'd come in and attacked you and you'd accidentally killed him and run away."

"And you told the police you killed him? But why?"

"Why do you think?"

"For me? You actually thought I killed George and you wanted to protect me?"

He smiled and shrugged. "I'd do anything for you."

"But your career, Toby. I mean, you tossed away your career like it was nothing?"

Toby grimaced. "Well, not like it was nothing. It was hard, but in exchange for your freedom, it was worth it."

"I can't believe it. It's like you really do love me."

He gave a soft laugh. "I really do." He looked up at the detective. "So, sir, what's next?"

The Lieutenant frowned. "I guess from what I'm hearing, neither of you knows a single thing about how George Mancini ended up dead in Caroline's apartment?"

They shook their heads in unison.

He sighed. "I'm back to square one and the two of you are not off the hook just yet. We're gonna talk about the consequences of what you two pulled. If you provide false information on a police report, you can be charged with either a misdemeanor or even a felony in New York. I need to speak with the captain. I'll be right back." He left them alone.

Toby stood and pulled Caroline into his arms. "What you must be going through. I'm so sorry about your mom."

"It's okay. I mean, we talked. Like, really talked, for the first time. It's really a shame it had to be at the end. We wasted so much time when we could have been making memories."

He smiled and changed the subject. "You didn't kill George."

She smiled. "And neither did you. Lord, I've been so worried about you, and for nothing."

She looked up into his face, but didn't like what she saw. He was breathing heavily, his face pale, his brow covered with perspiration. "Toby, are you okay?"

"Actually, I don't feel very well."

"Sit down." She didn't have to ask him twice, because he was close to collapsing anyway.

She went to the door and when it wouldn't open, she pounded on it. "Lieutenant!"

The door opened almost immediately.

"There's something wrong with Toby. He's not well."

Veranza knelt down in front of him. "You okay, son?"

"Just a little dizzy."

"Tell you what, let's get you back to the hotel. We'll talk later." He took Toby by the arm and pulled him up. Toby swayed heavily against him.

"I think I'm gonna be sick."

"Okay, hold on." He grabbed a trash can and shoved it up toward Toby's face.

Toby peered into the Lieutenant's face, trying to focus. "Goin' down," he mumbled as his body crumpled.

Veranza dropped the trash can and grabbed Toby around the chest, easing him down.

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Caroline stood with Lt. Veranza outside an emergency room door, waiting to hear from a doctor. She'd called Toby's family and they were on the way. Caroline peered nervously down the hall then looked back at the lieutenant. He rubbed his hand over his hair. Caroline smiled at him. "Toby does that."

He looked over at her. "Hmm?"

"Oh, um, Toby runs his hands through his hair like that, when he's worried or frustrated about something."

The detective smiled. "Well, I'm both. I think it's a universal man sort of thing."

"Do you think he's okay?"

"Sure." The word sounded hollow.

Caroline never thought she would be the one trying to comfort the officer, but she smiled and patted his arm. "I'm sure he'll be fine. He's very strong."

Lt. Veranza looked the young woman over. Adorable. And strong as heck considering what she'd been through over the past week. Now that the truth was out, he hoped she could shed some light on why Mancini had been in her apartment. "Tell me about George Mancini."

She sighed. "He was a bad man. I hated him, but he was my
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landlord and I had no choice other than to deal with him because it was the only place I could find to live. He was always making advances toward me, trying to force me to, well, you know."

He nodded. "Yes, unfortunately, I do know. And you know what? I'm glad Toby kicked his tail."

She frowned. "Well, it was pretty scary when it was happening because Toby is so large and so strong, I thought he was gonna kill him right then."

He smiled. "You don't like confrontation very much, do you?"

"Not at all. I guess I'm a wimp when it comes to that."

"You, sweetheart, are not a wimp in any way. So tell me, did Mancini have any friends that you know of? The only family we were able to find was an older sister who refused to talk to us through her drunken stupor and not one person who lives in the building was willing to say much at all."

Caro shrugged. "I don't know about friends, but I saw him with women all the time. Don't ask me what they saw in him. Especially Sherry. Every time I think about her, I just get so mad."

"Why? Who is Sherry?"

"Oh, so, she's my downstairs neighbor. She's just a kid. Sixteen years old I think. She doesn't say much. She lives there with her mother and her little brother. I walked in on her and George once. Actually, that's why he jumped on me."

The Lieutenant remembered speaking to Sherry's mother. She'd had nothing to tell them. "So, tell me about Sherry."

"George was, well, he was having his way with her. That's really all I know. I was on my way upstairs one day and Sherry's door was open. I looked in and George was with her, doing stuff, you know?"

"Are you sure you didn't misread the situation?"

"I'm sure. Sherry was all wrapped around him and begging him not to leave. It made me sick."

"She was willing then? Not forced."

"She seemed to be willing enough, but she's a kid. He could've manipulated her somehow." Caroline suddenly looked down, feeling ashamed. "I should've done something, helped her, gotten involved."

He sighed. "We don't always make the right decision."

She looked up with tears in her eyes. "Yeah, but I know better. I should've done something. There were so many times in my life when I'd wished someone had stepped in for me."

"How so?"

She swallowed. "My mother, she, she had problems. She worked her way through those problems by hurting me."

"Okay, I understand." Veranza shook his head. No wonder Toby was so protective of her and no wonder she hated confrontation.

"Why didn't I do something to help her?" Caroline vocally reprimanded herself.

He touched her shoulder. "Listen to me, young lady, because I've seen it all. First off, the girl wouldn't have listened to anything you had to say anyway. Secondly, Mancini threatened you, correct?"

"How did you know that?"

"You said he beat you up because you saw him and the girl together. Sounds pretty threatening to me. I'm sure he made it clear you weren't supposed to tell anyone."

She nodded.

"You can't blame yourself for being afraid. From what you just told me, you've been pounded on most of your life. That tends to make people a little shy."

She smiled up at him. "You're very kind."

"Oh yeah. That's what my partner says too," Lt. Veranza laughed.

"Well, you're also mean and scary when you want to be."

"Sorry about that. I was simply trying to get to the truth. I was hoping you would know something more than you do." He sighed. Looked at his watch.

"Lt. Veranza?"

"Yes." He turned to see the doctor smiling. That was a good sign.

"Mr. Nash has a concussion. We've taken some scans and there is no swelling to the brain. There is, however, a large lump on the back of his head. He says it was put there by one of your officers. He'll be fine though. He needs to be watched during the night. Wake him every two hours, make sure he's responsive."

Fifteen minutes later, Toby walked through the emergency room doors into the waiting area with a nurse at his side, who was chiding him for refusing a wheelchair. His family arrived at the same time and Caroline found herself standing aside. She watched as Toby's family surrounded him with their love and warmth and she secretly wished she'd experienced that sometime in her life.

Lt. Veranza pulled Toby aside. "I'm gonna cut you two loose."

"Thank you, sir," Toby said.

"There's a public outcry about celebs getting special treatment, so there is gonna be a court appearance and probably gonna be some community service coming your way."

Toby nodded. "I understand."

"I was told that one of my officers did the deed as far as the concussion and I take full responsibility for that. Who was it?"

Toby shrugged. "It doesn't matter."

"It matters for others."

"Yeah, I guess it does. Okay then, let's just say, I'm glad I don't have to stay in the holding cell any longer."

Veranza nodded and offered his hand. Toby shook it.

"I've never seen two people willing to sacrifice so much for each other. Whatever you two have, it's rare. Hold on to it."

Toby nodded. "I intend to."

Caroline approached. "What will happen now, Lieutenant?"

"I intend to have a talk with Sherry. Then we'll see. You two go home and get some rest."

He held his hand out to her but she was having none of that. She rose up and kissed his cheek.

Toby's family had so many questions, too many. They escorted Toby and Caroline back to the hotel. Gathered in Ellen and Joe's larger suite, they went over the events of the day. She was offered many condolences on the death of her mother, before they turned their attention to Toby.

It was amazing to Caroline to see how Toby's family all catered to each other. Everyone was talking and laughing and even joking about their most recent arrest. The television blared in the background, with Jeff watching intently for news. A cell phone tuned to a country station played softly.

Glad the conversation had shifted away from her, Caroline curled up on the sofa and listened. The low conversation between Toby, his brother, sister and his parents, would be interrupted by bursts of laughter when someone made a snide remark. Toby glanced at her a few times and winked, making sure she didn't feel left out.

No one could believe what Toby had been willing to throw away for Caroline's sake. She could hardly believe it herself. He was a good, strong man, and he was from a good, strong family— but she wasn't. She had no idea how a real family was supposed to interact with each other. Could she actually become a part of this family?

She was sure he would eventually ask her to marry him. There should be no question. She should jump at the opportunity, yet as she sat there listening and watching, she was beginning to realize she wasn't the best deal for Toby. She wasn't strong like his mother or sweet like his sister. She knew nothing about running a household. She'd never been taught to cook. She'd never even owned a washing machine, though, it couldn't be much different from the laundromat she frequented. Toby wanted children and would be a wonderful father, but what kind of mother would she be? She had no homemaking skills. She could dance. That's not too helpful. Lack of cooking and cleaning skills aside, would a spilled glass of milk or a failing grade push her over the edge?

After all she'd just been through, she thought she'd learned to waste no time and go for what she wanted, but what if the things she wanted weren't best for all those concerned? She'd also just been given an education in self-sacrifice. Maybe there was a reason for that. Maybe she needed to sacrifice her own desires so the person she loves most in the world can have a truly happy life, one she was unable to give. Additionally, Toby would want to live in Nashville and she had a wonderful opportunity in New York with Madame Pierre.

There was so much to think about. She promised herself she would think long and hard before she jumped into anything. Toby moved to sit with her on the sofa, putting his arm around her, pulling her close and she laid her head on his shoulder.

"You okay?" she whispered.

"Tired. Weak. Want to go to bed?"

"Thought you'd never ask," she said.

"Hey, hey, everyone—listen to this," Jeff called, turning up the volume on the TV as he spoke.

"New York, once again, is the background for a wonderful tale of love and sacrifice."

They listened as the host of a popular news show told the tale of Toby Nash and the sacrifice he was willing to make for his lady love and the lady who was willing to take the fall for her man. It was embellished a bit and Toby had a feeling that was the doing of his publicist and business manager. He also had a feeling he would be playing a tour soon.

Jeff turned, grinning and rubbing his hands briskly together. "Looks like we're back in business, bro."

"Looks like," Toby confirmed with a smile.

Caroline smiled too. She was glad Toby's career was back in swing. Maybe even stronger than ever, yet she was also sad. She wasn't even sure why. Maybe because deep down inside, she'd already made her decision.

Toby rose, pulling Caroline up with him. "We're gonna get some rest," he announced.

"Toby," his mother whined, "You haven't eaten anything."

"Don't feel like eating, Mom. Just wanna sleep."

"Maybe you should stay in our room tonight. Just so I can keep an eye on you," Ellen suggested.

She hadn't meant to imply that Caroline was incapable of taking care of him. She was just wanting to baby her firstborn child, but the look on Caroline's face told her it hit home.

Joe jumped in to rescue the couple. "You kids go." He turned to his wife with a scowl. "I'm sure Caroline will be happy to stay in Toby's room and keep an eye on him."

"Oh, of course. Goodnight, baby." She reached up and kissed her son on the cheek, then turned to deliver the same to Caroline. "Remember, wake him every two hours."

Caroline promised she would.

Once in his room, Toby was concerned about Caroline's mood. She was quiet and reserved. He could sense her sadness. He just wasn't sure why. She should be happy. The nightmare was over. They were free. She'd come to terms with several things in her past, including her mother. Maybe that was it. Maybe the loss of her mother still weighed heavily on her.

They snuggled together. He was truly exhausted and still a little nauseated. Maybe he'd feel better in the morning.

Caroline set the alarm for two hours and slept by his side.

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Detective Sommers rapped his knuckles brusquely against the stained beige-colored door to the apartment just below the one rented by Caroline Jones. He glanced back over his shoulder at his partner as a young girl opened the door barely an inch and peered out.

"Yes?"

"Are you Sherry?"

"Yes."

"Sherry, we're from the police department. We need to come in
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and talk to you."

"My mother's at work."

"Yes, we spoke to your mother this morning, and now we have a few questions we'd like to ask you."

"Am I in trouble?"

"No, but we hope you can help us with our investigation."

She closed the door and Sommers had just raised his hand to knock again when Sherry opened it, stepped back and motioned them in. The apartment was a far cry from the one upstairs. This one was dark, dank, and smelled of bacon. It boasted all the amenities. A deluxe window air-conditioning unit hummed monotonously and there was an array of electronics including a giant screen TV, stereo and computer. A young boy who played video games in front of the television turned briefly to see who'd entered the room and immediately turned back to his game.

The two men sat on what appeared to be a brand-new sofa. "Sit down, Sherry," Lt. Veranza said.

She sank slowly down onto a matching armchair. Veranza looked her over. She was a pretty girl. Long, dark brown hair was haphazardly pulled up in a giant clip. A mild case of teenage acne did not deter from the prettiness of large blue eyes and a generous mouth. She couldn't be described as slim, more like voluptuous.

Sgt. Sommers spoke first. "Sherry, we want to talk to you about George Mancini."

She looked down.

"Sherry?"

She raised her head, her eyes filled with tears. "He's dead."

"Yes, we know. We're trying to find out just how he died."

"It's her fault," Sherry said quickly.

"Whose fault?" the Lieutenant asked.

"Caro." She spat. "Caro, the skank who lives upstairs."

"How is it her fault?"

"He was in her apartment, wasn't he?" she asked sarcastically. "Did she send you here? Did she tell you about me?"

"No one sent us here, Sherry," Sgt. Sommers assured her. "Do you remember anything out of the ordinary the night George died?"

She shrugged.

"Sherry," Veranza said. "You cared for George, didn't you?"

She remained silent.

"It sounds like it bothered you that he knew Caroline Jones," he continued. "Were you jealous because he liked her, maybe?"

"He didn't like her," she insisted, her voice rising. "He just wanted to do her."

"Okay, okay. Settle down," Sgt. Sommers said, using a calming tone. "He wanted her? How could he want that when he had you?"

"That's what I said," she agreed.

"Tell us about your relationship," Lt. Veranza said, his tone soft and understanding.

Her lips trembled as she began to speak. "He loved me. He said he did, but all he ever talked about was Caro." She made a sour face. "She's a real looker. Why can't you act more like her? You need to lose weight. Why don't you cut your hair? Maybe you should take some dance classes. Skinny witch. I don't know why he thought she was so great."

"I see," Lt. Veranza said softly. "He sure didn't appreciate what he had, did he?"

"No," she pouted. "He went up to her place all the time, when she wasn't home. Went through her stuff. He took me up there and we did it in her bed. I think he really got off on that. I hate her. I wish she'd been the one to die."

"I understand, Sherry. That must have been very hard for you," Veranza said.

Sgt. Sommers picked up on the line. "And when you went up there that night you meant to hurt Caroline, not George."

She looked up at him, the confusion evident on her face. "I didn't hurt, George. I didn't go in Caro's apartment. I hated that apartment. I hated it when George went up there. I hated it when he made me go that time."

"But George went up to her apartment that night, correct?"

"Yes. He'd been drinking. He said she was leaving town and he may not get another chance. He said it was gonna be tonight, whether she wanted it or not."

Sgt. Sommers' frustration surfaced for a moment. "Sherry, why didn't you tell the police this when they talked to you?"

A tear ran down her cheek. "Why should I? He was dead. It didn't matter anymore. At least not to me."

"Sherry, did you follow George up to Caroline's apartment that night?" Lt. Veranza asked.

"Yeah. So. I was just gonna watch. I wanted to see her cry. George said he would make her suffer for me. You don't blame me, do you?" Sherry spouted angry curses. "She was trying to steal George from me. I didn't do nothin' wrong."

"I understand how you felt, Sherry," Sgt. Sommers comforted. "So then, tell me, when George got up to the apartment that night, Caroline wasn't there, was she?"

Sherry was crying again. "No. She snuck out. Left early. George was mad. Real mad. He picked up a baseball bat and broke her lamp and knocked a bunch of stuff off the table."

Now they were getting somewhere. "What happened after that, Sherry? Did you see what happened to George?"

She shook her head. "I was in the hall outside the apartment. I heard a car pull up outside. It was a cab. I barely made it back to my place in time, before she came in the building. I watched her come inside and go upstairs."

"Who? Who did you see?"

"I dunno. Never seen her before."

Veranza smiled kindly. "Can you describe her to me, Sherry?"

"Sure. She was real tall. And pretty. She had black hair, all long and poofed out like a model or a movie star. She was wearing fancy clothes, probably real expensive."

"Do you know how long she was up there? Did you hear anything out of the ordinary? A scream or yelling?"

"She was only up there a couple of minutes. I didn't hear no scream. I did hear her say, 'get your hands off me,' then she ran down the stairs and out the door, got in the cab and went away."

"Did you go back up to Ms. Jones' apartment?"

"No. I don't like George when he's like that, all drunk and talking about her." New tears welled in her eyes and spilled over. "If I did, maybe George would be alive. I can't think about this right now."

"You know Sherry, you should have come forward and told us this information earlier. The woman you saw probably knows how George died."

"I don't care. First Caro's boyfriend was in jail for it and I was glad about that 'cause I knew it would make her sad. Then she went to jail and that was even better."

Lt. Veranza shook his head. "Ya know, sending someone to jail who isn't guilty wouldn't be the right thing to do, Sherry. Certainly, you

know that."

She frowned. "I don't care. I hate her. She thinks she's better than everyone else. George said so."

The detectives rose.

"Thank you for your help, Sherry. I know you're sad about George. If you ever want to talk, you can call me. Sometimes talking about things makes it feel better," Lt. Veranza said.

She looked up at him, surprise registering on her face. "You want me to call you? That's crap."

"No crap, Sherry. I want you to call." Lt. Veranza handed her his card. "That's my number right there. Anytime, day or night."

She took it.

They left her apartment, walked out into the sunshine and breathed deeply.

"What is this world coming to," Sommers said gloomily. "That girl gives me the creeps."

"She's sad and she's lonely and has no self-esteem. I'm hoping we can help her by talking her into getting some professional help."

"You're a good Samaritan, you know that?" Sommers said.

"Not hardly. Just not willing to give up on one so young."

Sgt. Sommers changed the subject. "So, I guess we need to have a word with Miss Jones and see if she knows who would've come to see her in the middle of the night."

Lt. Veranza nodded. "Perhaps one of her showbiz friends."

"I'll get on it."

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Toby turned toward Caroline, stroking her arm in an effort to wake her. "Good mornin', beautiful, how was your night, mine was wonderful with you by my side," he sang. "When I open my eyes, and see your sweet face, it's a good mornin' beautiful day."

Large brown eyes blinked open. She yawned and smiled, but the smile didn't reach her eyes. "I love that song."

"It's a good one, all right. Steve Holy. Good guy. How are you this fine morning?"

Stretching her arms over her head, she grunted. "Sleepy."

"Hmm, that wouldn't have anything to do with havin' to wake me up all night?"

"It might."

He smiled and touched the tip of her nose. "Can I make it up to
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you?" he said softly as he leaned over to kiss her.

Remembering her resolve to break things off with Toby, she stiffened and pulled away. "Sure. Get me some breakfast."

Realizing he had to confront the problem, he sighed, sat up and leaned against the headboard. "Okay. Let's talk."

"There's nothing to talk about."

"Caroline, there's something wrong. I can see it in your eyes. Why aren't you happy? I mean, we're both out of jail. Murder charges have been dropped. You made peace with your mother before she passed. Is that it? Is it your mom's passing?"

She shook her head. He hadn't actually asked her to marry him yet, so she couldn't very well tell him that she'd decided when he *does* ask her to marry him she was seriously thinking about turning him down. And she couldn't tell him that if she allowed him to kiss her she may not find the strength to turn him down.

"Caroline? Did you hear anything I just said?"

She looked up into his face, so sincere and concerned about her. Lord have mercy, how she loved him. Though was it enough? Enough to let him go? Enough to allow him to find a woman who fits into his family, who could take care of him and his future children? Someone who'd been to church and knew bible stories. She'd been so excited about reconciling with him. After everything that's happened, she'd promised herself she wouldn't waste any more time. Yet, would marrying Toby be selfish? Claiming Toby for herself, is that the best thing for *him*? Does she love him enough to do the best thing for *him*? She had no idea how she would go about letting him down, or even if she would. For now, she decided, she would try to act normal and try not to worry him.

Sighing, she fixed him with a smile. "So much has happened. I suppose I'm just a little overwhelmed." Before he could respond she neatly changed the subject. "How are you feeling?"

"Almost completely better."

"Almost?"

He reached for her. His strong hands pulled her to him. She didn't resist. Rolling over next to her, he looked deeply into her eyes and softly kissed the tip of her nose.

Caroline couldn't think of any way to avoid what was happening. She couldn't think of anything except how good it felt to have him so close. How safe she felt in his arms. How much she wanted his kiss.

He gave it to her. When he lifted his head, she almost wept with the emptiness and quickly lifted her face for another. She was so weak to allow him to hug her, to kiss her, to lie next to her. Maybe, she thought, trying to rationalize the weakness, just this one last time. Something to remember.

He had a way of kissing her that made her feel worshiped. It was wonderful to give in to him. It felt freeing to yield to his kiss, to surrender to him, to turn herself over to the care of another individual and to trust that person completely.

"I love you, baby," he whispered.

She didn't answer. Couldn't answer because she didn't know what to say. It would be cruel to lead him on, wouldn't it? It would be cruel if she were to go through with leaving him.

He stopped kissing her, turned onto his back and lay still for some time. Finally, he sighed. "I can't even imagine living without you."

She looked over at him, wondering if he were reading her mind. She reached over and stroked his cheek. Maybe she would be weak and selfish and just stay with him. Maybe.

They were startled out of the moment by Toby's phone. Caroline listened to his deep voice.

"Yep. Tomorrow? Sure. You got it. For you? Anything. Who else is scheduled to appear? You're kidding! No, no problem at all. He's a friend of mine, that's all. Yep. Nope. I don't need a limo. No, I promise, I won't be late." He laughed as he hung up the phone.

He lovingly stroked Caroline's arm. "Sooo, that was Brian, my business manager."

"And?"

"And he says as long as I'm in New York, I may as well do something to fix my rep and *The Mike Bitters Show* had a cancellation and they want me to take the open spot. So, taping is tomorrow and I told him I'd do it. Ya wanna come?"

"Really?"

"Sure."

"Mike Bitters is a friend of yours?"

"No."

"Oh. I just asked because it sounded like you just told Brian that he was a friend of yours."

"No, I've never met the man. I was speaking of another guest who'll be there, Ricky Kino."

"You know Ricky Kino?"

"We met at a charity function and became fast friends."

She smiled. "I keep forgetting you're a celebrity. To me, you're just Toby Smith, the boy who changed my life."

"Good. Let's keep it that way. I prefer being thought of as a real person. Except I'm averse to the 'boy' part."

"Why?"

"Because what has happened between us is not exactly the work of a boy."

"No," she agreed with a laugh. "It was definitely done by a man."

He sat up on his knees and pounded his chest with his fist. "That's right. A he-man. A manly man."

She giggled.

He raised his arm and sniffed. "A smelly man." He stood. "I gotta take a shower."

She stood to go back to her room. "You do that. I'll do the same."

While Toby was in the shower, singing at the top of his lungs, Caroline headed back to her room. In preparation for a shower, she took some clothes from her suitcase and laid them on the bed, though they'd been worn twice already. She wondered when she might be able to get back into her apartment. Maybe she would give the cops a call and ask them about it because her plans for the day included meeting with Madame Pierre and it would be nice if she could stop by the apartment to pick up a few things. The knock on the door pulled her from her thoughts.

She peeked out. Sgt. Sommers stood there, smiling. "I need to ask you a few questions."

She frowned. "Please, come in. Um, Toby's in his room."

"That's okay. It's you I wanted to talk to." He smiled as if reading her thoughts. "Don't worry. You're not in trouble."

She blew out the breath she'd been holding and offered him a seat and then sat in the chair opposite him. Before he could even begin though, Toby knocked on the door. Caro let him in.

He shook the officer's hand and sat on the bed.

"We've talked to your neighbor, Sherry," Sommers began.

Caroline sat silently, waiting for him to tell her what he'd found.

"Did you know her very well?"

She shook her head. "I only spoke to her a few times. She seemed to be quiet and shy. I introduced myself right after I moved in a few

years ago and we really haven't spoken since."

"Did you realize she didn't like you very much?"

Caroline frowned. "I had no idea what she thought of me."

"We thought she might have been the one to kill George. You know, jealous girlfriend type of thing."

She nodded. "But?"

"But I think she's telling the truth. She didn't do it, but she may have seen who did."

"Who?"

"Well, that's where we need your help. She saw a woman go up to your apartment that night shortly before George died. A tall woman. Pretty, with long, thick black hair. Actress or model type. Do you know someone like her? A friend from a show you were in, another dancer, maybe? Someone who would be coming to see you in the middle of the night?"

Caroline went over everyone she knew in her head who could possibly fit that description. "There's Alicia. She was in *Chorus Line* with me. She has black hair, but no one could ever say she was tall, since she's about five feet."

"Anyone else?"

As she thought, Toby stood and circled around behind Caroline.

Caroline continued. "I can't think of anyone. I can think of a dozen who fit part of the description. One who is tall but has red hair or one who is tall and has black hair but it's cut short and spiky."

"You say she's tall and has long dark hair?" Toby asked.

Sommers nodded. "Yeah and well-dressed."

"Well, I hope it's not who I think it is."

Caroline turned, surprised. "Who do you think it is?"

"Tracy."

"Oh, Toby, you're right. Oh my goodness, it does sound like her."

"Tracy?" Sommers asked.

"My ex-girlfriend, Tracy Chastain. She lives in Nashville."

"Why would she be visiting Miss Jones in New York in the middle of the night?"

"Well, that I don't know. She was angry about our break up, to put it mildly. She'd already shown vindictiveness toward Caroline. Who knows why she was there? But the description is too much like her to dismiss it."

Caroline shivered. Toby took her hand as he spoke. "So what

happened that night? I can't figure out why either Tracy or Mancini would be in Caroline's apartment in the middle of the night."

Sgt. Sommers nodded. "What we learned from Sherry wasn't pretty. Mancini had a real fixation on you, Miss Jones. According to Sherry, you're all he talked about. She says he went up there that night with the intention of raping you."

Caroline's face paled and she clutched her stomach.

Toby cursed, placed his hands protectively on Caroline's shoulders. "It's a good thing someone beat me to it, because I would've murdered him myself."

Sgt. Sommers debated with himself whether he should tell them the rest. Like the part about George and Sherry in Caroline's bed, or about Sherry's intense hatred for Miss Jones. He decided to leave it. No use in making Caroline feel worse than she already did. He nodded at Toby's words. "Understood, but let's not go there. I'm gonna need some information on this woman and I think we'll be speaking to your ex-girlfriend very soon."

Granting Caroline permission to go into her apartment, he shook their hands and took his leave.

Toby turned to Caroline. "I can't imagine how you're feeling. Vulnerable I suppose. It didn't happen, though. God must've been watching over you." He glanced heavenward. "Thank you, Jesus."

"Why would God save me? I mean, why me? There are plenty of people who don't get spared. I don't even go to church."

Toby nodded. "Good question. There's a lot of people who ask that same kinda question. Why would God help one person, but not help someone else? I've asked that same question myself."

Caro nodded. "Well, maybe we can find someone to ask."

Toby smiled. "I think that's a great idea. I'm thanking God though, because I recently started praying again, thanks to you, and I asked Him to bring you back to me, and He has answered my prayer."

Caroline sighed. That statement sort of put a kink in the thoughts she'd been thinking.

Toby frowned at the expression on her face. "Until we can find the answers to that question, can you find comfort in the fact that for some reason, God stepped in?"

She looked up at him, nodded slightly. "I need to take a shower."

Toby watched her go, wondering what was going through her head. While Caroline showered, he touched base with his family. They

would be leaving in a few hours, his parents heading back to their extended vacation, his sister to her husband in Augusta. Brother Ben would stay a few more days in New York before heading back to Texas. Toby would spend some time with him, while Caroline met with Madame Pierre. Still, the most important thing would happen later that evening, when Toby would take Caroline out for a special dinner and this time nothing would stand in the way of him asking her to be his wife.

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"So, Caroline, why do you come see Madame with such a sad look on your face, eh? What can I do to help my little one to smile once more?"

"Oh, Madame, I'm so confused. I know I should be happy, yet I feel close to tears. Why am I so sad? What's wrong with me?"

"Come. Change clothes. We will work through this."

"I hardly think a dance lesson will help me."

"You, young lady, do not know everything, do you? Now, scoot, scoot, scoot."

Caroline did as commanded, joining Madame in the west dance room. The afternoon sun shone through the windows along one wall, casting an orange light throughout the room. Soft music played. They moved to the middle of the floor and sat, their long legs spread, their arms above their heads. Slowly, they began their stretch, the one Caroline had moved through almost every day for the past twelve years. First to one side, then the other, then to the middle, laying their torsos flat against the floor.

Madame spoke as they moved. "Now, little one, you say you are sad, yet you have no reason to be. This tells me you are doing something against your nature."

"Against my nature?"

"Yes. Something that is wrong for you. Something out of harmony with your being. Turn your foot out farther, young lady."

Caroline obeyed, corrected her point. "That's the trouble. I don't know what's wrong for me and what's right."

They rose and went to the barre. "Yes, you do. You are fighting against it. This is what causes your sadness. When your spirit lifts and feels excited and joyous then you know what you're doing is right. You made your peace with your mother, no?"

"Yes."
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"Maybe you still feel anger inside. Maybe you still wish to be mad with her and you can't because she is gone now to the other side." As she spoke Madame removed her foot from the barre and moved behind her student.

Caroline shook her head. "I don't think that's it. I don't feel anger at my mother. I understand the power the alcohol had over her and I understand the pain she felt at my father leaving her."

Madame's hand was on Caroline's waist as she spoke to her in the mirror. "Posture, slowly, turn out. Good. Then maybe you are sad to be leaving all your friends."

Caroline rotated to look at her. "Leaving my friends?"

Madame forced her back toward the mirror, pulled her arms into fifth position. "Yes. You will leave to marry your man, no?"

Caroline frowned. "Uh, no." She came down from her relevé.

Madame tapped the back of Caroline's leg and she rose back up on her toes. "Ah, so this is where you go against yourself."

"That's nonsense. Toby hasn't even asked me to marry him."

Caroline let go of the barre, spun once. Madame caught her by the waist, held her still, looked at her in the mirror. "A matter of time. He will ask."

Caroline looked down. Madame forced her chin up, straightened her shoulders. "You do not love your Toby like you once thought?"

Caroline moved to arabesque, came back down to fifth position, spun, and back to arabesque.

"Well?" Madame persisted.

Caroline sighed. "I love him so much. So much it hurts."

Madame pressed her lips together. "It hurts because you fight your own feelings."

Caroline came down, hands on hips, a frown on her face. "All this talk is very frustrating."

Madame scowled her best scowl and clapped her hands together sharply. "Discipline, young lady. You are in the middle of an exercise. You will not break concentration."

Caroline sighed, moved to the middle of the floor and waited for Madame to count.

"And one and two and begin, your turn, and..." Once Caroline was again proceeding through the choreographed movements, Madame started on her again. "You are frustrated with yourself. Toby *will* ask you to marry him. You will be denying yourself and him much

happiness if you do not accept his proposal." She shrugged. "But, that is your way."

Caroline didn't dare stop her movements, but spoke as she danced, breathing heavily. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"You are still the little girl whose mother beats her. You are a victim. You feel you deserve punishment. Somehow she convinced you that you do not deserve to feel happiness. You are a bad girl, Caroline. You do not deserve to be happy. Nothing must ever go your way. You must always struggle financially. You must be a victim. You must not feel how good it is to have a man's arms around you, to feel safe and secure in his embrace."

"That's ridiculous," Caroline said, panting.

"But true," Madame returned. "You feel you don't deserve happiness, you feel you don't deserve him. As long as you feel that way, God will oblige."

"He doesn't deserve me," she said softly. "I don't fit in. I would be a terrible wife, a horrible homemaker and who knows what kind of mother I would be to his children."

"*That* is what's ridiculous," Madame sang her words back to her.

They finished the dance in silence. Once Caroline curtsied to Madame, she moved to the window and peered out.

Madame fell in behind her, lightly touching Caro's shoulder. "Toby does not want you because you fit in. He wants you for who you are. He loves your soul. He does not marry a maid, he marries a dancer. You do not expect him to be a good homemaker and not sing, do you? No, you do not. And he does not expect that of you. You would be a wonderful wife, because you love him. Because he moves you in ways you never knew existed. Now, about the children…" She thought a moment. "I don't know what to say to make you see how good you are with children. You will be a wonderful mother, because you learn from others' mistakes and because you will remember."

When Caroline turned to face her, a tear escaped. She dashed it away with the back of her hand. "Ugh, I'm such a baby. I cry at the drop of a hat."

"You feel things deeply. There is no sin in that, little one."

"You're so good to me, Madame."

"I'm about to be even better to you."

Caroline sniffed. "What do you mean?"

"So, dear, have you thought about the fact that you will not be able

to stay here and teach for me and live in Nashville with your new husband at the same time?"

Hands on hips, Caroline scowled. "I didn't say I'd marry him yet."

Madame shooed her as if she were a bothersome fly. "Oh, pooh, girl, if you are the brilliant young lady I think you are, then I'm sure you will say 'yes' to him. And then what? You have told me you will teach for me, no?"

"Yes, I did, and really that's just one more reason to say 'no' to Toby. I won't let you down."

The older woman laughed. "If you say 'no', then you will most assuredly let me down."

Confused and frustrated, Caroline breathed a sigh. "Then what do you want me to do? Marry Toby or teach dance for you?"

"Both, little one. I will explain. There are so many children, children as you once were, who have no way of learning dance. There is only so much a single dance teacher can teach a child. So the children must come to New York, where the best teachers are, where we are always on the cutting edge. Unfortunately, there are many talented, dedicated children who cannot come to New York. So, I was thinking, let's bring New York to them! *New York's School of Dance* should become a chain, and we should begin in Nashville."

Stunned, Caroline listened as Madame described her plan.

"There is no one that I would trust more than you to run an efficient school for me in Nashville. The Nashville school will be used as a prototype. We shall measure all subsequent schools against the one in Nashville. Oh, it is so exciting, don't you think?"

Caroline was grinning. "I think it's a wonderful idea. I also think you must be crazy to believe I'm capable of running a school."

Madame shrugged. "You are quite capable of running the artistic aspects of the school. If you need an administrator to help you with business, then so be it."

"I don't know what to say. You bestow upon me a great honor."

"Say yes, little one. To me and your handsome man."

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Romans 8:28

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

# Chapter 12

As Caroline walked along the sidewalk back toward the diner she pondered the offer Madame made to her. It would be a wonderful opportunity to be Madame's right-hand man, so to speak. Madame must have a great deal more confidence in her than Caroline did in herself. Still, in order to be the headmistress of *Nashville's New York School of Dance*, Caroline would have to live in Nashville. And the whole reason for living in Nashville was because she would be married to Nashville's own, Toby Nash, a.k.a. Tobias Smith, and that brought her back to the original dilemma. Should she marry Toby?

Looking up as she neared her apartment building, her heart skipped a beat in anticipation of running into George, before she remembered that wouldn't be possible. She dreaded going up to her apartment where the man died, but her things were still there, and she needed to get her lime green dress. Toby was taking her out to dinner tonight and the green dress was the nicest she owned. If she'd had any money left over from her first and last poker game, she would simply buy a new dress instead of going inside that apartment, but there was no money left– story of her life. She drew a deep breath, turned right, headed up the stairs and pulled open the heavy green door.

Familiar sounds drifted from behind each door to meet her ears. A dog yapped, a baby cried, a couple argued, another laughed. The video game from behind her downstairs neighbors' apartment was clearly audible as was the music blaring from across the hall. She slowly walked up the stairs.

The yellow tape was still there. She pulled it down. Sgt. Sommers said she was free to retrieve her belongings whenever she wanted. She found her key, turned the lock and pushed the door open. Once inside, she silently closed the door but could move no farther. The dark stain in the middle of the hardwood floor caught her eye and held it. Shivering, she flipped on the overhead light. She ran her hands up and

down her arms, forcing herself to take in the remainder of the room.

Her lamp lay smashed into pieces on the floor against the far wall. Near the window, also on the floor, lay what was left of the two pictures she'd saved from childhood. Caroline moved around the stain and knelt to retrieve the picture of her mother and father by the beach. The frame was broken away, part of the finish scratched from a shard of glass, but it was salvageable. She leaned over and rescued the picture of the Stillwater children as well. Careful to avoid the blatant spot, she carried the items into the bedroom. She'd mistakenly thought all the action had taken place in the living room, but her bedroom was in shambles. Caroline swallowed hard as she surveyed the room.

Apparently, George had not been pleased to find her missing from her bed. The bedclothes were torn from the mattress and strewn around the room. Her few belongings had been swept from her dresser. A flashback of her mother's handiwork popped into her brain but she quickly pushed it away. Picking through the mess, she gathered dance attire, some clothes, shoes and underwear, went to the bathroom and grabbed what she hadn't originally packed of her personal items, and tossed everything into a dance bag. Her dress remained on a hanger, flung over her shoulder.

Then, as she turned to leave the room, she spotted the music box. The only thing she could remember her father ever giving her, lay smashed and broken beside the dresser. That music box, with its twirling ballerina, had been Caroline's inspiration to dance. Caroline sank to her knees, scooping up the tiny porcelain ballerina broken off at the ankles. She held it, cupped in her hands as if it were a tiny person, because maybe to her, it was. Despair overcame her. A teardrop landed on the face of the tiny dancer. Alone in her world, she hadn't heard her visitor come in.

Toby knelt beside her. Slowly, she looked up into his face. The compassion was there. The understanding. He brushed a tear away with his thumb. "Maybe you shouldn't have come here alone."

She sniffled. "I lived here alone for three years. I never thought—I didn't realize it was this bad."

Toby took a few moments to look around him. "Well, Princess, we could look on the positive side."

"What could possibly be positive about this?"

"How about the fact that you weren't here? I don't even want to imagine what'd been in store for you that night and I'm incredibly

grateful you weren't here, because you could have been badly hurt or even dead, and then I would be awaiting a real trial for murder."

Caroline grimaced at his words. "But here we are, speaking to each other, both alive and well. I guess there is a very positive side."

He pulled her to her feet. "Is there anything else you need to get?"

She shook her head. "Not right now, but I'll have to eventually. But I don't want to handle this now."

He nodded.

"How did you know I was here?"

"I was on my way to the diner and saw you coming home. You still feel like going out to dinner?"

She smiled. "Yes. I'm not gonna let George Mancini do another thing to mess up my life."

He smiled, raised her chin and softly kissed her lips. "Thatta girl." As he turned and glanced down at the floor, he saw something familiar. "Mutt-face!" He scooped up the small carving from the floor. "I can't believe you still have him."

"Of course I do. He and I have been through a lot together."

He rubbed his thumb over the small face of the dog.

"Keep him for now," Caroline offered. "So he doesn't get lost in this mess."

Toby nodded and held out his hand. "Come on, darlin'."

They stopped by the diner on their way back to the hotel.

"Well, well, well," Rosie declared as they came through the door. "If it isn't the celebrities."

"Nuh uh," Caroline disagreed. "He's the celebrity."

"Not hardly, Caro," Rosie argued. "You both hit *Entertainment Tonight* last evening and that's all our customers could talk about today at lunch."

Eugene emerged from the kitchen and kissed Caro's cheek. "You, young lady," he said sternly. "I'm glad everything turned out okay, but Rosie will tell you I was very mad at you."

Caroline looked at her feet while Toby asked the obvious.

"Well, little Caro here, told us she was going to see you and instead went to the police to confess murder," Eugene explained.

"So you guys knew she didn't do it?" Toby asked. "And you let her go through with it?"

Eugene jerked his thumb at Rosie. "It was our first fight. Apparently, little miss Caro here swore Rosie to secrecy and Rosie

extended that promise to include me."

Rosie shrugged. "I thought you would be on my side."

"While Caro sacrifices her freedom and happiness for her man?" Eugene laughed. "As a man, I think I can say that is not what we want from our women."

"Whatever are you talking about?" Rosie asked sarcastically.

"Choices, sweetheart," Eugene answered. "The right ones. Women, ya know, don't have to sacrifice themselves for someone else's happiness. We're supposed to be past all that. And I was not gonna stand by and let Caro take the rap for you. No offense, Toby."

"None taken. I was pretty much set against it myself."

"Well, anyway," Rosie said quickly, trying to change the subject. "Everything's okay now and that's all that matters."

"So have you two made up?" Caroline asked.

"What do you think?" Rosie giggled.

"I think it's time for Toby and me to say goodnight."

"Have fun," Rosie called as they headed out.

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They walked hand in hand down the street, their minds in very different places. Toby feeling grateful to have Caroline safely by his side, and Caroline trying to decide if she had the strength to turn Toby down when he asked her to marry him.

Toby looked up as they came upon an old, small, gray stone chapel. The sign out front read "Church of Christ," and Toby knew immediately they needed to stop in. He tugged on Caroline's hand, pointed to the large front door. "Wanna look inside?"

Caroline smiled, nodded. "Yes, let's do. Funny, I've never noticed this little church before."

They walked up three steps to the entrance. Though it was obviously an old building, a small wheelchair ramp had been added on one side. They went inside and were instantly charmed. They stood inside a small vestibule. The doors to the chapel were propped open. The aisle leading down to the pulpit was made of stone tiles, while the floor running under the polished wood benches was old hardwood. The front of the chapel was simple, a wooden pulpit, a large wooden cross on the wall, and to one side a small bench piano. A big vase of roses sat atop the piano.

Toby and Caroline made their way down the aisle and sat in the front row pew. It was very quiet, compared to the bustling street just
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outside the doors. There was a smell of furniture polish mixed with the floral scent of the flowers.

Caroline sighed. "This is lovely."

Toby nodded in agreement. They sat quietly for several minutes, but both looked up when a young man walked in from a door off to the left carrying an armful of hymnals. He stopped short when he saw he had visitors, nodded and smiled. "Hello!"

Toby stood. "Hello. I hope it's okay for us to be here."

"Of course it is." The man offered his hand. "I'm Matthew Lucas. I'm the pastor here."

Toby shook his hand and Caroline rose to do the same.

"Please feel free to sit awhile if you'd like."

Caroline sat back down. Toby remained standing.

"Is there something I can help you with?" Matthew asked.

"Well, Pastor Lucas," Toby began, "I'm thinking maybe there is, but I don't know exactly where to begin."

"Please, sit down, and you can call me Matthew. Now, why don't you start at the beginning, that's usually the best place to begin."

Matthew listened intently as Toby and Caroline got their story out, nodding his head in understanding to urge them on.

When they finished telling their story they were surprised to see tears in the eyes of the pastor.

Pastor Matthew dabbed at his eyes and laughed. "Oh Lord, you are so good ALL the time," he exclaimed. "Ya know, I don't know why I'm surprised, every time, but the evidence of God's workings always gets to me."

Toby and Caroline sat quietly, a shared expression of confusion on their faces.

The pastor went on. "So, after all that you've been through, your main question is, why would God bless you, Caroline, when others end up suffering, even dying." He laughed again. "Forgive me, but I have a story to tell you. You see that question is what brought me all the way across the country to pastor this little church. When I was fifteen years old I was a mess. My father had just died."

"I'm so sorry," Caroline offered immediately.

The pastor waved her off. "Thank you. It was a long time ago and it's okay, because it was a turning point in my life. It was a car accident. He was hit head on by a drunk driver. It just destroyed me. I was full of hatred and bitterness. I started skipping school, getting into

trouble. But, I had a good friend who decided he wasn't going to allow me to destroy my life completely. He too had lost a parent. He invited me over to his house over and over until I finally came.

"He'd wanted me to speak to his father, which I did. His father was a very spiritual guy. He understood when I asked why my father had to die and other people talked about their loved ones miraculously being saved. He understood because that was the same question he'd asked when he learned that his wife was dying of cancer. Like I said, he was very spiritual. He had a very close relationship with God, so he just couldn't understand why God would not answer his prayer and give his wife the healing he was begging for.

"He told me how he first cried to God, and then yelled at God things like, 'Why won't you hear me? Why is this happening? What can I do?' One night after asking those questions and feeling nothing, he started running. He ran for miles. He ran until he collapsed and lay flat on his back. He was calmer, quieter, and he asked again, 'Please, Father, tell me what I can do,' and the answer came, loud and clear inside his head. 'There is nothing you can do.'"

"His first thought was to not accept that answer. He'd been taught to never give up. But this time, he felt a surety in his soul that it was out of his hands. He was powerless. He told me he learned that there are times when you must never give up, and there are times when you must accept that there are some things you cannot control. He asked again, why this is, and the answer came.

"God has a plan. A plan for each of us, yet it's not the same plan for each of us. Some must learn how to handle tragedy, others have to learn to love, to forgive, to do away with bitterness, this is how we grow and evolve. Still, there are so many equations involved that it's impossible to make a blanket statement. For example, not all accidents or all diseases are part of a plan. Sometimes another's choice interferes in God's plan. Sometimes, we bring hard things on ourselves in one way or another. Or perhaps, sometimes the plan changes. Everything is adaptable. Sometimes, there may be a miracle cure, and sometimes there is not. We may cry to God, why would He save one and let another die? It's all about free will, the plan you chose before you came to this earth. Yet, there is a constant in every single instance. That constant is that each time, each life, each plan, is an opportunity to grow and evolve.

"My friend's father taught me, that it's difficult for some to accept

that the death of a loved one could ever be a 'good' or 'positive' thing. That's still thinking from a human perspective. If you don't have some kind of inkling of how eternal our beings are, then the loss of a loved one is devastating and would make us inconsolable. Even with an inkling, for example, many people of faith in many religions, they teach others about our eternal souls, yet though they speak from faith, when one of their loved ones passes, their faith is sorely tested, and understandably so.

"God's plan for you, Caroline, didn't involve what that man had planned for you. For me, God's plan was to meet the man who changed my life. After spending time with him, I knew I wanted to do God's work, to help others understand the eternity of our souls, and to help them return to God through Jesus Christ our Lord."

"Does your friend's father have his own church too?" Toby asked.

Pastor Matthew laughed softly. "You wouldn't believe it, but no. This man is actually a martial arts instructor, a famous one. You might have heard of him, Grandmaster Eric Kino."

Toby and Caroline both gasped and then laughed. "I guess we're about to get you all teared up again," Toby said. "Because that good friend of yours, whom I assume is Ricky Kino, is also a very good friend of mine."

The tears did indeed start again. The pastor laughed through his tears. "God is so awesome. See how He works! Praise You Father!"

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"You look beautiful," Toby uttered as he entered Caro's room.

He wanted tonight to be perfect. He'd gone to a great deal of trouble and expense, but that didn't matter. For Caroline it had to be perfect. She wore her green dress. The one she'd worn when they'd gone out with the guys in the band and she was beautiful. Of course, she would have been beautiful in jeans and a t-shirt.

Nervously she smoothed the front of her dress. "Are you sure? I know it's the same dress I wore before. I have a limited wardrobe," she added apologetically.

Toby circled her with his arms. "You could go naked and I wouldn't care."

"Isn't that just like a man."

The words were not said in jest and Toby's brow furrowed. "I'm just kidding, Caroline. Are you lookin' for an argument?"

She sighed. "Maybe. Just maybe."
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"And why is that?"

She shook her head. Changed the subject. Spoke about the weather. That had Toby worried. He had a feeling she was trying to tell him something. Something he didn't want to hear. He would not take the hint though, nor was he gonna make it easy for her. She'll have to come out and say whatever it is she has to say and he isn't gonna guarantee he won't have something to say right back.

He took her arm. "Come on, darlin', I'm starved, and you are beautiful," he whispered.

They arrived at *Greenwoods Castle*, an exclusive restaurant in the heart of Manhattan. Caroline was surprised to find they were ushered through the main dining area and into an elevator. When the doors opened, she squealed. "The roof? We're on the roof? Oh, my. I can't believe it."

She gazed around her at the setting of a wooded glen, flanked by torches. Flowers were everywhere. The gurgling of a fountain announced its existence as the water cascaded over the rocks and ferns. Toby ushered her to the edge to peer down at the city. "This is amazing," she purred.

"Yes it is," he agreed, his eyes roaming over her face. He tilted her chin up. "Your face glows brighter than the candlelight. You remind me of an angel that hangs on our Christmas tree each year. Ah, Caroline, do you realize how much I care for you? How much I love you, darlin'?"

She tried to look down, but he held her chin, with his fingers. "Tell me, do you know I love you? Do you know I always have? Since you were twelve."

She nodded. "You've proven that, Toby, over and over. And don't think that I don't know I'm a very lucky girl to have your love. I really don't deserve it."

He frowned. "You deserve everything in this world that's good and wonderful."

"You're biased," she laughed nervously.

Beautiful music began to play. Caroline looked over, to a raised platform, expecting to find a sound system. Instead, she found Billy-Bob playing a violin and mandolin. They smiled at her and she blew them a kiss.

"Toby, you brought your own musicians?" Her voice choked with emotion. "I can't believe what trouble you've gone through to make this

evening special."

"Dance with me, Caroline."

He took her in his arms, moving slowly with the music. His hands caressed her back. His head bent to whisper in her ear. "It feels so good to have you in my arms."

She smiled up at him. He couldn't resist. He came to a stop, and kissed her. Incredibly, every time he did, he sank immediately into a fathomless abyss of passion. He lost all sense of time and place. When she moaned with pleasure, it brought him back to awareness and he backed away.

"Oh woman, the things you do to me, it's unbelievable. We'd better sit and eat before I forget where we are."

He ushered her to a chair. The moment he sat, a waiter appeared at his side, flourishing champagne and glasses. Caroline cautiously took a sip. She'd allowed herself to drink only once at a friend's wedding. She supposed this was as good a time as any.

"Do you like it?" Toby asked.

"Um, yes, I think so. I mean, it's not as sweet as I thought it would be, but it's okay."

"I can get you something else."

"No, it's okay. I think I like it just fine."

They never ordered food. A selection of gourmet dishes simply materialized in front of them, the delicious aromas enticing their appetites. They didn't hold back. Toby watched her sample the new foods, sip her champagne. She'd had so little experience in life and yet so much. She'd experienced more sorrow and pain than anyone should have to and yet she'd be the first to say it wasn't so bad. However, she'd had very few pleasures. Well, he intended to change all that.

He'd intended to begin his proposal over dessert, but she "oohed" and "ahhed" over her chocolate mousse, licking the spoon and her fingers and he had to wait for her to finish so he could concentrate.

"Caroline, you make everything fun, even eating dessert."

She shrugged. "Sorry. I'm probably being a pig, but it's sooo good," she said with a giggle.

Toby smiled at her. "I suppose this is a far cry from the meals you're used to eating, huh?"

"Hm, let's see, I'd say yes. Yes, duck l'orange is quite different from ramen noodles and peanut butter."

He smiled. "You know, you don't ever have to eat ramen noodles

ever again, if you don't want to."

She frowned. "Actually, I have no problem eating ramen noodles. I like them."

"That's what I love about you, Caroline. You're so unspoiled. It makes me want to give you everything."

"Really?" she giggled wickedly. "How about a brand-new car?"

"Done," he offered quickly. Too quickly.

"I was just teasing," she said.

"Well I'm not, Caroline. What I'm doin' is a very poor job of trying to ask you something."

She finished off her glass and held it out for more. "Yes, you are."

"Yes, I am what?" he asked as he refilled her glass.

"Doing a very poor job."

He breathed a sigh, took her hand. "Caroline, I love you more than life itself and I want to give you everything. Yes, a car. And a new dress if you want one. A hundred new dresses. And food. And I want you to never have to worry about paying your rent again. I want to take care of you. I want to make you happy, baby. I want you next to me, all the time. I want to share my life with you, Caroline."

She'd been feeling a little tipsy, but immediately sobered, listening intently. It was happening and unfortunately, she still didn't have an answer.

"I want to make love to you at night and wake up in the morning and do it again. I want to talk with you and share my innermost feelings with you and just be with you. Caroline, say you'll marry me. Make me the happiest man in the world and say you'll be my wife."

She set her glass down and stared into his eyes. "I..." Make the sacrifice, she told herself. Do the right thing and make the sacrifice.

"Yes? You what?"

She sighed. "No."

He sat, letting the word register in his heart. He wanted to beg. No, he wouldn't beg. Would he? He ran his hand through his thick black hair. "No?"

She drew a deep breath. "No," she confirmed, feeling stronger. "No, Toby. I won't marry you."

He would beg after all.

In an instant, Toby scrambled to his knees on the floor in front of her, opened his mouth to speak but closed it. His head bowed, his hand ran through his hair. When he looked up, his eyes were moist. When he

spoke, his voice was thick with emotion.

"Why?"

"Why?" she asked nervously.

"Yes, Caroline, why? It makes no sense."

"It does make sense. I just don't know how to explain it to you."

"Then you're serious?"

"Yes."

He gazed at her face, had to clear his throat. "You have a way of breaking me, Caroline."

"Oh, Toby, I promise, that is not my intention," she answered softly, reaching down to take his hand.

"Well then, I'm begging you to reconsider."

Lips pressed together in a firm line, she slowly shook her head. Her light blond hair fell softly across her cheek. He reached up to brush it back— and she flinched.

"Son of a..." He stood, stormed away and turned abruptly, fire raging in his eyes. Glancing in the direction of Billy-Bob, he snapped his fingers and pointed. It required only a few seconds for them to take their leave.

"You wanna tell me what that was all about?" Toby snapped. His deep voice did not sound broken any longer.

She shrugged. "It happens sometimes. You know that."

"It hasn't happened between the two of us since you were a kid. What's going on in your head?"

"I'm not sure. I really don't know where that came from. Maybe it's the drink. Don't be angry."

"Well, I am angry, Caroline. You're driving me crazy. You must know I would never hurt you. Never."

She went to him. "Yes, I do know that. I feel safe with you. I always have. I think you're the only person in my entire life who's ever made me feel safe."

"So, I make you feel safe," he paused and brushed her hair back. "That should tell you something, Caroline."

Her eyes lowered and he used his finger to raise her chin. "Okay, listen, do you realize how much I love you?"

She nodded. "You've made it evident. It's hard for me to believe someone, anyone, could love me that much, but I don't doubt your love for me. Not any longer."

He held her and kissed her. Holding her head in his hands, he took

her mouth fiercely. He lifted his head. "And you love me, Caroline. I know it. I can feel it in your kiss, in how your body responds to me."

She looked into his cobalt blue eyes, still breathing heavily from the kiss. "That was never the question."

He stepped away. "Then what? I must be an idiot, because I can't figure it out. I love you, and you love me and I cannot think of one reason why you and I shouldn't be together, and please don't say something stupid like you're not good enough for me or you aren't capable of being a good wife."

She stood there, stone-faced, thinking over his words.

Silently, he watched her, realization dawning in his brain; that was exactly what she'd been thinking. "You're kidding?"

She shivered. "You make it sound so silly."

He nodded his head. "That's because it is– and I mean that in the nicest way." He approached her and took her in his arms. "Caroline..."

She interrupted. "I watched you with your family. I don't fit in."

"You fit in just fine."

"I've never had to take care of a household."

"You mean cookin' and cleanin'? Stuff like that?"

"Yes, stuff like that," she sighed.

"All I ever see you do is clean. I don't think you realize what you know. Who took care of your mother and you when you were little? Who did the cookin'? Who cleaned your home? Who took care of Paul and Lynn Stillwater so well, fed them dinner, cleaned up after them?"

"I guess I did."

"Darn straight, you did."

She was silent.

"But you know what? None of that matters. I don't care if the dishes pile up to the ceiling and our feet make prints in the dust, Caroline, Princess, I'll do whatever it takes to make you see we were meant to be together. I'll do anything to make you happy. We'll hire a housekeeper. We'll live anywhere you want. Would you like to live here, in New York? Done. Wanna live in Atlanta where you grew up? Done. China? Done. Well, maybe not China, but just say you'll marry me and I promise we'll work out the small stuff. But don't say 'no,' baby, please. We've come through way too much."

"You'd live in New York for me?"

He frowned. "Yes."

She laughed. "You look like a little boy who's just been asked to

wash up for supper."

"Well, it's no secret I love the country life, but if you wanna live in New York..."

She stopped him. "No, Toby. I love the farm."

"You do?"

"Yes, but," she began as she grimaced.

"But what?"

"It's not our home. It's your parents' home."

His eyes sparkled with excitement. "We would build. We have hundreds and thousands of acres. We could build maybe down by the creek. Would you like that? Would you like to build your own home?"

She grinned. "Oh, that would be wonderful, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, it would. Let's do it, Caroline. For you, anything goes."

"A home for you and me, that would be a dream come true," she sighed. "And I do love you so, and I know you love me."

"Then your answer is 'yes?' You'll marry me? I mean, it sounds to me like you're saying 'yes.'"

She looked up into his eyes. What she saw there made her feel her reservations had indeed been silly. Suddenly she felt as if a giant weight had been lifted from her. Madame was right. The correct decision would make her feel happy and excited. She smiled. "I was prepared to turn you down for all the silly reasons you said, but, yes, Toby, I'll marry you."

He hollered like a cowboy at the rodeo, picked her up and swung her around.

"But Toby, I don't want you to think I'm saying 'yes' because you'll build me a house."

"I know..."

She raised a hand to stop him. "Wait. I want you to know, that I'm marrying you because I love you, Toby, with all my heart. I'd been thinking that I wasn't good for you, that I didn't fit in, but you made that sound so silly. I want to do the right thing, Toby, and I think marrying you is the right thing. I want to make you happy."

"Oh, Caroline, you have made me a very happy man."

"I hope that feeling continues," she said apprehensively.

"You have to stop that."

"Stop what?"

"Worrying and stressing about everything. Live here, in the present, with me. Be happy in the present moment with me. Whatever

problems we have in the future, we'll work through together. It's all gonna be great. Oh, I almost forgot."

He pulled her back to the table, sat her down, reached in his pocket and pulled out a small, black, velvet box. Toby placed the box in her hand. "Go ahead. Open it."

She did so slowly. She'd not worn one ounce of jewelry since the day her mother jerked the earrings from her. She drew in a breath. The ring was tiny, white gold, with one bright diamond winking up at her in the candlelight.

She gazed at Toby. He shrugged. "If you don't like it, we can exchange it. It reminded me of you. Small and utterly feminine, yet strong enough to stand alone."

"I love it." With tears in her eyes, she removed it from the box.

"Here, let me," Toby said, taking the ring and sliding it smoothly onto her finger.

He pulled her to her feet. "A lifetime of sharing every moment with you. I can't believe I've been so blessed to have you. I thank God you were brought back into my life. Ya know what, I mean, really, I truly want to thank God, right now, like Pastor Matthew did earlier today. Do you mind?"

A little confused, she nodded her head.

Toby took her hands in his and spoke softly. "Dear Father, I am so very grateful for you bringing me this beautiful daughter of yours to be my wife and companion. She is the angel you used, Father, to bring me back to you. I want to start this whole marriage thing out right, so Father, I'm asking for your blessing on our union. Help me to be the best husband for her, and if we are blessed with babies, help me to be the best dad. And she's worried about that, so help her to be the best mom ever. I ask a blessing upon Caroline, that she will come to know you, though I believe she already does, and she will be blessed with confidence and that she will feel your eternal love, in Jesus' name we pray, Amen."

"I love you so much, Toby. You really are my knight in shining armor." She went up on her toes to kiss him.

Softly, his lips touched hers. He pulled away, cherishing the moment, then kissed her again, before pulling her close and hugging her to his chest. They remained in the embrace a long time.

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Lt. Veranza smiled as he tucked the picture of Tracy Chastain into
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the growing file on the George Mancini homicide. Young Sherry had picked her out of a photo lineup and soon, they would be on their way to Nashville to question the beautiful socialite. Rising, he went down the corridor and stuck his head into his captain's office. "Hey, Cap. So are we ready to roll?"

The Captain nodded. "E-tickets have been issued. You'll be meeting with Nashville Deputies Wallace and Stone. They'll escort you to the Chastains'."

Veranza tipped an invisible hat. "On my way. Sommers will be only too happy to get out of the city for a while."

"Yeah, well, you guys be careful and stay out of trouble and off the news. Got it?"

"Loud and clear," Lt. Veranza said, his hand raised in salute.

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Caroline discovered that the Green Room for *The Mike Bitters Show* was just like all the others she'd been in, not green. Toby had his own dressing room, but he and Caroline had decided to take a tour of the place. They found Toby's band members gobbling up doughnuts in the Green Room. They chatted briefly, had a quick snack themselves and were heading out when Ricky Kino came in.

"Toby!" Ricky exclaimed, holding out his hand.

Toby took the offered hand with a big smile on his face. "Rick, good to see ya, man." He turned to Caroline and introduced her.

Red-faced, Caroline murmured a hello. She knew Ricky Kino was a big movie star but she hadn't expected his presence to be so overwhelming. He was certainly gorgeous enough. Shorter than Toby but every bit as built. His longish black hair skimmed his shoulders. His dark eyes were warm and friendly, his smile kind. He had an aura, a presence of extreme power, that she found very unsettling. His question stopped her musings.

"So, the story on the news, is it fairly accurate?" Ricky asked.

"Surprisingly accurate," Toby said.

Ricky shook his head. "Man, I'll tell ya, you two are something." He zeroed in on Caroline. "So, you're from Atlanta, huh?"

Caroline's brow furrowed. "Yes, I grew up there. Why?"

"My, uh, step-sister, Bree, she thinks she might know you."

"Bree?"

"Yeah, see my father married a woman from Atlanta, Shelley Adams. Her daughter's name is Bree, Breanna Adams. She says she
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remembers you from some middle school dance club she was in. Said you came from the high school to help them learn some choreography for a competition and that you called yourself Caro."

Toby glanced down at Caroline's surprised look.

"I did help a middle school dance team for a short time. I think I remember Bree, but just barely. Long, brown hair, very pretty, right?"

He smiled fondly. "Sounds like her."

Caro nodded thoughtfully. "She was in middle school and I was a freshman in high school. I volunteered to help choreograph a few shows for them. I remember her mom too, because she helped with the costumes. So Bree's mom married your father?"

"Yep. Best thing that ever happened to him, besides me of course," he said with a grin. "Anyway, it's amazing to me sometimes how small the world is."

Caroline felt Toby squeeze her hand and looked up at his face. "It is, isn't it?" she said.

"Speaking of small worlds," Toby started. "Do you remember a guy named Matthew Lucas?"

"Matt? Yeah, he's a good friend of mine. We actually went to high school together."

"Well, Caroline and I met him yesterday. He's pastoring a church near where Caroline used to live."

"Yeah, my dad made a big donation to help him get a church going. We asked him why it had to be in New York and he said New York was a den of iniquity and needed him more. Ya know, Jesus said, 'I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'"

Toby smiled. "Well, Matt is a great guy, and he really helped us, and he said it was your father and you who really helped him."

Ricky nodded. "I'm glad to hear he's doing well and that he helped you. It really is a small world."

"So, Ricky, you'll have to tell Bree and her mom that I said hello," Caroline put in.

"Most definitely." Ricky agreed as he looked from one face to the other and grinned. "Ya know, you two have it bad. Hey, I gotta get dressed, but Toby, we're gonna have to get together. Why don't you guys make your way out to LA next month?"

Toby smiled. "We just might do that." He offered his hand. "Always good to see ya, Rick."

"Backatcha." Ricky took Caroline's hand. "A pleasure to meet

you, Caro. Toby is a very lucky man."

"Thank you," Caroline said, blushing.

They watched him walk away.

"He's larger than life, huh?" Toby asked with a smile.

"Hm? Oh— yes. He sort of takes your breath away, doesn't he?"

Toby laughed. "I think I'm jealous."

"Very funny, but I have to admit, there is something about him."

"Yeah there is. He's one of the good guys."

"He looks so young. How old is he?"

"Mid-twenties, I think. Why?"

She shrugged. "He just has an energy about him that would make me think he's much older."

Toby nodded. "I agree. He's younger than me, but I have huge respect for him. He's like a ball of light and energy."

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Caroline smiled at her fiancé as he moved across the stage to shake hands with the host of the show, Mike Bitters. Mike smiled at Toby as if they were best friends, yet Caroline knew they'd met only a short time ago.

Mike tried time and again to get Toby to talk about George Mancini and the night he died. Toby tried to tell him he couldn't say too much because it was an ongoing investigation. Finally though, Toby did tell the story of the time he'd caught George beating up Caroline and how he'd had to take care of business. Caroline was amazed at how the violent story seemed to appease the audience.

They talked about Toby's family, about his band and somehow got back to Toby and Caroline lying to the cops. Toby successfully maneuvered out of that and focused in on what he really wanted to talk about: Caroline. In front of the entire world, Toby confessed his love for her and announced their engagement. Thankfully, it wasn't quite a "Tom Cruise" moment, but still, Caroline was pretty red-faced when Mike Bitters directed the cameras so that Toby's adoring public could get a glimpse of the woman who'd stolen his heart.

Finally, Toby moved to the other side of the stage set where his guitar sat shining in the light. The other members of his band were there. Ace held out his hand, Toby clasped it. They nodded at each other. Jeff saluted with his sticks, Billy-Bob smiled and the rest of the guys picked up their instruments.

They flew into a fast-paced piece that had the audience going.
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Toby strutted across the stage, very much at home performing. Caroline thrilled. She'd never seen him like this. In command. Every female in the audience lusting after him. His voice rolled over the notes. He wasn't playing his instrument, only held the microphone, however, he was playing the audience. The tight-knit shirt he wore showed off his bulging biceps and muscular chest. The black Stetson gave an air of mystery. The jeans did what they were supposed to do, only Caroline wasn't so sure she liked the effect they were having on the female assemblage.

He was interacting with the members of the band. He and Ace did a short two-step together. He got between two female back-up singers who kissed him on his cheeks. The crowd was screaming by the time the number came to an end. Toby immediately jumped down to her.

"Hey, darlin'. Not much longer now." He kissed her cheek, his breath coming fast.

"I'm in no hurry, Toby. I love watching you perform."

He grinned. "Yeah? Well, we'll have to plan a little private performance, just for you."

He looked up. They were motioning to him. "We've got one more number to do and we're outta here." He jumped back on the stage, moved to a stool and picked up the guitar. He wiped his brow on his shirt causing the girls in the audience to squeal. Caroline rolled her eyes. She wanted to turn around and inform them that it's only sweat, but she held her tongue. She realized she felt a twinge of jealousy, though why should she? After all, he was hers, she thought as she smiled with satisfaction.

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"You are so beautiful. I can't believe how much I love you."

She blinked. "Ah, but will you still feel that way when I'm old and fat?"

"You'd better believe it, and stop doing that."

"You mean questioning your love? Sorry."

They'd come straight back to Caroline's room at the hotel after Toby's performance and sat down on the bed. There was a kiss, another, and next thing they knew they were lying on their sides facing each other whispering dreams, making plans, reveling in each other's company. Caroline used her finger to draw patterns on his chest. "When do you have to leave?"

He sighed. "First thing in the morning. I have two early shows to
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do in New York before I have to hightail it to Chicago. I have one show there and then have to fly out the next morning headed to Nashville to do a few local shows. I owe them my allegiance."

"You're gonna be awfully tired, aren't you?" Caroline asked.

Toby shrugged. "I can't be worried about being tired. I'm just grateful my career isn't quite over yet."

"Me too," Caroline agreed.

Toby stroked her arm. "Listen, I know I said we would build our own home in Nashville, but I was thinking, Princess, if you're gonna teach for Madame Pierre, we're gonna need a place to live here in New York, too. When I get back from Nashville, would you like to go apartment hunting?"

She sighed. "Toby, thank you for being so thoughtful. Thank you, but it's not necessary."

"Not necessary? You're an amazingly talented dancer and teacher. You can't just throw that away."

She snuggled closer to him. "I have no intention of throwing it away. Madame Pierre had a surprise for me."

"A surprise? What?"

"She wants me to help her open a *New York School of Dance* annex— in Nashville."

Toby grinned, pushed her over on her back and looked down into her eyes. "Wow, that's wonderful, Caroline. Are you happy?"

"Very. Unbelievably." She sighed with pleasure. "Now, tell me the rest of your plans. How long will you be in Nashville? When will I be leaving New York?"

"That all depends on one thing."

"What's that?" she asked.

"When do you want to get married?"

She pursed her lips and thought, her eyes lighting up when she had her answer. "How about New Year's Day?"

He smiled. "I think that is a wonderful idea."

"But I want to come to Nashville with you as soon as possible so we can make plans and start on our home."

"You've got it, darlin'. The very minute I finish up the scheduled talk shows, I'll hightail it back here in my Explorer to collect the most important person in my life."

She smiled, but apprehensively chewed on her lip. Her life was about to change dramatically.

He touched her nose. "I don't think I like the look on your face. Tell me you're not having second thoughts."

"No, Toby. No second thoughts. I've done too much thinking as it is. It's just that I'm gonna miss you so much while you're gone."

"It'll only be seven days, tops."

"Seven days! That sounds like an eternity."

"It'll go by fast, darlin'. You've got to make the rounds and say goodbye to all your friends."

Caroline thought a moment. "You're right, I do. And I also have a lot of work to do."

"Work?"

"Yeah," she said as she yawned. "I need to box up and pack everything in my apartment."

"Are you sure you're up to that?"

She smiled. "I'm positive."

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Genesis 2:24

"Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."

# Chapter 13

An older woman opened the door. Her dark eyes did not look kindly on the four men who had the audacity to arrive at her employer's home without prior notice. "May I help you?" the woman asked haughtily.

"Yes, ma'am," Officer Wallace said, assuming the lead role. "We would like to speak with Tracy Chastain, please."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," the woman answered quickly. "Miss Chastain is indisposed and cannot be disturbed."

"Well, ma'am, I'm sorry but I'm afraid you're going to have to disturb her. We're here on official business," Officer Wallace said as he flashed his badge.

The woman sighed heavily. "Excuse me a moment," she said as she closed the door.

Patiently, they waited the few minutes it took for her to return. She opened the door. "You may come in," she declared. "Wait here." She turned and left them standing in the large foyer.

"This place is somethin'," Sgt. Sommers murmured after the woman left. "It's hard to believe people actually live this way."

The others only nodded their heads in agreement.

"May I be of assistance to you?" an older gentleman asked as he approached, offering his hand. "I'm Harrison Chastain."

"Mr. Chastain, I'm Deputy Wallace and this is Deputy Stone from the Nashville Sheriff's Department." He motioned toward the other two men. "And this is Detective Veranza and Detective Sommers from the New York Police Department. We're here to speak with your daughter, Tracy."

The man seemed extremely bothered by this news. He motioned toward a room to the right. "Come in."

They moved into a spacious room, possibly a study, since a large cherry desk was the prominent piece of furniture. A deer trophy with a huge rack hung over the desk. The detectives noticed crystal

chandeliers, imported rugs, rich cherry paneling, and a complete wet bar. They were offered a seat, which they accepted, and a drink, which they did not. That didn't keep Chastain from having one himself.

Harrison turned, drink in hand. "So, what business do you have with my daughter?"

"I'm afraid we're gonna have to take that up with her, Mr. Chastain," Officer Wallace said.

"Come now, gentlemen, I'm thinking that maybe you don't understand exactly who I am."

"I know who you are, sir. I understand your importance and prominence in our community, but I'm afraid this is quite serious and we must follow protocol and speak with your daughter."

"Look, fellows, what's she gone and gotten herself into now? You say you're from New York?" he questioned, motioning to the two detectives. "She have some kind of fender bender while she was there? Outstanding parking tickets?"

"Not that we know of," Lt. Veranza answered.

"Then what? Drugs? Did she buy some pot, or maybe cocaine? I assure you, I can make those things go away."

"Sir," Deputy Wallace began. "Lt. Veranza and Sgt. Sommers are homicide detectives."

"Homicide?"

"Yes, sir."

Harrison Chastain turned abruptly, went to the window, stared out. When he turned back, his face was red with rage. "If you're trying to associate my daughter with what happened up there with that Tobias Smith, you're wasting your time. He's poison. Did he send you here? Is he trying to clear his own name by involving Tracy? I swear I'll see he pays for this."

"Mr. Chastain," Sommers began, "Toby Nash did not send us here. Your daughter was placed at the scene by a witness. She was picked out of a photo lineup. We really need to speak with her. It will be best if you cooperate."

"This is absurd. I most certainly will not cooperate with you. How dare you come into my home and try to associate my daughter with anything he did."

Lt. Veranza decided to speak up, keeping his voice and mannerisms calm. "It would be better for Tracy to speak to us here instead of having to go down to the station."

"I'm sure there is a perfectly good explanation for her being placed at the scene, as you say," Mr. Chastain barked.

"If so, then all we need to do is hear that explanation *from her*."

"Do you think I just fell off the turnip wagon? Absolutely not. I will not just let..."

"It's okay, Daddy," Tracy Chastain said as she entered the room with a flourish.

The four officers turned to gaze at her. She was breathtakingly beautiful. She definitely fit the description given. Her long, black hair, painstakingly styled as if she were about to walk the ramp in the Miss Tennessee Pageant, bounced in voluptuous curls as she walked. Her silk blouse was open to show a hint of cleavage. She wore matching peach-colored linen slacks, creased perfectly. Makeup was artfully and tastefully applied and diamonds sparkled at her ears and throat.

"Tracy, go back upstairs. You don't have to take this. I want a lawyer. She refuses to speak to you without our attorney present."

"I said it's okay, Daddy. For once, just stay out of it. I don't need an attorney because I have nothing to hide. The officers are absolutely correct, I was there."

"We know you were in New York, darling. That doesn't mean you had anything to do with the murder they're trying to link to you."

"But I did have something to do with it, Daddy. It wasn't a murder, but I was there. And I am definitely involved in the death of that horrible man."

"Tracy, how can that be?"

"Because, I killed him, that's how. Now, Daddy, please leave and let me speak to the officers."

"Tracy, this is absolutely absurd. Don't you dare try to protect that man. He's done nothing but cause you trouble."

"Toby's done nothing but be honest, Daddy. And now, that's what I'm trying to be. Toby wasn't even in New York when I pushed that man. I know, because I learned when he was flying out of Nashville and purposefully took an earlier flight." She turned to the detectives. "I went there to speak with Caroline. I went to tell her the truth."

"Hold on, Miss Chastain, we need to read you your rights," the Lieutenant said quickly.

Tracy impatiently nodded as she listened and then nodded. "Yes, I understand and yes I'll speak to you."

"Very well. So, you said you went to Caroline Jones' apartment?"

"Yes. I wanted to tell her the truth."

"What truth is that, Miss Chastain?" Lt. Veranza asked kindly.

"That I wasn't pregnant." She turned back to look at her father at his gasp. She sighed. "When Toby and I broke up, I was hurt and vindictive. I told him and his new girlfriend that I was pregnant. It broke them up and I thought that would make me happy." She shrugged. "It didn't. I was miserable. I don't have it in me, Daddy. I don't have it in me to be like you."

She ignored his red face and plowed on. "I'd heard from a friend of a friend that they were going to be spending July fourth together and try to work things out. I decided to make amends and thought I should do it face to face. I flew to New York and took a cab to Caroline's apartment. It was late. About one in the morning, but Caroline wasn't there when I arrived."

"Was anybody there?" Sommers asked.

"Oh yes. That man."

"George Mancini?"

"Yes, I mean, I suppose that's his name. I've heard it on the news enough lately."

"Tell us what happened," Veranza prompted.

"Tracy, don't say anything. Let me get Cresswell on the phone."

"You can call him later, Daddy. I don't need an attorney present to tell the truth." She turned back to her audience.

"The door was slightly open and I stepped in and oh my Lord, the place was wrecked."

"Wrecked? How?"

"There was stuff broken all over the floor. A lamp I think. There was a baseball bat lying in the middle of the room. It looked as if someone had taken the bat and smashed things up."

"Did you see George?"

"Not at first. He was in the other room. He came out when he heard me call Caroline's name."

"Can you describe him?"

"He was a skinny, short man with greasy black hair and a mustache and he was extremely drunk."

The detectives glanced at each other.

"He could barely walk. He staggered around, cursing Caroline. He frightened me." Tracy stopped and ran her hands up and down her arms to relieve the shivering that had begun.

"Then what, Tracy? What happened next?"

"He asked me who I was. He asked me if I was a friend of Caroline's, and he asked me where she was. I told him I had no idea. He walked toward me saying something like, I would do in a pinch. He grabbed me by the arms, but I was able to pull away." She stopped and took a breath.

"Did he have a weapon?"

She shook her head. "No. Well, not that I could see."

"What did you do?"

"I backed toward the door. I remember thinking that I hope the cab driver actually waited like I'd requested. Anyway, the man lunged for me and I pushed him away and when I did, he sort of stumbled back and he slipped on the baseball bat that was in the middle of the floor. His feet went out from under him and he hit his head on that old-fashioned radiator."

Bingo. She got it right. Lt. Veranza smiled. "How did you push him? Can you push me like you did him?"

Tracy placed her hands against the officer's chest and pushed.

"Just like that?"

"Yes. I didn't mean to kill him. I didn't even know that I had until later when I heard it on the news. I swear I didn't know he died. I remember hoping, as I ran down the steps, that he was hurt badly enough to slow him down."

"And you ran back to the cab? Was it still there?"

"Yes. I was frightened. I thought I'd made a mistake about trying to make things right. I was so confused."

"Which is why you didn't speak up when we arrested Toby?"

"Oh, I would have eventually. Really I would. If he had gone to trial, I would have turned myself in."

"And I suppose the same goes for when we had Miss Jones in custody?" Sergeant Sommers asked.

She nodded and then turned to her father. "I'm sorry, Daddy. I didn't mean to be so much trouble."

Her father ignored her. "You have nothing other than her word that she was even there," he said to the officers.

Veranza nodded. "Well, sir, her word is good enough seeing as how she's the only one who actually knew the cause of death. And there's a record of her flight, and like I said, we have a witness who will be able to identify her."

"And you have this," Tracy said, holding out a piece of paper. "I picked it up off the floor when I first walked into the apartment."

Lt. Veranza took the paper and read it. It was a note from Caroline to Toby telling him where she'd gone, asking him to understand and promising they would talk soon.

Chastain paced back and forth. "What happens now?"

"Her statement is in agreement with the evidence. She may be asked to appear before a grand jury, but if so, I have a feeling they will dismiss her."

"She's not going anywhere."

"Daddy, you can't protect me forever. Call Mr. Cresswell and he can go with me when the time comes. It's gonna be okay."

The man turned back to the officers. "I promise you I will be looking into this with your superiors."

"I understand that, sir," Deputy Wallace stated. He continued to make that same statement several times through the tirade that ensued.

All four men were relieved when they were able to walk out into the sunshine, leaving the self-important Harrison Chastain blubbering about lawsuits and dismissals.

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Caroline accompanied Toby to the morning shows he was scheduled to appear at in New York. It was tremendous fun for her even though Toby promised the novelty would wear off quickly.

As they waited in the green room for Toby, Caroline was giddy with excitement. "How about a quick game of poker?" she asked Jeff.

"No way, darlin'," he whined. "I know when to take my marbles and go home."

"Fine," Caroline pouted. "But remember, you won't be able to avoid me forever."

"So I hear," Jeff smiled. "I want you to know, Caroline, I, uh, I mean, well, I'm pretty fond of Toby."

She laughed. "Aw, come on, Jeff, you can say it. You *love* him."

He shrugged. "Yeah. What you said. But really, he's the best friend in the world, and I'm, like, really happy and all that the two of you found each other."

Caroline's eyes were wide with surprise. "Those are mighty mushy words coming from a drummer."

Jeff shrugged. "If you tell Toby what I said I'll deny it."

Caroline smiled. "Your secret's safe with me."
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Jeff leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Ya know, Caroline, you're a good girl."

It wasn't much later before Caroline was seeing the guys off at the airport. She wanted to go see them off but Toby didn't want her to go to the trouble. He argued about how she would get back to the hotel where she would be staying and she'd told him she'd take the subway. He'd said 'absolutely not' and insisted on paying for a cab. He'd won that part of the argument. She accompanied him to the airport though, still, it didn't really help to ease the pain of separation.

"Will you call me tonight?" she asked.

"Will you be at the hotel or the diner?"

"I'm not sure but one or the other. Don't give up."

He pulled her close, stroked her cheek with the pad of his thumb. "You know me better than that." He raised her chin for the kiss. The one that would have to hold them for seven days. Her arms slipped up around his neck, her soft body pressed against his hardness. She sighed, he groaned in return. It was the clearing of several band members' throats that finally broke them apart. He leaned his forehead against hers. "Lord have mercy, this is hard."

She closed her eyes in response. She couldn't help it. She was a cry baby. The tears started. She sniffed.

Toby raised his head to peer at her face. "Oh, now, come on darlin', no tears. This is an exciting time. We're about to start our life together. And your friends are gonna have a big ol' party for you tonight that you need to get ready for and you have lots to do tomorrow to occupy your time. So don't cry, Princess, okay? Now let me see a smile. You know I hate to see you cry."

She sniffed and smiled. He wiped her tears away, kissed her once more and left her.

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Eugene and Rosie walked Caroline back to her room at the hotel. They'd had a wonderful party for her at the diner. All their regular customers had been there, along with dancers and actors from shows Caroline had been in, Madame Pierre, and even some of her students with their parents had stopped in to say goodbye to the best dance teacher they'd ever had. Some of those students had threatened to move to Nashville just to keep Caroline as their teacher which was a huge boost to Caroline's confidence.

Caroline turned to the couple as they got to her room. "Y'all will
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come to the wedding, won't you?" Caroline asked.

"Of course we will," Eugene answered.

"You know we wouldn't miss it," Rosie ensured.

"I want everyone to come. Irene and Alice and everyone. I can pay for everyone's transportation, put y'all up. You won't have to worry about the expense."

"Oh, my," Rosie exclaimed. "Don't you sound so hoity toity?"

Caroline laughed. "It's something, isn't it? Just a few months ago, I didn't even know how I was gonna pay my rent and now money isn't even an issue."

"And never will be again," Eugene said. "And you deserve that. You're a good, sweet girl, Caro. It's time someone took care of you for a change."

She turned and kissed both Eugene and Rosie. "With friends like you, I've always been rich."

"Are you sure you don't need help packing up at the apartment?" Rosie asked.

"I'm sure. There's not much, anyway."

"Doesn't it give you the creeps to be there?"

"Yeah, sort of. I'm gonna try not to think about it, so stop reminding me, please."

The sound of a phone ringing had Caroline hurrying to open the door to her room. "Ooh, ooh, that's probably Toby calling me. Gotta run. Bye, y'all."

She dashed inside, slamming the door and diving across the bed to the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hey, darlin'."

Caroline grinned. "I love the way you say that."

"What? 'Hey darlin'?"'

"Mmm. Say it again. Once more, please, and it should do it."

"Okay— hey darlin'! Now, any more wishes you would like for me to fulfill?"

Caroline giggled. "Wow, I feel powerful."

"You are, darlin'. Believe me, you really are. I sure do miss you," he murmured.

She sighed. "It's only been half a day. How will we ever survive?"

"I'm wondering the same thing. How did your party go tonight?"

"It was fun. There was like, a million people there. I'm so lucky to

have such good friends."

"You have good friends because you are a good friend."

"Toby, you always say the perfect thing."

"Yeah, not always. Anyway, I miss you, I love you, I can't wait to see you again."

"I love you, Toby. With all my heart."

"Have a good night, Princess. Dream about me. I know I'll dream about you."

"Bye, Toby. I don't know how long it will take me tomorrow at the apartment, so if I'm not here when you call, leave a message for me, okay?"

"I will. That reminds me, I've gotta get you a cell phone. If you'd had one when you left for Atlanta maybe you would've thought to call me and let me know what was goin' on."

"I guess I would have. I thought about you a lot. I told my mother about you. She was glad that I was so happy and so in love with you. She said she was glad that I hadn't let bitterness keep me from loving someone. I was too ashamed to tell her that in some ways I had done exactly that."

"It's easy to fall into that, isn't it? I had just about given up on love myself which is why I finally agreed to marry Tracy. I didn't believe there was ever gonna be anyone for me. And then you came back into my life. I can't even imagine what my life would be without you now."

Caroline yawned. "Me too."

"Okay, sleepy head. I'm gonna let you get some sleep. Good night, my love."

Caroline hung up the phone, sighing contentedly.

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Sitting on the floor of the old apartment, Caroline hummed softly as she worked. She hadn't bothered to turn on the air conditioner earlier, so beads of perspiration formed on her brow. She'd arrived early, around six in the morning and only four hours later she was close to finishing. Her stomach rumbled, reminding her she hadn't eaten any breakfast, but she would head over to the diner soon.

There hadn't been much to actually salvage. She'd cleaned the place spotless, packed her personal items into several small boxes and thrown everything else into two large boxes to be given to the Salvation Army along with the worn out furniture. Back to where it came from, she thought with a smile.
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She didn't feel the least bit sad about leaving the place she'd called home for the past few years. She would take with her only a few books and pictures, her clothes, some mementoes and her dance shoes. That was it. She needed nothing. Caroline Jones was about to be provided for by a very wealthy man. She sighed. She wasn't sure how she felt about that. Should she feel guilty that her life was to become something out of a fairy tale?

Life had always been hard for her. Even forgetting what she'd suffered at her mother's hands, things had been tough. There had never been enough to eat, and having new clothing had never even crossed her mind. Still, her body and mind operated perfectly and she'd always been grateful for that. Because of that she could work and learn and buy the necessities of life. Others were not so lucky.

Pondering the guilt she was experiencing, she realized it was the old– "I'm not worthy," thing that was giving her trouble. Toby would tell her she was a good person and deserved everything good in life. In her mind, she reversed roles for a moment. If she were the one with all the money, she wouldn't think twice about taking care of those she loved. And Toby did love her. She was sure of that. He'd certainly proven it to her and the world.

Never had she guessed she could be loved so completely and love a man in return the same way. Soon, she'd have her own very lucrative career and she would buy Toby things. She smiled. In a world of her own, Caroline never heard the uninvited guest enter the apartment. It was just a shadow in the corner of her eye that caught her attention. She looked up, startled.

"Sherry?"

The girl smiled slightly.

Caroline smiled back at her from her place on the floor. "Hello, Sherry. What are you doing here?"

Disregarding Caroline's question, the girl moved closer. "So, like, are you moving?"

Caroline raised her brow with a smile. "Yes, I am. And moving day is not very fun."

"How come you don't have anyone here to help you?"

"Well, my friends have their jobs and lives to look after and there's not much here to be done, anyway. I'm almost finished."

"How come your boyfriend isn't helping you?"

"He's out of town and won't be back for a few days." She looked

into the girl's eyes. She thought she saw anger, or maybe it was fear. She was a confused young lady. Caroline wished again she had stepped in and tried to help her. "So, Sherry, I guess we won't be neighbors anymore," Caroline said.

"Guess not," Sherry shrugged.

Caroline drew a breath and went on. "Listen, Sherry, I know we haven't really talked very much since I've lived here. I want you to know that I'm sorry about George. I know you cared for him."

Sherry shrugged again, but Caroline caught the fierce look in her eye. Bless her heart. "I know it seems really bad now, but eventually you'll find another boyfriend, Sherry. Someone closer to your same age, who will take you to school dances and to the fair, and bowling and stuff kids like to do."

"I don't care about that stuff," Sherry argued.

"You'll see," Caroline assured her as she taped up the last box.

"No. You'll see."

Caroline looked up, confused by Sherry's last statement. She gasped, her mouth falling open. She stood immediately, began backing up, but the wall blocked her.

The gun Sherry pointed wavered slightly. Caroline began inching her way around the wall, toward the door.

"Stop!" Sherry ordered. "Don't move anymore!"

"Sherry, what are you doing?" Caroline asked, unable to keep her voice from shaking.

Sherry smiled.

"Sherry, this isn't funny. Now put the gun down." She licked her lips, eyeing the gun, hoping it was a toy. "Is it real?"

Sherry, standing only a few feet away, pointed the gun just to the right of Caroline's feet and fired. The blast was deafening. Caroline jumped back, eyes wide. She turned and gazed into Sherry's face which was completely void of emotion. The gun pointed, once again, at Caroline's heart. Caroline froze. This can't be happening. It just can't be. "Sherry, you need to put that away." Caroline spoke firmly, thinking to gain some control over the situation.

"Shut up! I'm giving the orders now."

"But, Sherry, if you'll just put the gun down, I'm sure we can talk about this calmly."

"Shut up!" Sherry roared.

Caroline immediately closed her mouth. Her heart raced a mile a

minute. Her mind was right there with it, trying to figure a way out of her predicament. She had no idea what would be the best course of action, but she thought she needed to put on a brave front.

"So, what now, Sherry? Are you gonna kill me?"

"Shut up. I might. I just might. It's your fault George is dead."

"You can't believe that, Sherry. I wasn't even home."

"It don't matter. You led him on. It's all your fault."

"Sherry..."

"Shut up!" Sherry screamed again.

The girl approached Caroline. "Turn around."

"Please don't do..."

"I said turn around," she yelled, moving quickly to point the gun at Caroline's chest.

Caroline did as she was told, flinching when she felt the hard metal of the gun at the small of her back.

"I'm gonna show you something downstairs."

Caroline resisted, but Sherry shoved her forward.

"Move. If you try anything, I'll shoot you. I swear I will." She nudged Caroline with the gun, prodding her forward.

Caroline felt her stomach roil at the feel of the metal against her back, knowing it could fire at any time. Hesitating, she swallowed hard, fighting nausea.

"I said move," Sherry ordered.

Caroline took small, slow, careful steps, worried that anything else would rile the unstable girl. Slowly, they made their way out of Caroline's apartment and down the stairs. Caroline assumed they were going to Sherry's apartment. Sherry surprised her though, when she bypassed her own apartment and continued down the hall to the apartment behind Sherry's.

With the gun still pressed firmly against Caroline's back, Sherry used the set of keys George had given her to open the door. They moved into the vacant apartment and headed toward the back bedroom where Sherry opened what appeared to be the closet door.

Caroline's jaw dropped when Sherry moved forward and pushed against the solid back wall inside the closet and it swung out. Sherry circled back behind Caroline and shoved her through the opening, following behind, then turned and pushed the wall back into place. They stood motionless, completely in the dark.

Terror overtook Caroline. She found herself waiting for the

moment when Sherry pulled the trigger. She thought about taking a chance, running, but she couldn't see anything. The only thing Caroline was aware of was the point of the gun still pressed against her back. She'd had her chance when Sherry had passed her to open the hidden entrance, but Caroline hadn't thought fast enough.

"Better be careful," Sherry chanted sarcastically. "You wouldn't want to fall. There's steps right in front of you. Step down."

Real fear reached out to grab Caroline. "Sherry, please."

Sherry yanked on Caroline's hair, pulled her head back. "You just do what I tell you, now step down."

Caroline stepped slowly, trying to keep from tumbling down the steps in the blackness. Once they reached the bottom of the steps, Sherry reached for a light switch. Caroline took in her surroundings. They were in a room, made mostly of concrete and brick with a concrete slab floor, obviously in the basement. An old sofa lay on its side. There was nothing else in the room. Sherry nudged Caroline to the right toward the only door in the room on the far wall.

"What do you want to show me?" Caroline asked, unable to disguise the fear in her voice.

"You'll see. It's just through here." Sherry unlocked the door and shoved Caroline through. Caroline found herself in a small room, probably situated just under Sherry's own apartment. There was a single overhead light, giving off a dim, yellow glow. No real windows, but at the top of one wall, a small grate leading to the outside gave a small bit of gray light. Sherry pushed Caroline forward, into the room and closed the door behind them.

An old dirty mattress in the corner of the small room gave off a foul smell. In the opposite corner lay a small stack of newspapers and an old aluminum bucket. Caroline turned to face Sherry, her heart beating rapidly. If Sherry intended to kill her now, she wanted to see it coming.

"Take your shoes off," Sherry demanded. "Socks too."

"What?"

"You heard me. Do it. Do it now!" Sherry screamed.

Caroline held her hands out. "Okay. Okay, Sherry. Calm down. I'm doing it."

She sat on the floor, removed her shoes and socks, and handed them to Sherry who opened the door to the larger room and tossed them out. She turned back to Caroline.

"Now your clothes, give me your clothes."

Caroline started to protest, but Sherry waved the gun at her. Hands trembling, Caroline unzipped her jeans, pushed them down and stepped out.

"Shirt too," Sherry commanded.

Caroline pulled her pink shirt over her head.

"Hand them to me."

Again, she opened the door and tossed Caroline's clothing out. Sherry turned and eyed Caroline. "You got pretty things. I've tried your stuff on before. George and I went up to your apartment and tried on all your stuff."

Caroline stood in her underwear, shivering not from cold, but fear. She had no idea how to reply to what Sherry just said.

"Sit down," Sherry ordered. "Over there."

Caroline moved toward the mattress and sat on the edge. She was in trouble. Big trouble. Sherry was about as stable as a house of cards.

"We did it here, ya' know," Sherry bragged, pointing at the mattress with the gun.

Again, Caroline had no idea what to say to that.

"Why are you doing this, Sherry?"

"George liked you. He thought you were so great. He wanted me to be just like you."

"He was wrong, Sherry. He didn't appreciate you. You're a very pretty girl."

"Shut up!" she screamed. She pointed the gun at Caroline's head, came toward her. "Just shut up."

Caroline held her breath, waiting for the final moment. It was several seconds before Sherry lowered the gun.

"He liked you but he also hated you. He said girls like you lead a man on and then don't put out." Her eyes teared up, spilled over. "I wasn't like that. I didn't put on no airs. I hate you," she blubbered as she began backing out of the room.

Caroline panicked. "Sherry, wait! You can't leave me here. Sherry, please don't do this."

"Goodbye, Caro," Sherry said softly. She slammed the door and locked it.

Caroline immediately ran at the door, pounded on it, but there was no way she could open it. It was solid wood, probably made a hundred or more years ago, like the building itself. She spun, leaned against the

door of her prison and looked up at the grate near the top of the ten-foot-high wall. She pulled the mattress over under the grate, doubled it on itself. Next, she fetched the bucket and placed it on the mattress upside down and stood on it. Up on her toes, she was still at least three feet short.

She kicked the bucket away and stood the mattress up on end, leaning it against the wall at an angle. She tried to climb the mattress, almost made it, but as she reached the top, the mattress slid out from under her. Her chin hit the concrete wall as she tumbled to the floor. She lay there stunned, blood gushing from her chin, as she stared up at the unfinished ceiling.

"What am I gonna do?" she whispered. Tears ran from the corners of her eyes, down the sides of her face and into her ears. Surely, the girl would tire of this little game. Caroline had no choice but to hope and pray that would be the case. Pray, she thought. Yes, pray.

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Sherry gathered Caro's shoes and clothing and started to reach for the light switch, but stopped. It was the middle of the day so probably no one from the outside would even notice the light coming from the grate. Deciding to let Caro have the light for now, Sherry tiptoed up the steps, making a mental note to make sure to come back later and turn it off. She gave a push at the top of the steps and the wall swung open. Stepping through into the closet, she began to hum. She closed the closet door, moved through the empty apartment, stepped out into the hall, closed the apartment door and locked it. Leaning back against the door, she giggled.

~~~~

It had been a long, hard day. Toby's flight to Nashville had been delayed due to some passenger freaking out about something. He'd barely made the two local shows he was supposed to do, then he'd visited some friends in Nashville before he was able to drive out to the farm. It was good to be home.

He'd gone down immediately to visit with Rascal and his other animal friends before dark. When he made his way back up to the house, he found his pulse racing as the time neared for the phone call to his sweet Caroline.

He showered first, then stretched out across the bed to make the call. When there was no answer in her room, the call was routed back to the hotel clerk. "I'm afraid she isn't in, Mr. Nash, but I would be

happy to take a message."

"Yes, tell her I'm sorry I missed her and I'll try again later tonight, or in the morning. And tell her– tell her– tell her I love her."

The clerk did a very professional job of keeping the laughter from his voice. "I'd be happy to do that, Mr. Nash."

"Yeah, thanks," Toby mumbled as he hung up the phone. He glanced at his watch. It's nine o'clock in New York. Maybe she went out with some friends.

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Caroline had been sure Sherry would be back in a few hours, once she'd made her point and had her fun, yet when the light from the grate began to dwindle, Caroline began to panic. Her hands shook as she smoothed her hair back. She wasn't sure if they shook from fear or from the lack of food and water. She'd neglected to eat breakfast that morning, thinking she would head over to the diner once she was finished packing. The lack of food wasn't nearly as bad as the thirst. Summer in the city could be sweltering. Caroline knew she'd lost a good bit of fluid perspiring in the sauna-like room even though the concrete floor itself was cooler than the air around her.

Panic filled her when close to dusk the light went out. Caroline ran to the door, pounding until her hands were numb. "Sherry, please!" Caroline cried. "Sheeeerrrryyy, please," she screamed over and over until her throat was raw. Finally, she leaned her head against the door. "Please, let me out," she cried softly to no one in particular. She slipped to the floor, sobbing in the blackness until she fell asleep.

She was awakened in the dark of night. At first she couldn't figure out what had disturbed her, then she realized, something had moved, had touched her. She lay still, listening when something went scurrying over her arm. Caroline bounded upright, screaming, running around in pitch blackness until she found her way to the corner. Cowering down, her back to the wall, she cried at the top of her lungs. "Somebody, help me! Please, somebody! Please, help!"

~~~~

Toby awoke with a start. He'd intended to call Caroline again the night before, but he'd fallen asleep and slept through the night. Glancing at the clock, he decided to give her a chance to sleep in while he went for a morning ride. Dressing quickly, he ambled down to the stables and spoke to Thunder as he saddled him.

"Hey, boy. How's it goin'? Caroline says to tell you 'hello.' Yeah.

She's gonna be seein' you a lot soon 'cause she and me, we're gonna get hitched. Right now though, I'm missin' her somethin' awful, so how about a good hard ride to get my mind off the lady?"

He mounted up and took off.

~~~~

Sherry dialed Lt. Veranza's cell phone number. It was very early in the morning, but she was sure he would be up by now.

"Hello, Lieutenant, this is Sherry Price. Do you remember me?"

"Of course, Sherry. How can I help you?"

"I tried to call you yesterday, but I couldn't reach you."

"I'm sorry, Sherry. I had to go out of town for the day, but I'm back now. What can I do for you?"

"I just wanted to talk."

"Okay. So, how are you feeling?"

"I dunno. I still feel pretty bad, ya know? But it's getting better."

"That's good, Sherry, that it's getting better. Give it some time. It *will* stop hurting. And then you'll find another boyfriend."

"That's what she said."

"Who?"

"Oh, just somebody else I was talking to."

"Well, she's right. The sadness you're feeling now will eventually go away and life will get happy again."

"I guess. Well, I gotta go."

"Okay, but remember, Sherry, you can call me anytime."

"I'll remember," Sherry assured him.

She hung up the phone and smiled. She took a final peek in the mirror. Caroline's pink shirt looked good on her. A little tight, but good, but the jeans and shoes didn't fit at all. Patting the pocket of her own jeans to make sure she had her keys, she stuffed the gun in the waistband and started down to check on her prisoner.

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Caroline stirred. It must be morning judging from the gray light filtering through the grate. Her mouth was dry and she was so sleepy, but she came to life the moment the light came on. When she heard the scratching sound on the door, her heart leapt. Standing shakily, she readied herself.

Slowly, the door opened. Caroline moved forward immediately, but Sherry had the gun pointed at her.

"Good morning, Caro." Sherry looked her over. "What's that on

your bra?"

Caroline looked down. "It's, uh, it's blood. I hit my chin."

"Want me to bring you a Band-Aid?"

Caroline ignored her taunt. "Sherry, this has gone too far."

Sherry ignored her right back. "I can't stay long. I have a million things I need to do today."

"Sherry, please," Caroline begged, the tears pooling in her eyes. "Please, let me go now. You've made your point."

Sherry's lips pressed together as if she were truly considering Caroline's plea. Finally, she shook her head. "Can't. Everyone will know what I did and I'll be in trouble."

"I won't tell. I promise. Just let me out."

Sherry only shook her head.

Caroline took a step toward the door, but Sherry pulled the gun up with both hands and prepared to fire. "You're gonna make me shoot you."

"Why are you doing this?" Caroline cried.

Sherry's eyes flashed with anger. "I want you to cry. I want you to hurt and cry like I did."

"Well, I am crying, Sherry. So, you've won. You've had your fun. Now, please, let me go."

Sherry shook her head. "Can't."

Sherry watched as Caroline sank weakly to the floor. "This room is not as great as where you've been staying over at the hotel, is it?" When Caroline didn't answer, she waved the gun. "Is it?"

"No, it isn't," Caroline conceded. She looked up suddenly. "You know, Sherry, Toby's gonna be calling me at the hotel. He'll know something is wrong when I'm not there to take his call."

She smiled smugly. "Well, I guess that just can't be helped."

"Sherry, if you don't let me out, I'm gonna die and when that happens, you really will be in trouble."

"You won't die."

"People need to have water and food to live, Sherry. I need water. If I don't get it, I will die."

The young girl contemplated that for a short while. "I might bring you something to drink, if you're good," she added with a smile. She peeked over at the corner and nodded. "I see you figured out what the bucket was for."

Caroline smoothed her hair back. She needed to be calm, needed

to figure out a way to get through to the sick girl. In order to do that she needed to know something about her. "When you come back with the water, will you stay and talk for a while?" Caroline suggested.

"Talk? Why? You're not gonna be able to get me to let you out. Not anytime soon. Maybe not ever."

Caroline forced herself to stay calm. "Well, if I'm gonna be around that long, we might as well get to know each other."

"You think you're so smart. I'll talk to you when I get back, but you won't like what I have to say." She turned and left the room.

Caroline sat, conserving her strength. Already weak and sluggish, she had no idea how long she would have to last before Toby came back to New York and started searching for her. She closed her eyes and concentrated on him, wishing she could establish some kind of psychic connection. *I'm in trouble, Toby. Help me. Come to New York and find me. I need you, Toby. Please, find me. Please.* Yet, she felt no comfort or hope. She'd tried to call him once before, when she'd been twelve, and he didn't come then. Not for fifteen years. She didn't have that long this time. She remembered she was gonna try to pray, but she didn't really know how. "Dear God," she whispered. "Please help me. Amen." She didn't know if she did it right, but for some reason she already felt better.

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Ephesians 6:12

"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

# Chapter 14

"Get out, squirt!" Sherry yelled at her little brother.

"I don't have to!" he yelled back at her.

She smacked him in the back of the head. "I need to use the phone and I want privacy. Now get out."

"Go in your bedroom."

"No, I don't trust you. I need complete privacy, now get out, before I beat you," she threatened.

Sullenly, he left the apartment. The last time he'd crossed her, she'd tied him to a chair and held a lighter to his leg. His sister was up to something, but he had no desire to challenge her.

Sherry took a deep breath and settled herself on the sofa. It had taken her several hours to finally make the decision to do what she was about to do and she didn't want anyone to break her concentration. Sherry cleared her throat and dialed the *Grand Marquis Hotel*.

"Yes, hello. This is Caroline Jones," she said in her best voice. "I'm afraid I was out all night. Do you have any messages for me?"

"Yes, Miss Jones. Mr. Nash called for you. He said he would try to reach you again this morning and that he loves you."

"Oh, how sweet. Could you do me a favor?"

"Of course. What can I help you with?"

"If he calls back, tell him I'm staying with some friends and not to worry about me."

"Yes, ma'am, will do. Anything else? Is there a number where he can reach you?"

"I, uh, I don't believe that's any of your business. Goodbye."

She punched the red button and giggled. "That was fun," she said aloud. Grabbing a coke out of the refrigerator and a snack cake wrapped in cellophane, she headed back to the vacant apartment.

Caroline heard the keys at the door, but this time, she didn't stand. She'd been close to forty-eight hours without water and the dizziness and lightheadedness were becoming an issue.

Sherry came in and stood over her. "Here, I brought you something to drink."

Caroline sat up and sighed in disappointment when she eyed the coke. She craved cool, clear, sweet water, but anything would do. Her trembling hands popped the top and she held the can to her lips. She sipped slowly. The liquid burned her throat, but at least it was wet. Sherry watched her as she sipped. Caroline's eyes met hers. "Thank you," Caroline said.

"Sure." She held out a snack cake. "Want this?"

Caroline held out her hand, but Sherry retracted the sweet.

"First, I have a message for you, from your boyfriend."

"A message? From Toby? How?"

She laughed. "It was easy. I called the hotel, told them I was you and they gave me the message. He called and said he loves you."

Tears welled in Caroline's eyes, but she forced them back.

"And I gave him a message for you."

She sniffed. "What did you say to him?"

"I said to tell him you were staying with friends and not to worry about you, cuz you were just fine."

Caroline only shook her head in despair. She would probably never see him again. Dear God, this is gonna crush him.

Sherry sat down cross-legged in front of Caroline, placing the gun on the floor in the center of her legs. "So, let's talk."

Caroline collected herself enough to remember her plan. Find out as much about Sherry as possible. Get her to talk about herself. She drew a deep breath. "How's your mother?"

Sherry shrugged. "She's okay, I guess. She's at work. She's always at work."

"Does that make you feel like she doesn't care?" Caroline asked.

Sherry rolled her eyes. "Don't try to play little psychological games with me. I'm not stupid."

"Okay, okay. I was just trying to help."

"Help what?"

"Help you sort out some of your feelings, that's all."

"What do you know about sorting out feelings?"

"I know all about it. I had a troubled childhood and I've had to learn how to overcome the sadness."

"What happened in your childhood? Your daddy do things to you that shouldn't be done?"

Caroline's mouth opened but no words came forth. Sherry had probably just provided her with the reason Sherry was the way she was, but Caroline had better not pounce on it yet. "No. My father left us when I was about five years old. My mother took it out on me."

"What do you mean, took it out on you? She was mad at you?"

"Yes, she was mad and she drank a lot and she hit me a lot."

"That don't seem so bad to me. I hit Kevin all the time."

"Who's Kevin?"

"He's my kid brother. I can't stand him. So what did your mom do to you?"

Caroline shrugged. "Let's see. There was so much, it's hard to remember it all. Are you sure you want to hear this?"

Sherry rolled her eyes. "Aren't you dramatic. I doubt there's anything you could tell me that would bother me."

Considering that the poor girl had probably experienced unspeakable things by her own father, Caroline thought she just might be right. Nevertheless, Caroline tried to remember the worst of it in hopes of working up some sympathy from the girl. "She slapped me around all the time. Once, when I reached for second helpings at the dinner table, she stuck a fork in my hand."

She paused, hoping for a reaction from Sherry, but there was none, so she forged on. "And my mother knocked me down once and when I refused to stand back up she kicked me in the stomach and I threw up blood for two days after that."

Nothing.

"Um, she tied me to my bed when I was younger, and once she locked me in the closet all day. She always beat me with a clothes hanger." Caroline eyed Sherry but nothing she said seemed to affect her. "She broke a plate over my head, and she pushed me down the stairs." Caroline shrugged when Sherry was obviously not impressed. "She broke everything in my room that I had worked for and bought with my own money. There's a lot more stuff I can't remember."

Sherry finally spoke. "She broke your stuff? Man, that's harsh. If my mom did that to me, I'd kill her."

Caroline began to wonder if there was any way she would be able to crack a nut this hard, but she had to try. She'd fought all her life, why quit now? On with the rest of her plan. "Sherry, what do you want to be when you grow up?"

She shrugged. "I wanted to be a cop."

That little piece of news momentarily stunned Caroline, but she recovered smoothly. "Really? That's, uh, a really good goal."

"Yeah, well, it probably won't happen now."

"You mean because of you locking me up in here?"

"Yeah, but ya know what? It was worth it. You should have seen the look on your face."

Caroline forced a smile. "I bet it was pretty funny, huh?"

"Yeah. You were so scared."

"Yeah, you scared me alright. But, you know what? It doesn't have to end badly, Sherry. We can chalk it up to a childhood prank and one day you can go around in your policeman's uniform and tell kids at the school how you used to be and they can change their lives for the better just like you did."

Sherry nodded. "That'd be cool." She looked closely at the woman. She wasn't so bad. Not near as bad as George made her out to be. She didn't act like she thought she was better or high and mighty. Caroline's face was hopeful. So hopeful. Still, if Sherry let her out now, she would be in big trouble. She had to think. She needed some time to think. "I gotta go."

"Wait, Sherry. Please don't leave yet."

"Stop it. I gotta go. I'll come back and see you later. Here." She held out the snack cake.

Caroline ignored it. "Sherry, please, I can't spend another night down here."

The girl's face hardened. "You can and you will. Now, stop being such a little crybaby." She tucked the cake away in her shirt. Caroline struggled to get to her feet. "You just sit right back down. I'll still shoot you, now back off," Sherry warned.

Caroline staggered toward her, reached out.

"I said, back off," Sherry ordered. In a flash, she stepped forward and shoved Caroline with all her might.

In her weakened state, the force sent Caroline sprawling backward onto the concrete floor, her head snapping back to make a terrible cracking sound.

"Behave," Sherry ordered as she slipped out the door.

Caroline sat up shakily, rubbing her hand over the back of her head, searching for a lump. Her hand came away covered in blood. Blankly, she stared at her blood-soaked fingers, feeling confused and weak. Dizziness overcame her and she lay her head back down on the

cool floor and slept.

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Toby hung up the phone. It made no sense. The Caroline he knew would not have gone to stay with friends. She would have stayed at the hotel where he could reach her. And she certainly wouldn't have spoken those particular words to the hotel clerk. Something was terribly wrong. He dialed the number at Eugene's diner.

"Hey, Toby, how's it goin'?" Eugene asked cheerfully, though his expression fell when Toby explained the bad feeling he had. "No, Toby, we haven't seen her since Friday night, not since the party. She said she was going over to the apartment to pack. We just figured she'd been too busy to stop by."

"Can you run over there and see what you can find out?"

"You got it. Call me on my cell."

Toby dialed the cell number he was given.

"I'm headed up the stairs right now," Eugene stated. "The door's not locked. The place is clean. Boxes are packed. Caroline? Caro, are you here?" He paused. "She's not here, Toby. I'm gonna check the park. You call Madame Pierre."

Toby dialed Madame. "No, Toby," Madame said, frowning. "I haven't seen her since Friday night. Maybe she went shopping. No, what am I saying? Our Caroline does not shop. You have me worried now, Toby. I will contact some of her friends. Call me back in a little while, oui?"

"Yes, I will. Thanks."

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"Lt. Veranza?" Sherry asked nervously.

"Yes, this is Veranza. Sherry?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"How ya' doing, Sherry?"

"I don't know." She was silent.

"Sherry, so, is there something you wanna talk about?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, shoot."

She giggled.

"Did I say something funny?"

"No. It's okay."

"What do you want to talk about, Sherry?"

"Um– well– so, like, have you like, ever done something wrong,

like something you wish you could take back, but you don't know how to get out of it?"

He was silent. "What did you do, Sherry?"

"I knew you'd pull that policeman crap on me," she complained.

"No, wait, Sherry. Okay. Yes, I did."

"What did you do?"

"I stole a radio from the store."

"So, like, how did you get out of it?"

"I didn't. I took the radio back to the store owner and apologized. See, I had to face up to what I did. He told me I had to work for him for two months or he was gonna turn me in to the police. He made it very hard on me, but it was a good lesson about standing up and doing the right thing."

Sherry thought a moment. "Hmm, so, even though you did something wrong, everything turned out for the best. Do you think that applies to everyone?"

"Yes, it does, at least it does when I have something to say about it. We all make mistakes, but facing what we do is the very best thing in the world."

"And even after you stole something, you still got to be a cop."

"Yes, so, do you want to tell me what this is all about?"

She was silent.

"Sherry?"

"No, not now, but thanks." She quickly hung up. In the morning, she just might go down and let Caroline out of the basement. It would be the best thing she could do. She could make it right. And Caroline would be so happy. Sherry sort of liked the idea that she had the power to make Caroline sad, and now she had the power to make her happy. If she wanted.

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Toby called Eugene again. He had a bad feeling gnawing at his gut. Eugene didn't make it any better.

"Toby, me, Rosie, Irene, Alice, and Madame Pierre have searched everywhere. We've contacted all of Caroline's friends that we know and no one has seen her since Friday. Not anyone."

"Oh, Lord Jesus, where could she be?" He drew a deep breath. "I was able to get a late flight out. I'll be there before you open the diner in the morning and I'm calling the police."

"Maybe by the time you get here she'll show up and say, 'why was
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everyone so worried about me?' She'll laugh and we'll threaten to give her a spanking and send her to her room and all will be well."

"Yeah, maybe," Toby agreed, but he didn't feel it.

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Caroline was humming in the dark. Sherry hadn't come back the rest of the day and Caroline wished she'd accepted the snack cake when she'd had the chance. "That was a stupid mistake, young lady," she muttered, stopping her song to speak the words out loud.

Without delay, she went back to her humming. She'd begun with classical pieces and was now on show tunes. At the moment she was doing "Summer Lovin'." She moved her fingers along the floor, as if they were dancing, even though she couldn't see them. Maybe in the morning, when there was more light, she would get up and do some dancing herself, go through some of the routines she knew. Maybe in the morning. Right now, she didn't feel like it. She felt weak and dizzy, a little nauseated, which was silly because she hadn't eaten anything in days. She took a moment to tilt the coke can up again. Maybe there was one more drop that clung to its insides. But no.

Caroline moved on to one of Toby's songs. She hummed first, then sang the words of a lost love. She giggled. Her current situation would make a great song. He's gonna make a million on this one. Surely, he'll write about it, about his Caroline and how he found her and lost her again. "I'll make sure he writes about it," she whispered.

She pulled the tab off the coke and began to scratch a message to him on the concrete floor. Placing her finger carefully below each letter as she scratched its form, she was careful not to overlap the letters and words in the dark. It was supposed to be a short message. "Toby, write a song about us. I love you, Caroline." Somehow though, it grew longer, and more involved.

She told him to forgive Sherry. And to see she gets help. She told him she would do her best without him on the other side and that she would ask God if He would let her look after him. She told him to find another love and to not feel guilty about that. And she told him over and over how much she loved him.

She was humming again, and smiling when the door opened. She looked up, squinting as golden light filtered into the room. "Toby?"

"Yes, darlin'. It's me."

She reached for him. "Oh, Toby, I didn't think you'd ever find me. How did you find me?"
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He knelt down beside her. "Nothing could keep me away from you, darlin'." He raised her chin for a kiss, just as he always did. "Hmm, what's this?"

"Oh, I hit my chin on the wall. It doesn't matter now, though."

"Of course it matters. I never want you to be hurt. I'll make it all better." He kissed her sweetly, softly. "Goodness," he said, sniffing loudly. "Caroline, my Princess, you smell awful. Would you like to take a long, hot bubble bath?"

"Oh, I would so love to do that. Soon, okay? I hate that you have to see me this way."

"Ah, Princess, it's just so good to see you. We've been looking for you everywhere."

"Really?"

He touched her nose. "Yes, really, but I have you now." He sat next to her, his back against the wall and pulled her close. "Sleep, Princess. I've got you."

She smiled as she snuggled up close to him. It was heaven being in his arms. Heaven.

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Toby stood in the door of Caroline's apartment, the early light of morning drifting through the curtainless window. He rubbed his hands over his face, tried to push the sick feeling out of his mind. Everything was packed. Six small boxes sat neatly stacked, two high on the worn sofa. The floor had been swept and scrubbed, but the ominous bloodstain remained.

Two larger boxes stood at the entrance to the kitchen, filled with the things Caroline would give away. They were taped shut, the roll of tape lying on top. The tiny kitchen was empty, cabinets washed down, floor spic and span. He went through into the bedroom and bathroom. Bedroom was barren, bathroom spotless and empty. He sat on the bed. "Where are you?" he muttered aloud.

He stood and went back into the living room, then went to the window and stared out toward Eugene's. When he saw the light come on in the diner, Toby headed out.

Caroline's downstairs neighbor sat on the steps as he came down. Sherry. Yeah, that was her name.

"Hello," he said to her softly.

"Hi," she answered.

"Sherry, isn't it?"
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She smiled at the handsome man. "Yep. That's me. And you're Caroline's boyfriend, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am. Have you seen Caroline?"

She frowned as she thought. "I saw her the other day. She said she was moving. Is that true?"

"That's right."

"Where to?"

"Nashville. You say you saw her the other day?"

"Uh huh," she confirmed.

"What day was that?"

"Um, maybe Friday, or it might have been Saturday."

"You haven't seen her since then?"

"I don't think so. So you guys are moving all the way to Nashville, huh? That's a long way."

"Listen, this is important. If you see her, please tell her to go to the hotel and wait for me there. Can you do that for me?"

"Sure." She smiled at him.

"Thanks, hon. I'd really appreciate it."

He ran across the street to the diner. Sherry frowned as she watched him go. Hmm, she thought, that complicated matters. He's cute and all, but he will probably be really mad at her when he finds out what she did. Then again, Lt. Veranza said it would be a hard thing to do, doing what's best. She needed to think some more.

Eugene greeted Toby as he came through the door. "Anything?"

Toby shook his head. "Where could she be?"

Rosie touched Toby's hand. "It's not like her. You know that and I know that. We've got to find her."

"I went to the police and they had me file a missing persons report." He shook his head. "But I'm gonna go down to see Lt. Veranza. I realize he's a homicide detective, but he really likes Caroline and I think he'll help us."

He turned just as Alice and Irene came through the door. They weren't smiling.

"We used the whole night to try to listen to the streets, see if anyone knows anything, but there is no dirt out there. Not on Caroline," Irene said.

Toby ran a hand through his hair. He was beginning to admit to himself that Caroline really was missing. It's not just a case of getting wires crossed, or baseless worries. She's gone. Vanished. No one has

seen her in days. "Please, God," he begged as he left the diner, headed for the precinct.

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"What's all this?" Sherry asked, kneeling down on the floor to read it better.

When Caroline didn't answer her, she went to her and shook her awake. Caroline looked up groggily. "Toby?"

Sherry giggled. "Uh, no, it's me."

Caroline struggled to sit up, but found that she couldn't and laid her head back down.

Sherry watched her. "You don't look so good. What's all that black stuff in your hair?"

"I hit my head."

"I read what you wrote here to your boyfriend. It's real sweet. You said I was a good kid. You said I didn't mean to hurt you. That will help me a lot."

Caroline only nodded. She couldn't think straight. Her head was pounding. Water. She really needed some water.

"Did you bring me some water today?" she asked.

"Nuh uh. I forgot. I'll get some and bring it back down to you. Here let me look at your head, so I can see how bad it is." She examined it. "That's a lot of blood. Kind of reminds me of George," she said in jest but got no response from her prisoner.

She sat next to Caroline and pulled her head over to lie on her lap and dug her fingers through the matted, dried mess to find the cut. It didn't seem so bad. She left Caroline's head there on her lap and stroked her hair. Caroline allowed her the act. She didn't have the energy to resist, anyway.

"I was gonna let you out this morning," Sherry began, speaking softly. "I still might." Caroline sniffed. "Shh, it's gonna be okay, it's just that there is a slight problem and I don't know what to do about it. You see, your boyfriend showed up this morning."

Caroline raised her head, searched the girl's face.

Sherry pushed Caroline's head aside and stood up. "And I think he's gonna cause a bunch of trouble. He's looking for you. Seems big time worried that he can't find you."

"Did you talk to him?" Caroline asked softly.

"Yeah. He's really cute, isn't he?"

Caroline nodded. To know big, strong, Toby was so close, made
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every cell in her body cry out for him. She peered hopefully at her captor. "Are you gonna let me out, Sherry?"

"I think so. I just need to figure out how."

"Just open the door and I'll walk right out."

Sherry was unconvinced. "I don't know."

Caroline wanted to scream at her in frustration. She wanted to beg, she wanted to shake some sense into her, but she knew that would get her nowhere and so she tried to calm herself.

"I'm trying to figure out how I can be the one to..." Sherry began.

Caroline tried to decipher what the girl was getting at. It was so hard to think with the bass drum that was pounding in her brain. "The one to what? The one to save me?"

Sherry smiled. "You really are very good at sorting out feelings, aren't you?"

"Sherry, I think I can help you come up with a plan, but I'm having a hard time thinking right now because I really need some water and some food."

"Okay. I'll get you something and we can talk some more."

Caroline nodded as Sherry disappeared.

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Lt. Veranza and Sgt. Sommers arrived at the precinct at almost the same time.

"Mornin'," Sommers grumbled.

"How's it goin'?" Veranza answered. "You feeling puny today?"

He shook his head. "Need coffee. We were out at home. Need coffee. Must have coffee."

"Hold on there, son," Veranza laughed. "We'll fix you up." They headed to the break room.

Mugs in hand, they ambled back toward their desks in the squad room, but were stopped by a fellow officer. "You guys have a visitor and I get the feeling it's not gonna be a happy reunion."

She motioned toward the large man who sat in a chair opposite Lt. Veranza's desk.

He looked beaten down and defeated and the lieutenant told him so as he greeted him and shook his hand. "Toby. What's wrong?"

Toby nodded at Sommers as he shook Veranza's hand. "I need help, guys. I'm desperate."

"What can we do?" the Lieutenant asked as they took a seat.

Toby heaved a sigh. "Caroline's missing."
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"Missing? For how long?"

He knew he could depend on the detective to take him seriously. "No one has seen her since Friday night. It's just not like her. I was out of town. She wasn't there to take my calls."

"Maybe she went to visit friends," Sommers offered.

Toby shook his head. "She would have been there. You have to believe me. She wouldn't have gone away for three days without talking to me first. Something's happened to her. I went to the police but all they had me do was file a report. Believe me, she wouldn't go anywhere without me."

"I believe you," Lt. Veranza said. He was getting a very bad feeling. And his most recent phone call from Sherry Price was playing through his mind.

"Do you know what her plans were while you were out of town?" Sommers asked.

"She went to a party the day I left, that was Friday. I spoke to her that night on the phone at the hotel. Saturday morning, she planned to go over to the apartment to pack up the place."

"You guys are leaving?"

"Yes. We're getting married. We're moving to Nashville to my farm. You've got to find her."

Sgt. Sommers was beginning to feel a little panicky himself. "She went to the apartment alone?"

"Yes. She said she'd be okay. It was sort of creepy but she could handle it. After all, George was dead. There was no danger."

The detectives exchanged glances.

"What?" Toby demanded. "What are you not telling me?"

Veranza sighed. "The little girl George was having an affair with? She's a mess. She's got it in her mind that Caroline is the cause of all her troubles. She blames Caroline for everything wrong in her life. For George's death. Everything."

Toby ran a hand through his hair. "Well, I spoke with her this morning. She seemed okay enough to me. I mean, heck, she's just an innocent kid, right?"

"That kid, as you put it, is not innocent in any way," Sommers assured him as they rose. "Come on. I want to get a warrant and search Sherry's apartment."

"What are you thinking? You actually think this kid would do Caroline harm?"

"I hadn't thought that until now and we could be wrong, but I don't wanna leave any stone unturned." Veranza's eyes met Toby's. "We'll find her."

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Matthew 5:43-45
"You have heard that it was said,
'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'
But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray
for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons
of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun
rise on the evil and on the good,
and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."

# Chapter 15

Lt. Veranza filled Toby in on the few conversations he'd had with Sherry. He believed if she was asking about how to fix things that meant she'd done something that warranted fixing. On the positive side, it also meant things were fixable. And, assuming Sherry had something to do with Caroline's disappearance, if things were fixable then Caroline must be alive.

The detectives dropped Toby off at the diner with strict instructions he was to stay put. They'd asked Eugene to help keep Toby calm and keep him from doing anything stupid. Little did they realize that Eugene was as fired up as Toby. Both men wanted nothing more than to go across the street and tear little Sherry apart with their bare hands.

Across the street, Sherry opened the door a crack at the sound of Lt. Veranza's knock. "Yes?"

"Sherry, it's me, Lt. Veranza."

"I know who you are. I'm not stupid."

"Sherry, we need to come in and talk to you."

"Why?"

"Someone's missing and we're searching all the buildings in the neighborhood."

"Well, she's not here."

Lt. Veranza smiled his friendliest smile. He hadn't said it was a female. "Now, Sherry, how is it gonna look to my captain if he finds out I searched all the apartments except this one. He'll think I'm showing favoritism just because you and I are friends. He'll say I'm getting old and try to retire me. You wouldn't want that to happen, would you?"

She sighed. Actually, she really didn't want that to happen. He was nice. "No. Just a minute." She closed the door.

Sommers shook his head. "She's got two seconds to open that door or I'm breaking it down."

"I'm with you," Lt. Veranza agreed.

However, the door opened and Sherry motioned them in. "Go ahead and search, you won't find anything," she said smugly.

The men moved quickly through the apartment, looking for signs, clues, anything suspect that would tell them what Sherry might have done to Caroline. Nothing. They found nothing. They came out to the living room, their faces drawn with worry. "Sherry, sit down," Lt. Veranza ordered.

"I got stuff I need to do," she argued.

"Sit down," he said gruffly. "You and I are gonna have a talk."

She pouted, but sat, her chin raised defiantly.

He motioned to a can of coke and a snack cake on the table by the door. "Whose is that?"

"I was about to have a snack when you came to the door."

"Sherry, you know who's missing, don't you?"

She shrugged.

"Tell me, Sherry. You said she wasn't here, so you must know it's a woman. Who's missing?"

"I kinda figured it's Caroline, from upstairs. Her boyfriend was looking for her this morning. It is her, isn't it?"

Veranza sighed. Sherry was a clever girl. "Yes," he answered her.

"Sherry, we know you didn't like Miss Jones very much. You said you hated her. Did you make a mistake? Did you do something to her? You can tell us, Sherry, and we'll help you through it."

It had been Sgt. Sommers who spoke, making Lt. Veranza nod his approval. His partner was learning to catch flies with honey.

Sherry looked back and forth between the faces. "I, uh, I didn't do anything to her. I haven't seen her."

She listened as the detectives continued to question her and reason with her. She wasn't gonna say anything though, not until she and Caroline had a chance to talk and try to figure things out. She glanced at the clock. Caroline needed something to drink real bad. But now, she was just gonna have to wait until these people went away.

Finally, the two men rose. "If you decide you want to tell us anything, Sherry, you can call. Anytime. Just like before."

She nodded. "I will."

They left.

She watched them through the crack in the door. They weren't leaving the building. They were headed upstairs. Other policemen were

knocking on doors in the building. They really were searching the entire building, but they wouldn't find Caroline. No one knew about the secret passageway to the basement room. The real basement was completely walled off from the little area under her apartment. She pouted. Poor Caroline. She would have to wait for her drink and it may be a long time.

Across the street, Toby answered his phone. The Lieutenant told him he could head over and meet him in Caroline's apartment. Toby dashed across the street. In a flash he was charging through the big green door and up the stairs. "Did you find her?" he asked as he burst through the apartment door.

Lt. Veranza spun around. "No. Simmer down."

"What did you find out? Anything?" Toby demanded.

"Toby, if you want to help us, you're gonna have to stay calm. Sherry isn't talking yet."

"Yet? Well, by God, I bet I can make her talk."

"And what if that shuts her up like a clam? We may never find Caroline if you scare Sherry bad enough."

Toby sighed. "Sorry." He pressed his hand to his forehead. "I'm sorry. It's just that I keep thinking about what she must be going through. What she's thinking. What she's feeling. Is she wondering if we're looking for her? Is she afraid? Is she even alive?"

Sommers broke in. "Okay. Let's keep our heads clear. Getting all worked up won't help the situation."

Veranza motioned around the room. "Looks like she was finished with the packing."

"Yeah," Toby muttered.

"How were you gonna move everything? Did you hire a moving company?"

He shook his head. "There's not enough stuff. I was gonna drive my Explorer back here to pick her up and get the stuff."

Veranza motioned to the boxes on the floor. "This wouldn't all fit into your vehicle."

Toby shook his head. "Those two big ones were to be given away. She wasn't gonna need anything. I was gonna take care of her. I was supposed to take care of her." His voice broke. They gave him a second to get hold of himself.

Lt. Veranza knelt down next to one of the large boxes. It had a roll of packing tape lying on top. "This was probably the last one she

filled." He used his pen to pick up the roll of tape and handed it to Sommers. "I want prints off this. I want prints off everything in this place. Get a team over here."

He ran his hand over the smooth top of the box. "Tell me something," he whispered to the box as Toby shifted uncomfortably.

"Tell me you're psychic," Toby said hopefully.

"I wish, but I do have good instincts."

"Well, why don't we get one of those psychics in here? We should do it now while the trail is still warm. How hard could it be to find one here in New York? I'd do anything if it helps."

Veranza smiled. "We could do that, but..." He stopped speaking as he ran his hand down the side of the box. "What's this?"

His finger hit a hole in the box. A small hole, just near the bottom of the box. He looked closer. "Holy crap."

Toby knelt down beside him, trying to see what he'd found.

"Sommers, get in here."

The detective came quickly. Veranza pointed to the hole.

"Bullet hole," Sommers stated matter-of-factly. "In all likelihood the bullet is still inside that box somewhere."

"Bullet?" Toby asked. "Are you saying someone shot her?"

Veranza shook his head. "No. No blood. No sign of her at all. She was taken from here at gunpoint is what I'm thinking. We'll dig through this box and find the bullet and determine what kind of gun. It's a start."

Sommers ran his hand slowly over the floor. "It hit here, ricocheted into the box."

"And whoever it was, fired the gun, why?" Toby asked.

"Who knows? To scare her or to get her attention, or the gun went off accidentally. We'll go back and canvass the building again, see if someone forgot that they heard a gunshot Saturday morning."

Toby nodded. "Well, let's get started."

Veranza looked him over. "I think we'll handle this. You need to go back to the hotel, get some sleep. We'll call when we have some definite information."

Toby stared at the man as if he had two heads.

Veranza shrugged. "Just thought I'd try. Okay, you can stick around, but stay out of the way and stay away from Sherry."

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The voice was soft, shaky, and barely audible, but she continued
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on. "The sun will come out tomorrow, bet your bottom dollar that tomorrow, there'll be sun."

Caroline paused in her song and sighed. "And I won't get to see it. Maybe never again," she mumbled. "No. I can't think that way. I will get out of here. I am out."

She lay on the cool floor, too weak to do anything else. She held the tab from the coke can in her hand as she lay on her stomach scratching words into the concrete floor. She didn't even realize that she'd covered half the entire floor.

"I should like to bathe before supper," she stated haughtily to the unseen butler she pretended was seeing to her needs. "And I think I shall have some fried chicken. Kentucky fried— original recipe please, with mashed potatoes and a big ol' buttery biscuit," she added. "More iced tea? Don't mind if I do."

She rolled to her back and stared up at the ceiling. "Oh, Toby," she sighed as she drifted in and out of reality. She thought of the morning they'd spent down by the creek. She thought of the horseback ride. He'd taught her things that day, pleasures she'd never known existed. Sins of the flesh, her mother would have told her. Maybe she was paying for those sins now. "God, are you mad at me?" she asked aloud. She could feel Toby's arms around her now. Feel his warm, soft lips on her cheek. "Toby," she whispered as she closed her eyes and drifted off somewhere between sleep and unconsciousness.

She opened her eyes again to a soft hand stroking her cheek.

"Caroline, wake up. I brought you something to drink."

Caroline squinted at the light from a flashlight pointed toward the floor. The hand went behind her neck, lifted her head. Caroline opened her mouth as Sherry tilted a cold can of coke against her lips. She swallowed too much too quickly causing her to cough and sputter. She tried again and kept it down. Sherry helped her to sit up and leaned her against the wall for support.

"There. Better?" the girl asked.

Caroline nodded.

"Sorry it took me so long to get back down here to ya," Sherry apologized. "But the cops are all over the place. They're looking for you. I don't know what to do now. They seem to think it was me who did something to you. They even came to my apartment and questioned me."

Caroline didn't bother pointing out that it obviously wasn't so

ludicrous that they thought maybe Sherry had done something. "But you're still gonna let me go, right?"

Sherry didn't answer. She only frowned at the scratchy, hoarse voice. "You need to drink more."

She held the can to Caroline's lips. "I don't know what to do now. Everyone's gonna be mad at me when they see you."

"We can fix that. You can sneak me up to your place. I can take a bath and get all fixed up. Then I'll just show up at the hotel like nothing happened."

"Everyone's smarter than that, Caro. Don't act like I'm stupid. We got to figure out a way to where it looks like I tried to help you."

Caroline wanted to think, but her mind wouldn't function. "What time is it?" she asked.

"It's the middle of the night. It's the only time I could find to come down. I had to sneak past the policeman watching my apartment when he went to check the outside."

"Sherry, if you don't let me out soon, they're gonna find me. You're gonna slip up and make a mistake and they won't give you the benefit of the doubt if you aren't the one to tell them where I am."

Sherry thought about this. "I gotta figure this out. I'll come down to get you in the morning."

"Promise?" Caroline asked, trying to keep the desperation from her voice.

Sherry nodded. "I promise, but I gotta clean you up a bit. Here, let me get a better look at you."

She shined the flashlight directly in Caroline's face. Caroline recoiled in pain.

"Sorry," Sherry said. "Wow, you look terrible. George wouldn't think you're so pretty now. Your face is all dirty. There's blood all over your neck. Your hands and nails are a mess. I can't bring you upstairs looking like this. What am I gonna do?" she asked in a panic.

"Sherry, bring me some soap and water and a washcloth, and my clothes and I'll look much better."

"I don't know if I can get all that down here."

"Put it in a backpack or something. You can do it, Sherry. Just some bottled water and a cloth. Okay?"

"Okay." The girl ran her hand over Caroline's cheek. "All this time, we could've been friends, but you didn't ever talk to me."

"I'm sorry, Sherry. I guess I got all caught up in my own life. You

know, trying to pay bills, sending money back to Atlanta to help pay my mother's medical bills, trying to make something out of my dance career. I didn't take time to get to know you. I should have. I realize that now."

"Your mom's sick?"

"She's dead now. She died a few weeks ago."

Sherry sat quietly, thinking. "So, your mom died about the same time George did. Sorry. So, like, I guess I haven't been very much of a friend either."

"It's okay, Sherry. When we get caught up in our own troubles, we tend to forget about those around us."

"I think when I'm a cop, that's one of the things I'm gonna talk to the kids at the schools about."

Caroline smiled. "You do that, Sherry. That will be real good."

"Well, good night, Caroline."

"Good night. I'll see you in the morning, right?"

"Yeah, I guess. Does that make you happy?"

She smiled. "It does."

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Toby hadn't been able to rest. It didn't matter that Lt. Veranza had ordered it. He wandered back to the last place Caroline was known to be alive. He thought he was losing his mind because he could see her, hear her, everywhere. Out in the stairwell, he sat on the steps, his head in his hands. He and Caroline had sat just like that fifteen years ago, at his home on the farm. What a cute little girl she had been. What a beautiful woman she'd become. "Where are you, Princess?" he muttered.

His head raised when he heard a door slowly open and close softly. He looked down through the railing. Sherry. What was she doing sneaking around in the middle of the night? He watched her lock the door of the apartment down the hall then turn quietly and head to her own door. She looked up. Their eyes met and she startled.

"Wait," Toby ordered as she fumbled with her keys.

"Please," he said softly.

She stopped, looked back up at him.

"What were you doing in that other apartment?"

She shrugged. "Sometimes at night I can't sleep and I go in there to be alone."

"Who lives there?"
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"No one."

"Where did you get the key?"

"George gave it to me."

"Would you mind if I go in and have a look around?" Toby rose and moved down to stand next to Sherry.

She looked up at him defiantly. "Cause you think I got your girlfriend hidden in there somewhere?"

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. The cops already searched that apartment today. Look, I know what everyone thinks, but I didn't hurt her. I'm gonna help her if I can."

"How are ya gonna do that?"

"I'm gonna look for her everywhere and I'm gonna be the one who finds her and then everyone will thank me and say they're sorry for thinking I hurt her."

Toby sighed. "Will you let me see inside the apartment?"

"Suit yourself." She unlocked the door and waited until he was satisfied Caroline wasn't anywhere inside.

"What's going on?" a gruff voice sounded from behind Sherry.

She turned to see the uniformed officer assigned to watch her coming through the big green door. "He wanted to check the apartment for his girlfriend and I let him in."

"Who wanted to?"

"I did," Toby said as he came back to the door. "I found her coming out of this apartment and asked to check it out."

"He didn't believe me when I told him I just go in there sometimes at night when I can't sleep."

"I think I'll have a look myself," the officer said.

Sherry stood, arms folded across her chest, pouting as the officer checked the vacant apartment.

"See, I told you," Sherry taunted as the officer emerged.

The officer motioned toward Sherry's apartment. "You need to go inside and go to bed," the officer ordered. "Does your mother know you're out roaming around?"

She shrugged. "She's asleep. She has to go to work real early."

"Well, you need to be in bed too," the officer said.

She didn't argue. "Good night," she answered sweetly.

At that moment Jeff pulled open the ugly green door to find Toby and a police officer standing in the foyer.

"What are you doing here?" Toby asked.

"Lookin' for you, man. Why didn't you tell me? I can't believe you didn't call on me."

Toby shook his head. "I wasn't convinced she was really gone. And by the time I realized this was real, there seemed to be no time, but thanks for coming."

"Not just me. Ace is asking the cabbie to wait. Billy-Bob are already at the hotel."

"How did— who told...?"

"You have a way with words, Toby. It's a good thing I can read your mind. Eugene called me, said he was worried about you. He filled me in on what was happening and said you needed a friend. Looking at you, I'd say he was right. You look terrible."

"What do you expect? She's been missing for almost four days. There's no sign of her, Jeff. She's just gone. I'm goin' crazy. I need to do something. Anything. I feel useless. And I can't stop thinking about what she must be going through. I just need to do something."

Ace entered the building. "What you're gonna do is come back to the hotel with us. There's nothing you can do here, not right now."

Ace grabbed Toby by the arm. "Don't even think about resisting. Come on."

Reluctantly, Toby got in the cab, but they only got a block away when Toby yelled, "Stop!"

The driver pulled over. Toby bounded out of the car and up three steps to pull on the door to the little Church of Christ. It was locked. He pounded on the door with his fist then leaned his forehead on the door in defeat.

His friends stood around him for support. Jeff laid his hand on Toby's shoulder.

Toby shook his head. "Just when you think everything is gonna be all right, something comes along and snatches life away. Why? I just keep thinking, why? She doesn't deserve this. You know?"

"Toby?"

All three men turned at the strong voice coming from the left side of the church.

"Pastor Matt," Toby answered. "Caroline is missing."

"I heard." He motioned for them to follow him. "Come inside."

Ace paid the cabbie and caught up. They entered the building from the back and found themselves inside a small apartment. They sat in

the tiny living room. The pastor introduced himself to Jeff and Ace, shook their hands, offered them something to drink which they declined. He then grabbed a chair from the dining table, turned it backwards and sat with his arms folded over the back of the chair.

There was a feeling of peace there as they sat silently. Finally, Pastor Matt spoke. "Tell me what you know so far."

Toby filled him in. Matt closed his eyes briefly and nodded.

Toby continued talking. "She was abused as a child." He turned to Jeff and Ace. "Did I ever tell you guys that?"

"Tell us again," Jeff prodded, understanding his need to talk about her.

"Her mother was a drunk. Used to beat her. Starved her. Knocked her in the head with the phone once when I tried to call her, back when she was just twelve. The woman sent her to the hospital several times. They finally took her away from her mother for a while, but Caroline forgave her, you know? She even helped take care of her when her mother became ill. Then she grew up and came here to make something of herself. And then we found each other. And now– and now she's gone."

"You say that like you've given up," Jeff said.

Toby hung his head.

"He hasn't given up," Matt put in. "That's why he's here. Toby, do you recall what we spoke about the other day?"

"Yes."

"And a few minutes ago, outside, I heard you ask 'why' is this happening."

"Did I?"

"Yes, you did. Toby, remember what I told you. God has a plan, and ultimately that plan is ALWAYS for our good, though we may not see that from our current perspective."

Toby's jaw clenched and he heaved out a breath in frustration. "I can't see how Caroline going missing can be for her good."

"I know you can't see it. That's why you came to me. And at the moment I can't see it either, though I'm sure God will reveal it to us both soon. I only know that everything will be okay."

Toby looked up. "How do you know that?"

"Because as you were telling me about what's going on I had a strong feeling of peace come over me. You may not think that means much, but over the years I have grown to know God's voice. I

recognize it instantly. That feeling of complete peace, where the knot in the pit of my stomach simply melts away and God fills me with His love and comfort. It tells me that she's alive, and that she'll be found. It's gonna be okay."

"Dear God, I hope you're right," Toby whispered.

Matt smiled. "I am. Have faith. Just a little. Will you allow me to pray with you?"

The three men nodded and bowed their heads. Pastor Matthew Lucas prayed powerfully, for a very long time. When he finished, there was a lifting of spirits and a hopeful feeling in all of their hearts.

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Toby and his band members lay on the beds and couches of the hotel suite, talking, dozing in and out of sleep throughout the rest of the night. When his phone rang early that morning, Toby leapt for it. "Hello?"

"Toby?" Lt. Veranza asked.

"Yes."

"I'm coming by to pick you up. The bullet we found is from a nine millimeter pistol. Easy for anyone to get here in the city."

"Are we still focusing on Sherry?"

"I'm keeping an eye on her, but you know we also can't immediately rule out that someone knew Caroline was about to marry a wealthy, prominent man."

"Yeah, so wouldn't there have been a ransom note or something by now, right?"

"Usually, but not necessarily."

"So, why are you coming to get me? Not that I mind. I want to be in on everything."

"To keep an eye on you, son. I want to make sure you don't do anything crazy, like maybe scare Sherry. Be ready in half an hour."

"Is this really necessary?"

"It's either this or I suppose I could arrange to have you arrested again and taken down to the station."

"You gotta be kidding me."

"Wanna try me?"

"I'll be ready in thirty minutes."

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"Caroline, get up, please," Sherry begged.

She shook Caroline again, poured more water from the bottle into

the cloth in her hand and wiped Caroline's face. It was a drop of the water running into Caroline's mouth that brought her out of her semiconscious state. Slowly, she opened her eyes, licked her lips.

"Man, Caroline, you had me worried. I couldn't get you to wake up. Here, sit up."

She pulled Caroline to a sitting position and continued wiping her face with the cloth.

"Water, please, Sherry. Just give me some water."

Raising her eyebrows, Sherry held the bottle to Caroline's lips. Caroline's tongue flicked out to taste the cool water. Slowly, she was able to take several swallows before Sherry took the bottle away. She set the bottle down and lifted the cloth to finish cleaning Caroline's face. She spoke casually as she worked. "So, thought you might wanna know that I saw your boyfriend last night."

"You did?" Caroline croaked, trying to sit up straighter.

"Uh huh. He was on the stairs last night when I got back up there. He saw me come out of the apartment."

Caroline tried to clear her throat. "Did he say anything to you?"

"Yeah. He said he wanted to check out the apartment to see why I was in there in the middle of the night. I let him. I knew he wouldn't find our secret door. Me and you are the only ones who know about it. I guess that sort of makes us special, huh?"

"Yeah, special," Caroline said weakly.

Sherry moved down to clean Caroline's neck and chest. She bit her lip as she rubbed the cloth over the parched skin. "I brought your clothes."

Caroline didn't answer. She felt like crying, only she was so dehydrated she had no tears. She was afraid to believe Sherry really would let her out. She'd thought she'd never see Toby again, and now, seeing him might be just minutes away. She was fearful it was too good to be true, afraid Sherry might change her mind.

"Let's see now," Sherry said, placing her finger on her chin. "How am I gonna get you dressed? It would be easier if you could stand. Can you stand, Caroline?"

She nodded. "I think I can. I'm gonna have to eventually unless you plan to carry me up those stairs. I can stand, if you help me."

Sherry struggled to help Caroline to her feet. "Wow, you're light as a feather. I bet you've lost ten pounds in these past few days. I bet you're gonna have a big ol' McDonald's hamburger tonight, and a

chocolate shake, huh?"

"I just might."

"Okay. I'm gonna lean you here against the wall. Can you stand right here while I get your clothes?"

Caroline nodded, standing shakily against the wall. Standing made her immediately nauseated, but she didn't care. Sherry turned to grab Caroline's jeans from the door knob where she'd hung them. She retrieved the jeans and came to kneel before Caroline to help her, but as she knelt, the gun she had stuffed in the waistband of her own jeans got in her way. She pulled the gun out. Eyed Caroline.

"I don't think I need this anymore, do you?"

Caroline bit her lip and slowly shook her head.

"Good," Sherry said, smiling and then casually tossed the gun over onto the mattress.

The loud blast startled them both. Eyes wide, mouths gaping, they stared at each other, but it was Caroline who began to slide down the wall. Her side was on fire. She grabbed at the hole where blood oozed from under her fingers. She looked back up at Sherry, terrified.

"Sherry," Caroline gasped. "Sherry, what have you done?"

Sherry stood, her mouth open, the surprised look on her face telling it all. "I-I—didn't mean to. I swear, Caroline. It was an accident. I didn't mean to shoot you."

Caroline slipped to the floor, her shoulders leaning against the wall. She drew in a ragged breath. "Sherry, listen to me," Caroline said quickly, knowing she had very little time before she lost consciousness. "You have to go for help. You have to go right now and get help."

"I didn't mean to do it," Sherry cried.

Caroline groaned with pain. "I know, but you have to get me help now. If you don't, I'll die."

"I can't. I can't go now. I'll be in trouble."

"Sherry, please," Caroline sobbed. "If I die, they'll eventually find me and then you really will be in trouble. You have to go for help now. If you do, they'll know that it was an accident and that you tried to help. Now go, Sherry. I can't hold on much longer. If you go now and get me help I'll be able to tell them how it was an accident."

"Okay," Sherry said, finally making the decision. "Okay. I'm going right now."

"Promise me, Sherry. Promise me you'll bring me help."

"I promise," she said solemnly.

"Good girl," Caroline said softly. Her eyes closed.

✞✞✞

John 14:16-17

"And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you."

# Chapter 16

Toby leaned on the unmarked car that pulled up to the curb. "Hello, detectives."

Sommers smiled. "Toby, I heard you went roaming last night."

"I couldn't sleep," Toby explained. "What are we gonna do to find Caroline? Did you re-canvass the building? Did anyone hear a gunshot Saturday morning?"

Lt. Veranza leaned across. "Several people did, but no one was concerned enough to report it. The lady upstairs said she'd be calling the police every few minutes if she reported every strange sound coming through the walls." He waved his hand. "Get in, Toby."

"Where we headed?" Toby asked as they drove away.

"A pawn shop near Caroline's apartment. We're gonna try to trace the gun."

Toby nodded and sighed. "Were you able to find out who called the hotel pretending to be Caroline?"

"Not yet. Got a warrant to pull phone records, and should have that information in a few hours."

As they approached the corner, Lt. Veranza's cell phone rang.

"Veranza," he answered.

"Lieutenant?"

He sat up straighter. "Sherry?"

"I didn't mean to do it. I swear. It just happened."

"Okay, Sherry, now slow down. You didn't mean to do what? What did you do?"

"I— oh, man, Lieutenant, I shot her. It was an accident and she needs help now! She needs help right now."

"Are you at your apartment building?"

"Yes, yes! You have to hurry."

Lt. Veranza put his hand over the phone and motioned to his partner. "Get the paramedics over there now." He whipped a U-turn,

glanced at Toby. "Easy now. We're gonna make this right," he said to both the girl on the phone and the man in the back seat.

Sgt. Sommers grabbed the radio and started barking orders. Toby's fingers dug into the seat as he tried to calm his heart.

"Sherry, I'm in my car and I'm close by. Meet me out front so you can take me to her right away, okay?"

"Okay," she agreed. "I gotta hang up."

"No, Sherry, wait. Damn."

Sirens blaring, they screeched to a halt in front of the building. The three men sprang from the car as Sherry stood on the porch, waving madly. She grabbed Lt. Veranza's hand and pulled him down the hall to the vacant apartment, while Toby and Sgt. Sommers followed right behind. When they watched Sherry go inside the closet and push the wall out they began to understand just how close they'd been to finding Caroline. So close and yet so far. She'd been right under their noses.

They flew down the steps and looked to the open door on the far right wall. Caroline's body lay sprawled on the concrete floor, her shoulders leaning against the block wall. Blood seeped from a wound in her side. Veranza and Sommers knelt down to see what could be done, ready to perform CPR if necessary. Lt. Veranza found a pulse in her neck. "She's alive," he said breathlessly.

Toby fell by her side. "Caroline," he sobbed. "Caroline, can you hear me, baby?"

For just a moment the room fell silent, as if they expected an answer, but there was none.

Sgt. Sommers ran upstairs to guide the paramedics down to the hidden room.

Toby took Caroline's blood-covered hand, stroked her cheek. "Live for me," he whispered.

"I was trying to get her dressed," Sherry began to explain. "It was an accident."

Toby looked slowly up in the young girl's direction, his eyes focusing on her. Lt. Veranza leapt to his feet, grabbed Sherry and pulled her out of the room.

Toby turned back to Caroline. "Don't you leave me," he prayed. "Don't you dare leave me. I promise I'll never let you out of my sight again. Never. Just come back to me."

"Sir, we need to take care of her now."

Toby looked up to find a paramedic gently addressing him. He

looked directly into the young man's eyes. "Ya gotta help her. Please don't let her die."

"We'll do our best," he said as he ushered Toby aside. Toby stood and watched over their shoulders as they worked to stabilize her, paced as they hooked up an IV, banged his forehead against a wall as they attached small electrodes to her chest.

"Why are you doing that?" Toby asked, motioning to the electrodes. "Is something wrong with her heart?"

The paramedic talked as he worked. "She's severely dehydrated, so, along with the loss of blood, her heart has a chance of stopping and we just want to be ready for the worst."

Toby nodded, breathing deeply, running his hand through his hair. Lt. Veranza joined him, asking the paramedics about her condition.

The man glanced nervously at Toby before he gave a shake of his head to the detective. "Well, she's lost a lot of blood. Her pupils are not reactive. Seems to be blunt force trauma to the back of the head. Her condition looks to be critical."

Toby's face paled. He slid down the wall onto his haunches and began to pray. It seemed forever before they lifted the stretcher to carry her out to the waiting ambulance.

"Ride with me, Toby," Lt. Veranza said, placing a hand firmly on his shoulder.

Toby watched as they lifted the stretcher and started up the steep stairwell. In shock, he turned, looking over the room that had been her prison. Slowly, his eyes moved around the room while Lt. Veranza ordered the room sealed. He used his pen to lift the gun from the mattress, nodded at an officer. "And bag this."

Both Toby and the Lieutenant noticed the writing scratched into the floor at the same time. Toby read it slowly, carefully. He lifted his head and met Lt. Veranza's eyes.

"Come on. Let's get you to the hospital. When she wakes up, she'll want to see you."

At the hospital the doctor spoke as he quickly examined the patient. "Looks like the bullet took a clean ride through her side. No organs, no arteries, no bones. She's very lucky."

Toby only grunted in response to that statement. He watched as they worked on his beloved, his eyes never leaving her face. If she opened her eyes, he wanted her to know he was there. He remained at her side, Lt. Veranza surprisingly at his side. He knew he wouldn't

have been allowed to stay if she'd been taken into surgery. And the fact that they'd been able to work on her right here in one of the small emergency treatment rooms told him she would be okay, but he was worried again when he heard them speaking about a head injury. Something about brain surgery. He scowled as they wheeled Caroline away. He asked to go with her, but the doctor wanted to speak to him.

"Mr. Nash, Detective," the doctor began. "She's made it through so far and that's a good sign. The bullet did very little damage internally. Her main problem is the deteriorated condition she was in to begin with. Severe dehydration, and a knock to the back of her head. We're hydrating her through the IV and I've sent her for an MRI to make sure there is no injury to the brain."

An hour later, Toby sat alone near Caroline in the Intensive Care Unit, holding her hand, talking to her, willing her to open her eyes when the doctor came in to check on her.

"What's her condition, Doc?" Toby asked softly.

"Her condition is serious but stable. There's some slight swelling to the brain, but the brain itself is not damaged."

"Swelling? Can you do something about that?"

"If it were major swelling, it could cause brain damage and we would operate to relieve the pressure, however, this swelling is only slight, and there is no reason to chance surgery."

"Could this slight swelling cause permanent damage?"

"It could but I doubt that. Right now we just need to wait for her to come out of it. Then we'll see. Okay?"

"So what now? We just wait?"

"I'm afraid so. We have to give her some time to recover. The fluids will help. The bullet wound shouldn't be a problem. She's in good hands here." The doctor smiled kindly. "Chin up. Does she have any other family?"

Toby shook his head. "No, I'm it. There is no one else."

The doctor nodded. "Well, regardless, I'm told you have some visitors in the waiting room, so you might want to go speak with them. I'll check back shortly." The doctor took his leave.

Toby headed to the waiting room and what he saw when he got there amazed him. He'd been incorrect when he told the doctor she had no other family. She had a very large family. Large and diverse, dedicated and loyal.

Jeff rose to greet his friend and put his arms around him. Toby

hugged him hard, looked around at all the other expectant faces. There was Ace, Billy-Bob, Eugene, Rosie, Irene, Alice, Madame Pierre, several regulars from the diner, a few fellow dance instructors, some of Caroline's theater friends and even Evan, the lead singer from Crazy 88 was present.

"Well, I'm on pins and needles. How is she?" Rosie asked.

Toby filled them in, giving the same information the doctor had given him. A woman Toby had never seen before approached him, tears in her eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Nash, about what my daughter has done. I don't expect you to be able to forgive her. I just wanted you to know how sorry I am. She's been a difficult child. I don't understand her."

Toby closed his eyes a moment and took time to clear his throat. "Caroline left a note. Part of that note asked me to forgive Sherry. So for her sake, for my Caroline's sake, I will. I do. Caroline also mentioned in her note that Sherry's father had done things to her and that Sherry needs counseling. I'm not sure if you're aware of these things or not. I just wanted you to know what Caroline said."

The woman's lips trembled. "I didn't know. Or maybe I was afraid to know. And now this has happened."

"Look," Toby comforted. "I appreciate your coming here. I know it took a lot of courage. Now you need to be there for your daughter so the rest of her life won't be ruined."

She nodded. "I will. I promise."

Jeff ushered Toby to a seat. "Sit for minute. Let me get you something to drink, some coffee maybe."

Toby conceded. Silently, he sat and began to pray. He prayed that God would give Caroline the strength to pull through. He prayed for healing. He prayed, he begged, he pleaded. Not one of Caroline's "family members" left. They stayed, knowing they probably wouldn't get to see her, yet still wanted to show their support. It was amazing to Toby how one small girl could touch so many people's lives. Toby was vaguely aware of more people filing into the room, but only looked up when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Uncle Jim?" Toby rose to be enveloped by his Uncle James and Aunt Sylvia Stillwater.

"How did you hear?" Toby asked. "I mean, how did you get here so quickly?"

James shook his head. "We had no idea what was going on with

you and Caro. We've been camping out near the Grand Canyon, doing the one with nature kind of thing. If I'd known what you two had been going through believe me we would have been here for you."

Sylvia took up where her husband left off. "We left our camp yesterday, checked into a hotel last night, flipped on the TV and there you were, headline news."

"I haven't paid any attention to it. What are they saying now?"

"They're saying your fiancé had been kidnapped," Sylvia said. "Then they started in on all this background which absolutely shocked me to the core. All this stuff about a murder and your arrest and then Caro was arrested and now this. It's all so crazy."

"Anyway," James continued. "As soon as we heard we started for New York. Once we got here we were told Caroline had been found but she'd been shot. We found out which hospital and here we are."

"Is Caro okay, Toby?" Sylvia asked.

"We don't know yet."

Paul and Lynn and their parents listened intently to the crazy story Toby told.

"So, now it's a waiting game." He shook his head. "It's killing me, thinking about what she must have been through. She wrote a message to me scratched into the concrete floor where she was held prisoner. At first it makes sense, but then, it's obvious she was delirious. There were rhymes, disjointed thoughts, parts of songs. There was blood on the floor and she drew petals around it, you know? Like a flower? She was so alone, in the dark." He had to stop. He rubbed his hands over his face, wiping the tears away.

James Stillwater placed a hand on Toby's shoulder. "Okay, now Toby, don't do this to yourself. Caro's a strong girl. She's a survivor. She'll pull through. I just know it. You two haven't come all this way to be apart now."

Toby nodded his head, because that made sense.

"Do your parents know?" Sylvia asked.

He shook his head. "I haven't even thought of calling them. They already came all the way back to the states once, when I was in jail. There's nothing they can do now. Let them have their vacation."

Jim Stillwater frowned. "Toby, your Mom and Dad will be devastated if you don't call them and they find out some other way. Come on now, let's give them a call. If nothing else, it will help to pass the time."

Toby only had to think of the comfort his father would offer and made up his mind to call. His father had a way of putting everything into perspective and this time was no exception. When Toby hung up from his call, he admitted that his father's strength had indeed been just what he'd needed. He drew a deep breath, ready to face the world and headed back to the room in ICU.

He arrived at the entrance to the room and he almost didn't recognize her. The tiny pale girl in the bed reminded him of the twelve-year-old he'd fallen in love with long ago. Thin, abused, beaten down. His hand shook as he reached for hers. Pressing her frail fingers between his large hands he willed her to get well.

"Hey, darlin'," he said softly.

He waited. Realized he'd give anything to have her open her eyes and smile at him.

When she didn't, he continued on. "Anyway, I just want you to know that I'm here. I'll never leave your side again. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you, Princess. It seems I never am when things get hard for you, but I'm gonna try to change all that in the future. I, uh, I read your message, the one on the floor. I *will* write a song about what happened to us, just like you asked, but it'll have a good ending. It won't be about a lost love. It will be about me and you and how much we love each other and about how happy we are together and about going down to the pond and feeding the ducks and riding Thunder and kissing on New Year's Eve. It will be about the children we will have someday and what a wonderful, loving, mother you are and it will be about the woman who can dance her way into anyone's heart."

He lowered his head to her hand. Kissed it. "Dear God, I love her. She has to get well. Please. In Jesus' name."

Toby cleared his throat and began to sing softly. He started with *Four Days*, then moved on to every other song he knew. It was when he started on *Amazing Grace* that his voice broke. It'd been the first song she'd ever heard him sing. It didn't sound like much but he made his way through it. And when he finished, he laid his head on their joint hands and fell asleep.

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Grace Watson sat in the nurse's station as she was briefed by Debbie, the morning duty nurse, in preparation for taking over.

"The newest arrival, Caroline Jones, is a gunshot victim, dehydration, head injury. She hasn't regained consciousness yet."
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Debbie leaned forward. "Listen to this. So, I go in to take care of her and he's singing to her."

"He? He who?"

"Oh, Grace, don't you know? Our patient is Toby Nash's fiancé. They found her this morning. She'd been held hostage by some deranged teenage girl."

"Oh, yeah, I remember hearing something about that. Well, thank goodness they found her. It's nice to hear good news for a change. Whenever you hear about someone being kidnapped the next thing you usually hear is their body was found in a ditch or a lake or something, so this is good."

"Exactly, except she's in bad shape. But she's alive and stable."

"So, they say this Toby Nash is quite a looker," Grace murmured as she thumbed through some paperwork.

"They say? Grace, honey, you've got to get out more. He's drop-dead gorgeous, but he's only got eyes for her. It's so sweet, Gracie. He hasn't left her side. Every time I go by he's either talking to her or singing to her."

"I'll have to head down there and just see this guy for myself."

"Ever heard his song, Nothin' But Lovin'? Does something to you, right here," Debbie said, rubbing her mid-section. "Gets things all stirred up. The man can definitely sing. And he really loves her, ya know? When he was singing to her he was all choked up. It got to me. Warms my heart to see he's for real."

"Well, I need to make my rounds and check her over and then he can sing 'til his heart's content."

"I don't think his heart will be content until she wakes up and he knows she's alright," Debbie sighed.

Grace halted just outside of Caroline's cubicle, taken by the one-sided conversation she overheard.

"...and of course, you can pick out the wall color, but if you want my opinion, it should be something bright and sunny, 'cause that's how it looks when you smile. And if you want, we can put a dance floor right there in the house, and maybe we could enclose it in glass, you know sort of like a sun room, and you can dance with the trees and flowers all around and..." He stopped as he noticed a nurse standing at the doorway.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to intrude," Grace said. "I just need to check her over and change her bandage." She smiled kindly at the man. She'd

been touched by his words and taken by his appearance. Such a large, strong man to speak such tender words, Grace thought. And beautiful. Was it possible for a man to be beautiful? Now she understood what Debbie meant.

Toby rose and stood back while the nurse checked her vitals and adjusted the IV fluids being used to hydrate her.

"Mr. Nash, would you like to step out for a few minutes while I change the bandage?"

"I want to stay," he said softly. "I promised her I wouldn't leave her side. I won't get in the way."

Grace nodded. "Oh, you're not in the way. It's just that some people are a little squeamish, so just so you know, if you faint I won't be able to catch you," she said with a smile.

He smiled back. "I think I'll be okay."

Toby watched as Grace examined the dressing on Caroline's side. Carefully, she removed the dressing exposing an angry red and purple wound. As she worked on the area, Caroline winced, gaining their immediate attention. Toby stroked her cheek. Grace spoke to her.

"Am I bothering you, Sweetie? You want me to leave you alone, huh? Well, just open your eyes and tell me to stop. Come on, Miss Caroline, open your eyes and tell mean old Grace to leave you alone."

Toby sighed heavily as he realized there would be no further response. He watched Grace work and appreciated her quick, precise movements. "You've been a nurse for a long time?"

"I've been in ICU for the past seven years and before that I worked emergency OR for twelve years. I've seen it all."

"So, why the move to ICU?"

She shrugged. "I have a way of getting attached to my patients. I had this one woman in the OR . . . in for an emergency C-section, but she was okay, ya know? She and the baby were just fine. We moved them up to maternity. The wards were brimming over and the nurses were short staffed. She developed toxemia." Grace paused. "She was overlooked and she died. It was senseless. Absolutely senseless." She shrugged, stopped to clear her throat. "We helped her through the most dangerous part, only to have her die upstairs when she should have been okay. I moved to ICU because I have this need to make sure the patients were getting the appropriate care once they were fixed up in the ER. I mean patients, just like your Caroline here, who need to be monitored carefully."

He nodded. "You're a good woman..." he looked for her name tag. "Grace Watson."

She shrugged again. "Well, we're nurses because we want to help people." She smiled. "It's sure not for the money."

Toby sighed. "Have you ever seen anyone stay unconscious this long? Has she slipped into some kind of coma?"

She smiled at him. "Coma is such a scary word. Caroline's body has closed down for a while to rest while she recovers. That's all. The head injury is the main reason. And yes, to answer your question, I've seen patients stay asleep for three or four days, then wake up good as new. So, don't you worry."

"Thank you," Toby said softly. "And, thanks for taking such good care of her."

Grace offered him some words of encouragement and left the room, but returned a few minutes later with a blanket and pillow. "That chair leans back," she explained. "You need rest too, so here's a blanket and pillow for later. Now, some of your friends down in the waiting room are asking about Caroline. I'll stay with her if you want to go down there for a minute or two and fill them in."

"There's a few who will want to see her. Would that be okay?"

Grace hesitated.

"You see, she has no family, I mean, they're really the only family she has."

She nodded. "Only two at a time and no noise."

"Yes, ma'am," Toby agreed.

"Are all you southern boys so polite?" she asked to help lighten his mood.

"Oh, no, ma'am. Some are downright ornery."

She laughed. "Sounds like my kind of men."

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In the waiting room, Caroline's extended family gathered around to hear about her condition. They were disheartened to find she was still unconscious. Those who wanted to go in to see her immediately began pairing up to go back to her room.

Jeff laid a hand on Toby's shoulder. "The detectives were called off on another case but said to tell you they would check back with you later."

Evan approached, shook Toby's hand. "I gotta be goin', Toby. I was in town and heard what happened. I just wanted to come by to let
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you know I'm here for you. The other guys said to give you and Caroline their best. I hope she's gonna be okay, man."

"Thanks for coming by, Evan. I was amazed to see you here, even though I didn't get to speak with you earlier."

"No sweat, man. You got friends everywhere, Nash, because you're one of the good guys, even if you do sing that country crap. If the truth were known, I was really here to steal your musicians while you weren't looking."

Toby smiled. "I don't blame you for that. They're the best."

"Well, at least we agree on that." Evan's smile faded and he shook Toby's hand. "Hey, take care, man."

He nodded goodbye to Evan as his cell phone went off. "Yeah," Toby said softly into the receiver.

"Toby? Rick Kino, I heard what happened. How is she?"

"She's alive, but still out."

"She'll pull through."

"I hope you're right."

"She will, I just have a feeling."

"She's such a good person, Rick, ya know?"

Ricky drew a breath. "I get it. So, I'm gonna tell you something, Toby, and you can take it or leave it. It's something my father taught me and it's gonna sound all airy fairy but if you open your mind, you'll realize the truth of it." He stopped, waited for Toby's response.

Toby sighed. "If you're gonna help me to make some sense of this, I'm all ears."

"Okay, good. So, what happens to us, for us, around us, is what we attract to ourselves. She did this, or you did."

"What the..."

"Let me finish before you go berserk and if you want to go a round with me next time you see me, that's okay too."

Silently, breathing hard, Toby waited.

"We may not mean to attract it. You see, God has a plan."

Toby nodded. "God has a plan. That's the same thing your pastor friend said."

"He's right. Nothing is random. God's universe is ordered. Part of His plan is to help us grow and learn. I say just part, because I don't know all of His plan. Whatever lesson we need to learn, it works out that how we vibrate, is what attracts whatever to us."

"Vibrate?" Toby questioned.

"I'm not asking you to believe any crazy way out stuff. Scientists have proven that everything, every single thing, is made up of particles of energy that vibrate at a certain speed. Some things, like a dense rock, vibrate very slowly and their vibration rarely changes. Living things are a little different. Their vibrations change. Flowers in full bloom have a high energy vibration, while wilted flowers or cut flowers have a much slower vibration. Puppies and kittens you can assume have a high vibration.

"People, however, have the advantage of actually being able to monitor, control and even change their vibrations, if they know how. Now, here's the crux. Like attracts like. So, whatever you are vibrating you are attracting the same type of vibrations to you. People who are very positive and constantly happy attract other people and situations to them of the same type vibrations and therefore, their happiness increases.

"The thing is, most people fluctuate, drawing a little of everything to their lives. Caroline drew you and you drew her. Like vibrations. Let me ask you a question and forgive me for being bold, but Shelley told me a little bit about Caroline. She believes Caroline was abused as a child."

"Yeah, she was. It's colored her life right up until now."

"What you just said, is exactly what I'm talking about. She's known abuse. She remembers it, she vibrates it. Maybe not all the time, but enough to continue to bring things of that same vibration into her life. Tell me, does it seem bad things are always happening to her? I know what's happened over the past few months. Do you wonder why she's always coming up against abusive situations?"

"I have wondered that. I actually discussed that very thing with a friend not long ago and with your friend too."

"You're talking about Matt again?"

"Yes."

"Well, if I'm telling you the same things he's already told you, that means it hasn't sunk in yet."

"Okay."

"God does have a plan, for you and for your girl. He wants her to lift herself out of her abusive mindset."

"How is she supposed to do that? If God is so powerful, why doesn't He do it for her?"

"Ever seen a baby bird trying to peck its way out of its shell?"

"Yeah."

"It looks like a long, slow, hard, tedious process, but as tempting as it is, ya don't help it, right?"

Toby sighed as he realized the point Ricky Kino was making. "Right, because it's the process of it working its way out of the shell that makes the bird strong."

"Exactly, man. So, maybe when Caroline comes out of this, she'll be so happy and grateful to be alive that she'll attract happier things to herself. And really, that same thing might go for you, and all of us who care about you and Caroline. God's plan usually affects more than just the people He's working through. His wisdom always amazes me. He's truly awesome."

"Ya know, I haven't thought much about God at all until Caroline came into my life, I mean *back* into my life."

"You see! God IS using her!" Ricky proclaimed. "Anyway Toby, just think about what I've said. You don't have to accept it right away. Just try to be aware of it. Even more, you and Caroline let go of the things that cause you hurt and pain and focus on the more positive side of life. I think you'll see that it makes sense."

"I think I already see."

"The joy of the Lord is your strength, it says in the Bible," Ricky quoted. "There are thousands of passages, bible quotes and wise sayings, that expound on the importance of having a joyful countenance, it's just that no one has ever explained the science behind it until recently."

Toby thought for a moment before he spoke. "Your words make a lot of sense, Rick, and I actually feel strangely comforted, like everything really is gonna be okay."

"It is, I prayed for you guys and had a strong feeling of peace come over me. I know things will work out for your good, and hers."

"Again, that's the same thing Matt said, almost exactly the same."

Ricky smiled. "God is faithful and true."

"Well, Ricky Kino, I appreciate you taking the time to help me to make sense of all this."

"You need anything, anything at all, let me know. In the meantime, we'll be sending positive thoughts and prayers your way."

"Thanks, Rick."

"And like I say, you need to go a round with me to work out some of that frustration, I'll gladly oblige."

"It would take more than one round."

"No offense, Toby, but you wouldn't make more than one round with me," Ricky said with a laugh. "Oh, just a heads up– Bree and Shelley are all up in arms and talking about flying out there, so you can probably expect them in a few days."

"That's really not necessary."

"Well, I've learned not to stand in Shelley's nor Bree's way when they have their mind set on something. Anyway, I'll let you go. Remember, Toby, all is well. Really."

"Thanks." He ended the call and glanced up to see Madame Pierre, shaken and pale. He went to her quickly.

"Madame?" Toby took her by the arm. "Please, come sit down. You don't look very well."

She let him lead her to one of the vacated chairs.

"Aunt Sylvia," Toby called softly. "Would you mind getting some water for Madame Pierre?"

"I wouldn't mind at all. I need to do something. This waiting is driving me out of my mind." She ran to do his bidding.

"Madame, you're not well?"

She wiped away a tear before she spoke. "Nonsense. I'm healthy as a horse, but my Caroline, I am worried about my Caroline."

"Have you been up to see her yet?"

"Not yet. I thought I would let everyone else go up to see her first. I don't want to appear to be a hog."

Toby smiled. "No wonder Caroline loves you so much."

The woman nodded. "Ahh, my little one, she is like a daughter to me. I try to stay out of her life, try not to be so overbearing and I try not to be hurt when I am not the first to know something that has happened in her life, after all, she is not really my daughter, oui?" She shook her head. "But this has been so hard. So hard. Tell me the truth, Toby. Do you think she is gonna be okay?"

Remembering Ricky's admonition, he nodded. "I can think nothing else, Madame. I don't dare think any other way."

Sylvia brought the water to Madame, bent over her and patted her back, and squeezed her hand.

Toby looked up as Eugene and Rosie came back into the room after their visit with Caroline. Toby and Jeff leaned down and helped Madame to her feet. "Come on, let's go see her."

Toby and Jeff stood outside the door while Madame had time with

Caroline. Toby could see through the small glass window and watched as Madame held Caroline's hand and prayed over her.

Madame Pierre stroked her little one's cheek, whispering to her lovingly, encouraging her to be strong. "You must never give up, mon chère. Your handsome man, he is so worried, but he waits patiently for you to take the time you need to get well. But Madame, your Madame does not have so much patience. So for me, you will hurry up, no?" She kissed Caroline's forehead.

Madame joined Toby outside the room while Jeff took his turn visiting Caroline.

"Hey kid," Jeff said casually. "Look, it's been a blast and all, but I'm ready for this gig to be over. I don't know how much more Toby can take. I want you to buck up and come out of this. Besides, I've decided that I want a rematch on that poker game. You owe me. Now get better." He bent and kissed her cheek.

Toby continued watching as more of Caroline's friends came to visit her. It seemed kind of spooky, as if they were saying goodbye one last time. Consciously, he let that thought go. He knew they were encouraging her and letting her know how much they cared.

The Stillwaters were the last of the visitors. They stayed with her a longer time and Jeff insisted Toby use the time to eat something before he went back in to spend the night with Caroline.

When Toby and Jeff returned from the hospital cafeteria, the remaining visitors said their goodbyes. Jeff left too, but returned thirty minutes later.

"Here, I thought you might need this," he said, as he held out Toby's guitar.

Toby accepted gratefully, looking his friend over. "You're soaking wet."

"Yeah, it's pouring out there, big time. Severe thunderstorm warnings. Sort of fits the way I feel."

Toby started to agree and stopped himself, again thinking of what Ricky had said, and realizing that it was truly easy to let negative thoughts and emotions take over. He held up the guitar, smiled. "Thanks, man."

Toby turned his attention to Caroline. He looked her over, his mind wandering back to the year they'd met. From the beginning he'd known there was something special about her. He'd wanted to save her then and he sure as heck wanted to save her now. With her eyes closed,

her face seemed remarkably peaceful. Her adorable mouth, the way it was drawn up, appeared to be smiling as she slept. He ran a finger down her turned up nose, over her lips to her cute little chin. Soft. How could she be so soft and yet so strong?

He thought of the way she'd taken care of Paul and Lynn Stillwater way back when and the way she is now, always working, cleaning, rehearsing, practicing, teaching. Up before the break of dawn every day, never complaining, always cheerful. He sighed.

"Hey, darlin'. Well, you've had quite a day, haven't you? All your friends have come to see you. I suppose you're pretty tired. You've been through a lot but I know you're gonna be just fine. I'm gonna stay right here with you, Princess. You sleep and get well and I'll be right here. I was thinkin' maybe you'd like to hear a song. I've got the guitar this time, so it will sound a little better."

He strummed a few times, tuned the strings, strummed again. "Here's one you might remember. It was one of my first hits." He began to play and sing softly, hoping he wasn't about to get himself kicked out of the room. The tune was sweet, his voice sweeter, as he sang about the good things in life and how we sometimes don't appreciate them until it's too late. How appropriate.

He glanced up to see Grace enter the room, but when he stopped playing she smiled and nodded and told him to go on. He did. One by one more nurses filed into the room and gathered just outside. He continued to sing for a long time. Finally he set the guitar down. "Hope I didn't disturb y'all too much," he said in apology.

Grace patted his arm. "There's no way in this world you could disturb anyone with that beautiful voice of yours and we want your girl to respond to you as much as you do, but you need to rest now."

"I will." He smiled at the stern look she gave him. "I promise."

Grace took Caroline's vitals, checked the IV, looked her over and made notes on the computer before she left the room.

Toby took Caroline's hand. "Well, I'll be right here if you wake up and wanna talk. I love you, Caroline. I love you so much. I know I keep sayin' that same thing, and it doesn't sound like much but I swear I mean it, from the bottom of my heart." He stood and bent over the rail to place a kiss on her mouth. She was warm and sweet and he'd give anything to have her respond to him. Sighing, he sat in the chair, pushed it back into the reclining position and closed his eyes.

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The blip, blip, blip, of the monitor had become a lullaby of sorts for Toby as he slept. It took several long moments, when the tiny short bursts of sound became one long horrible note, for it to register on Toby's sleeping brain. Finally though, it did register, about the time doctors and nurses burst through the door of the room.

Toby sprang to his feet, his hand still holding Caroline's. He was literally shoved out of the way as nurses and doctors crowded around the bed. He realized what was happening, even though his mind and heart denied it.

He searched for Grace's face. She was deadly pale, her mouth moving as she spoke to her patient, her hand obeying the doctor's orders as they worked to save the woman that meant life to him. Why was this happening?

Caroline was stripped to the waist. Someone held paddles in the air. "Clear," they yelled just before they placed the paddles on her chest. Her body buckled. The room became eerily quiet for a few seconds. But the monitor continued its monotone. Flat line. That's what it was called, Toby remembered. Flat line.

"No," Toby uttered quietly. "Oh, God. Please don't let her die."

Everything was happening so fast. Someone shot an enormously long needle into Caroline's chest. The man with the paddles called, "clear." Again and again, they were placed against Caroline's skin. Again and again her body buckled with the force. Nothing. Nothing!

Toby looked on in horror. Why? Why? What lesson was this supposed to teach him?

They were folding up the railings on the bed, throwing the IV bag onto her stomach and rushing her out of the room. Toby followed in a daze, but was stopped by the operating room door which was firmly closed in his face. He leaned his forehead against the door and waited.

The morning light began to filter through the corridors of the hospital. Toby had imagined the morning would bring him relief and Caroline's smile. He'd never thought he would be waiting outside an operating room while they tried to bring Caroline back from death. She was gone. He knew it. So when the doctor approached him, a strained look on his face, he really didn't have to speak the words, for Toby knew what he would say.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Nash. We weren't able to save her. She was too weak. Her heart just gave out."

What could he be saying? She was not weak. Caroline was the

strongest person he knew. Toby watched the doctor's face as he spoke. He could see his mouth moving, could feel the impact of his words, but his world was silent. Silent except for the roar in his ears and the unbelievable pain in his heart. He staggered. Someone was there helping him to sit. He looked up to see his father's concerned face.

"Dad?"

"Yes, son. I'm here."

"She's gone, Dad."

"I know." His strong hand rested on his son's back. "I know."

"I can't stand it. I..." His voice broke.

"Everything's gonna be all right," his father comforted.

"No, Dad. Nothing will ever be all right again. Never."

Toby rose in a fit of anger and pain and stormed around the hall, cursing, swearing, promising that he will never get over the loss of his Caroline. He ran out of steam in the midst of the tirade and sank to the floor in despair.

"Come on now, Mr. Nash," a soft female voice called to him from far away. "Come on and wake up. Toby? Are you okay?" Her hand rubbed his back.

Toby raised his head to peer into Grace's sympathetic face. Startled, he glanced around. He sat beside Caroline's bed, his hand still holding hers, the monitor blipping merrily to the tune of Caroline's heart. A dream. He'd been having a dream! Relief washed over him in giant waves again and again. He smiled broadly up at Grace, stood and hugged her, then bent to kiss Caroline.

"Well, now, it's good to see you too," Grace chuckled.

He put his hand to his head, shook it. "I had a dream. A horrible dream and– oh, never mind. I don't want to say it, don't even want to think it. It's just that it seemed so real."

Grace smiled. "I think I understand. I just stopped in to say goodbye. Debbie will be in at seven. I stayed past my shift to make sure Caroline was gonna be okay, but I've got to get home and get some sleep. Deb will be here until I get back at three."

"You stayed for two shifts?"

"Almost two. I'm going home to get some rest."

"You stayed for Caroline?"

The woman shrugged. "It's no big deal. Like I said, sometimes I get a little attached."

"I don't know how to thank you."

"There's no need for thanks, Mr. Nash. It's my job. I do it because I want to."

"At least stop calling me Mr. Nash. It's Toby to my friends."

Grace patted his arm. "Then, Toby it is." She turned to Caroline, rubbed her leg. "Why don't you be a good girl and surprise me when I get back with a great big smile, okay?"

Toby smiled down at his sleeping Princess as Grace left the room. There it was again. The relief. She was alive and getting better with each passing minute. The dream had put so much into perspective. She was alive and he was grateful. The dream seemed to have helped him to release his fears and man oh man, what a dream. Humming, he went into the bathroom to freshen up.

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Debbie and the other day shift nurses listened as the night nurses briefed them on the condition of the patients being left in their care. One handed her a handwritten page.

It was from Grace.

*You missed the concert, Deb. He played his guitar and sang. I was never that much into country, but I think I could be a fan.*

Debbie grumbled about missing the concert before she settled herself to review Caroline's chart. She skimmed over the lab results from the latest blood test and stopped short, her heart pounding. Had they missed this yesterday? Or did they not run the test yesterday? In all the excitement of finding Caroline, and Toby Nash being here, had they simply missed it? Or did they neglect to share the information? She blinked, looked closer to make sure she was seeing what she was seeing. "Oh, my," she uttered and then paged Doctor Silvers.

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Toby looked up when someone knocked softly on the door. Lt. Veranza and Sgt. Sommers entered the room quietly.

"Toby," they nodded in greeting.

He stood to shake their hands.

"How's she doing?"

"She seems fine, stable they call it."

"Okay, stable is good. We thought you'd like to hear about the case," Lt. Veranza began.

"Talk here," Toby instructed. "I'm not leaving her."

He nodded. "We went to see Tracy Chastain."

"Really? When?"

"So, actually, we'd just come back the morning that you came to us about Caroline missing. We just haven't had a good time to talk to you about it."

"And?"

"She killed George Mancini. She admitted it."

"Go on."

"She went to see Caroline that morning to tell her she wasn't really pregnant."

"I knew that," Toby said. "I knew I'd been careful."

"Yes, well, she surprised George, who we suppose decided Tracy would do for his needs since Caroline wasn't there. She pushed him, he slipped on the bat and hit his head on the radiator. After he fell, she ran. She didn't know he died until later. She said she would have come forward if you or Caroline had gone to trial."

"Yeah, I bet." Toby grunted.

"Don't be bitter, son. She was confused and scared. Scared of her father too. It took courage on her part to face her father and tell him to back off while she did what was right for a change."

Toby sighed and nodded. "Okay, so, what will happen to her? I mean, it sounds like an accident to me."

"She appeared before the grand jury. Her statement matches the forensic evidence. They dismissed the case. Sherry, on the other hand, will not fare so well."

Toby looked down. "Caroline wanted us to go easy on her."

"I understand that and I'm doing everything possible to help her. Sherry is a sick little girl. They've charged her with kidnapping and assault with a deadly weapon. She's a minor, so she's being held in a facility farther uptown."

"Yeah, well, don't let Mac anywhere near her."

"Mac, by the way, has been disciplined and transferred to a desk job where he won't be able to cause any more damage. If you want to bring charges, I'll understand."

Toby shook his head. "No harm, no foul. So what will happen with Sherry?"

"It depends on if, I mean, when Caroline opens her eyes. Caroline will be able to do a great deal to help her. She needs to be in a hospital where she'll receive the counseling and care she needs."

"Caroline WILL open her eyes. Soon. I'm sure of it," Toby said.

"Good. And when she does she will be frightened to see a big

hairy bear standing over her. You look terrible. You need to go back to the hotel, shower, shave and put on some clean clothes."

Toby nodded. "I will, eventually."

"See that you do," they said as they took their leave.

Jeff was the next to arrive, breakfast in hand. As Toby ate he filled Jeff in on what had transpired during the night. Their conversation ended when the doctor and Debbie entered the room.

Jeff excused himself. "I need to make some calls. Be back in a while and I think I'll bring you a razor. You look like, really bad."

"So I've been told."

Toby turned his attention to the doctor as he examined Caroline. "What is it? Is there a problem?"

Doctor Silvers nodded at him. "Let me finish and we'll talk."

Toby watched as the doctor shone a light in Caroline's eyes, listened to her heart and lungs, examined the small wound on her side, then moved down to the end of the bed, ushering Toby toward the head. Debbie stood beside the doctor as he put on latex gloves. She helped move Caroline's leg and hold the catheter in place.

Toby winced along with Caroline as the doctor examined her, pushing one hand down firmly on her abdomen below the navel.

"Well?" Toby asked. "Is something wrong?"

"Did you know she's pregnant?"

"Wh– what? She's pregnant?"

"Well, that answers my question."

"She can't be. I mean, there's only been one time."

"One time is all it takes," the doctor assured him.

Toby nodded sheepishly. Of course he knew that, which was why he was always so careful. "How far along is she?"

"Since you say there was only one time, suppose you tell me."

"I— well— we were back at the farm, I was trying to take things slow, but we were on a horse and she..." He went on to tell what enticed him to make love while sitting on a horse. Toby looked up at the strangled sound coming from Nurse Debbie. His face reddened.

"I don't see how it's possible," Deb mumbled.

He smiled and shrugged. "Well, it was a very big horse."

"And again, how long ago was..." the doctor paused, trying to keep a straight face, "...was the horse adventure?"

"Back at the end of May."

The doctor nodded his head. "That sounds about right. She seems

about six or seven weeks in."

"Your're absolutely sure?" Toby asked.

"She is definitely pregnant."

Debbie finished tending to her patient after the doctor took his leave. When Toby was alone again with Caroline, he leaned over her, stroking her face.

"I don't know what to say. The doctor has just given me some wonderful news, but it won't be wonderful at all if you don't wake up. I hope it makes you happy. I know you're worried that you won't be a good mother but I'm not worried a bit. You're the most loving person I've ever known. You asked me to forgive the one who did this to you. What does that tell you? You have much more patience and love in your heart than most people." He sighed in frustration. "Wake up, Caroline."

But she did not wake up. During the morning, the Stillwaters came again to visit Caroline. While they were there, Jeff talked Toby into coming back to the hotel with him and getting cleaned up. He did so reluctantly, worrying that she would wake while he was gone. Toby did feel much better once he'd taken care of himself.

When Grace arrived at work, Debbie immediately pulled her aside. "You are not gonna believe what we found out this morning."

"Is Caroline okay?"

"She's the same, only not the same."

"What are you talking about?"

Debbie pulled out the chart and pointed.

Grace's mouth fell open. "Pregnant?"

Debbie giggled. "Yes, pregnant."

"Tell her about the horse," one of the other nurses prodded.

"The horse?"

Grace patiently listened to the nurse's gossip. She pretended haughtiness and reminded them they were professionals. Only her red face couldn't be hidden. "On a horse," she muttered as she went to check on her patients. "Mm, mm, mm."

Unfortunately, the afternoon went along very similarly to the previous day and late that evening Toby found himself saying good night to Caroline once again, asking her to come back to him, asking her to get well, and asking God for His mercy. He was tired and frustrated and completely distraught as he fell into a fitful sleep.

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Awareness seeped slowly into Caroline's brain. She no longer lay on a concrete floor. She was sure of that. No bed she'd ever been in seemed as soft as the one she was in now. She stirred slightly, pressing her body against the mattress to feel the softness, but got something else in return. Pain. It shot through her, convincing her to be still.

As her body continued the waking process, she became more aware of how uncomfortable she was. Her head ached, throbbed. The pain in her side was agonizing. She could hear the blip of a monitor and she reasoned she was in a hospital. Slowly, her eyes opened, confirming her location. Peering through the dim light, she lifted her left hand to look at the IV needle. She panicked at first when she tried to lift her other hand and couldn't. Carefully, she turned her head to look down at her hand.

Toby. His head lay on her hand as he slept by her bed. Wiggling her fingers against his cheek produced no reaction. She tried to speak, but her throat was so dry, nothing would come forth. Again, she wiggled her fingers and smiled as she heard his gasp.

"Caroline?" He sprang up from his chair and leaned over her. She blinked up at him, smiling.

"Caroline," he said, unashamed as tears filled his eyes. He wanted to scoop her up in a giant bear hug, but restrained himself. Instead, he gently stroked her cheek. "How do you feel?"

She shook her head and tried to speak. Nothing came out but a dry, croaking sound. "Water," she finally whispered.

"You need water? Of course you do." He quickly reached for the mug of ice chips. Carefully he held a piece of ice to her parched lips. "Better?" he asked.

She smiled, licking her lips and nodding.

"Oh, Caroline, you don't know how good it is to see you open your eyes. I was so worried. First because I couldn't find you, then when we did, well, let's just say I was scared. We all were."

"All?" she whispered.

"Yes. All. Your family hogged the entire waiting room. You are a very popular lady."

"I have no family," she whispered.

"Is that what you think? You just don't know."

She frowned. "Are you okay, Toby? You look terrible."

He rubbed his hand over a day's growth of beard. "I suppose I do look pretty bad. You should have seen me before I cleaned up, but I

don't feel terrible. I feel like I could sing and dance and fly."

She winced as a new wave of pain hit.

"What is it? Are you hurting?"

"Yeah. My head, it feels like a bass drum is pounding in my brain and my side hurts." Her eyes opened wide. "I just remembered. The gun went off. Sherry. What happened to Sherry?"

Toby pressed his lips together in a tight line. "I'm not sure. Lt. Veranza will be by later today and we can ask him. I know she's in a lot of trouble, but will be much better since you've pulled through. They'll probably get you to speak for her at a hearing, but you don't worry about anything right now except getting well."

She raised her hand to her head and moaned softly.

"I'll get the nurse. Hold on baby."

Grace arrived at Caroline's room in only seconds.

"Well, now," Grace sang sweetly to her patient. "It's really good to see you with your eyes open. But I bet you're not feeling too good are you, sweetie?"

Caroline moved her head from side to side.

Grace smoothed Caroline's hair back. "I'm gonna go call the doctor and get you a little something for pain. We don't want to give you too much because of the..." She looked quickly up at Toby.

"She doesn't know yet," he confirmed.

"What don't I know?" Caroline asked softly, too weak to show the irritation she felt.

Toby leaned close. "Well, princess, it's a miracle really. You see, you and me, we're gonna have a baby."

"A baby?"

"Yes, Caroline. You're pregnant." He waited for a response, worried about her reaction.

A tear spilled over and ran down her cheek.

"Are you unhappy?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I thought I'd never see you again. When I was stuck in that place, I worried so much about how you would handle my death. I know how I would feel if the situation had been reversed, and I was so worried about you. I swore that if I ever got out of that room, I would never let useless worries and all the stupid stuff get in the way ever again. I love you so much, Toby, and I'm just grateful that I'm alive. And now to find that I carry your child, our child. You're right. It is a miracle."

"Ah Caroline," Toby uttered, kissing her cheek.

"Well, I suppose I'll leave you to each other," Grace said.

"Will the baby be okay?" Caroline asked before Grace could leave. "I mean, with all the trauma and being shot and stuff, will the baby be affected?"

Grace smiled. "Your baby should be just fine. The bullet hit some soft tissue and muscle. Your baby is fine and you are fine and your man is fine. This sounds like a very happy ending, now doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does," Caroline agreed.

"Just don't go riding horses anytime soon," Grace added with a wink toward Toby.

His mouth opened, his face reddened. He shook his head.

"Oh, Toby," Caroline said with a laugh. "Have you been bragging to the nurses?"

He smiled. "I don't know if that's something to brag about."

"Well, I know," Caroline giggled.

"Shut up and kiss me," Toby ordered.

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1 John 4:19

"We love because he first loved us."

# Chapter 17 [Epilogue]

Peering from the second-story nursery window, Toby Nash watched an angel stroll across the grounds. Her silvery white dress combined with her silky blond hair gave her an ethereal glow. She'd allowed her hair to grow longer during her pregnancy and it blew back softly from her face in the breeze. Dressed for the night's outing, she walked slowly down by the creek that inhabited part of their backyard, stopping to smile up at the late afternoon sun or to touch a flower or to listen to birdsong. Every so often her hand stroked her belly in a protective, maternal gesture. He breathed a contented sigh. Every morning he woke reminding himself that this was not all just a wonderful dream. And then he gave thanks.

They were happy and definitely vibrating on high, he thought, remembering that short lesson his friend Ricky Kino had given him. So happy. Each minute for them was a treasure chest waiting to be opened. He turned from the window to inspect the room. Caroline had decorated what was to be their daughter's nursery with all the things she'd never had and always wanted. Lacy coverlets, colorful mobiles, teddy bears and ballerinas. She'd been in heaven picking out the furniture without having to worry about how to pay for it. She'd actually never even been in a place that exclusively sold furniture. Like a kid in a candy store, she'd had a terrible time making up her mind and an even worse time keeping herself from calculating the cost. Seeing her brow creased and her mouth in a pout, he'd had a crisis of his own. It felt like his heart would burst with the love he felt.

The experience of shopping for their child made him realize how much fun it was gonna be to shower Caroline with all the things she'd never experienced. He bought her a car, but she wouldn't have any of the fancy ones he'd tried to talk her into. No Corvette, no Jaguar, no Cadillac or Mercedes. She'd wanted a pickup. Said she was the wife of a farmer-slash-country singer and it just seemed right. He'd asked her if maybe she wanted a tractor to go along with it which had caused a

delightful wrestling match.

They'd planned and built the house in a wonderful haphazard sort of way, down by the swimming hole. She drove the architect crazy, but she wanted the house to be "one with nature." She'd asked the gardener to teach her about plants and flowers and now that it was almost spring, the fruits of their labors were becoming evident.

He smiled as he looked back out the window. Each time he saw her it took his breath away. She'd worked hard over the last eight months. Even before she was completely healed from the gunshot wound, she was out, doing and planning. When he'd ask her to slow down, she'd tell him there was so much to do and she didn't want to waste one moment. She said they had a wedding to plan, a house to build, a dance school to open and love to make. When she put it that way, it was difficult to argue with her.

He'd been busy too. First, helping her, and then cutting an album that had barely made its release in time for the award it was up for tonight. Tonight, Toby Nash and his beautiful wife would attend the *People's Music Awards*. He was up for best hit single, country entertainer of the year, and album of the year, thanks to Caroline. She'd encouraged him to write about their love, their life and the things they'd learned. It had been almost too easy because it was from the heart and every song had been an instant hit. As predicted by his friend Evan, the album he'd cut with Crazy 88 had also reached the top, not having been hurt at all by the publicity he'd received during the past year.

As Toby gazed at her from the window, Caroline put her hand to the small of her back. Toby frowned. Maybe he should ask her to stay home tonight where she would be comfortable, though he already knew she wouldn't hear of it. She'd convinced him they would be fine because the awards were in Nashville this year and if she were to go into labor they would be close to her doctor and the hospital. As he watched, Caroline's head suddenly jerked up in surprise. She was smiling, but he watched in horror as Rascal bounded from the woods headed straight toward her. The large dog jumped on her, causing her to stumble backward a few steps.

Toby raised the window. "Rascal," his voice boomed. "Get down. Now!" The dog obeyed immediately and lumbered away, his tail tucked between his legs. Caroline turned her smile up toward the window, but Toby didn't smile in return. Rascal had left two muddy

paw-prints on the front of Caroline's designer maternity dress. She'd agonized over its choice for two months.

He closed the window and headed down. Approaching her from the rear, he circled her with his arms, nibbling on her neck. She leaned her head back against him.

"Hey darlin'," he whispered in her ear. "I was just wondering if maybe we should stay home tonight. You're two weeks overdue. The baby could come any time and it worries me."

She patted his arm where he held her. "I'm okay, Toby. As I already told you, if I go into labor, we'll be closer to the hospital in Nashville than we are here."

"That's true," he conceded. "But I hate to be the one to tell you this, well, look down."

She did, then back up at Toby with a sigh. "I suppose I need to go in and see if I can wash off the mud. And if not, I guess it will be a great conversation piece for the media."

"You're incredible, you know that?"

"Why's that?"

"Any other woman would be throwing a fit right about now."

She shrugged. "Remember what I said in the hospital when I first woke up?"

He nuzzled her cheek. "No. Tell me," he murmured.

"I– I can't remember either when you do that, now stop."

He raised his head. "Okay. Now tell me."

She sighed. "I said, I will never worry about all the small stuff again. And dirt on my dress is definitely small stuff."

"What if I told you no wife of mine is gonna be seen at a huge award show looking like she'd just been dragged in by a dog."

She turned to face him. "Tobias Smith, don't you dare try to strong-arm me, because I promise you, you will lose."

He smiled. Meek, little Caroline was no longer a victim. She'd come such a long way and was strong and happy and so very sexy, even in her cumbersome condition. "I love it when you talk tough," he teased. "But I think I have just decided that I'm not gonna allow you to go to the awards, for your own good. You're already tired, I can see it in your eyes. I think I'm gonna get my mom to come down here and keep you company tonight."

Caroline reached up and grabbed a handful of his hair. "Don't you dare." She yanked.

"Ow. You're asking for it, little girl," he threatened.

"Yes, I am," she purred, lifting her mouth for a kiss.

"Now, there's an invitation I cannot turn down." He rubbed a finger along her jaw, tilted her head up and lowered his mouth to hers.

"Come on, darlin'. Let's go inside and see what can be done for that dress."

Hand in hand they walked up to their beautiful new home.

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Caroline nervously grabbed Toby's hand as the limousine drew near to their destination. He looked down at her.

"Everything's gonna be okay. You can't even tell you've been dragged around by a ninety-pound dog."

She laughed. "I'm not so worried about that, but all the media, they make me nervous."

His brow furrowed. "Too late now to do anything about it, we're here. You look positively radiant and beautiful."

She looked up at his face. He believed that. She could tell he truly thought her to be beautiful. She would have to trust him on that. Then again, he thought Rascal was beautiful too. Hmm. Sighing, she decided to talk about something else to occupy her rampant thoughts while they waited in line to disembark.

"I spoke to Sherry's mom today."

"So how's she doing?" Toby asked.

"They're gonna release her from the psychiatric hospital into a halfway house next week. They're gonna let her take classes and get her high school diploma. She's doing very well. She's been able to work through all the terrible things her father did to her. It's been hard on her mother and little brother as well, and they have all been attending counseling sessions together. I think they're gonna be okay. I just wish they hadn't had to go through all of this just because some lowlife man couldn't keep his hands off his own daughter."

Toby took her hands. "Who knows what happened to him to make him do what he did. If you've taught me anything, it's that we can't judge another human being."

"You're right, who knows. Abuse is a vicious cycle, but I've learned so much. And one of the most important things I've learned is we can change our future with God's help. We don't have to go willingly down the path that was set for us. We can wake up and become conscious of our thoughts and actions and break the cycle."
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Squeezing her hand, Toby smiled. "You're not that same scared little girl anymore. Are you happy, Caroline?"

"Very."

He nodded toward the window as the limo door was opened. "Here we go."

She smiled up at him. "Lord, I hope I don't trip or something equally embarrassing. Don't let go of me, okay?"

"Not for the world."

Toby stepped out onto the red carpet and turned immediately to help Caroline from the limo. She stood slowly, straightened her shoulders and smoothed her dress. He waited for her. His eyes met hers and she nodded. He turned and tucked her arm in his as they began their walk amidst the murmurs and applause and even a few screams of the onlookers.

Cameras clicked away, lights flashed. They were stopped several times as they progressed down the carpet by different hosts of programs and their affiliates. The interviewers were very nice, Caroline thought. And friendly. And professional. No one was demeaning or condescending. All seemed genuinely interested in her. Toby stroked her arm and smiled down at her frequently, showing he was proud to have her by his side. She was grateful to him for his sensitivity. Nevertheless, Caroline was relieved when they were finally settled in their seats.

Toby would have to perform later, but for now, she had him with her. She sighed heavily. Toby had been right. She was tired. Before they'd been able to sit, he'd taken her around and introduced her to some of his friends. She kept forgetting he was a celebrity and, of course, his friends would also be celebrities. She'd had to remind herself to close her mouth when he'd introduced her to Reba McEntire and the woman asked her if she'd recovered completely from the kidnapping. Then she was hugged by Jason Aldean as he congratulated Toby on his luck at having found such a beautiful girl who could actually put up with him.

When she sighed again, Toby tilted her face up to look at her closely. "Everything okay, Princess?"

"Um hm. Just tired. It's all so exciting, I guess it's taking it out of me. Do you think it would be possible to get a drink of water?"

"Anything for you, darlin'," Toby said as he rose, but Jeff arrived at the same time. "Jeff, my man, how's it goin'?"

"It's goin' great," Jeff answered as he leaned down to kiss Caroline's cheek. "Where you headed?"

"Caroline needs water," he said as he smiled at the woman standing beside his friend. Jeff had told him he had a new girl. "Hello," Toby said, offering his hand.

"Bethany, meet Caroline," Jeff said. "Oh, and Toby Nash."

"Nice to meet you," Bethany said with a smile.

Caroline started to get up.

"Oh no, please don't get up," Bethany cried.

At that moment a muscular guy clapped a hand on Toby's shoulder. "Toby, good to see you."

Toby turned with a giant smile. "Rick!"

Though Ricky Kino was shorter than Toby, he gave him a giant bear hug and lifted the larger man off the floor.

"Ricky Kino, what are you doing here?"

Ricky grinned. "Florida-Georgia Line did the music for my latest movie so the powers that be asked me to present the award for best album. So, here I am."

Toby nodded. "Well, it is a great movie and they wrote some really great music."

Ricky smiled. "Yes, they did. So, I hope that means you won't be upset if they win?"

"How could I be? Just being alive and having Caroline with me and being able to do what I love to do, that's enough reward."

"Speaking of Caroline," Ricky said as he moved past Toby. He knelt in the aisle right beside her. "Caroline," he said reverently. "It's so nice to see you again. Toby was right."

"About what?"

"You really do glow like an angel."

"Oh, please."

"I have to go, but I'll be back to visit once that baby is born. Oh, and Bree and Shelley came home from their visit with you swearing that you are the most impressive woman they'd ever met and they have all kinds of girly gifts to bring to you in person."

Caroline laughed. "I am looking forward to seeing them again. They are so sweet."

"Well, Shelley definitely is, unless you make her mad. So, I'll see you soon."

"Come see us anytime you'd like," Caroline offered.

Ricky nodded. "Thank you, I will." He rose and his mouth dropped open in surprise as he moved out of the aisle. "Bethany?"

Bethany also stood with her mouth wide open. "Ricky!"

They hugged tightly as Jeff and Toby watched in surprise.

The introduction to Jeff came quickly, along with explanations of how Ricky met Bethany in Daytona back a few years earlier when Shelley was training for the MART. They dated a few times. The conversation turned to coincidences and it being a small world and a few minutes later, Ricky Kino was gone.

Caroline shook her head. "It never diminishes."

"What?" Toby asked.

"I don't even know what to call it. His aura? His light? His power? He swoops in, spills his light over everyone then flies away."

Toby nodded. "That is a perfect description of what he does. Sounds like some song lyrics." He leaned toward Caroline. "I'll get your water. Be right back."

Bethany and Jeff took their seats next to Toby's.

While Toby was gone Ace arrived with his date, Sheila, and Billy-Bob arrived with twin sisters, each holding on to an arm of one of the brothers. Toby returned with an icy cold bottle of water for Caroline and introduced himself to the females in the group. As they chatted before the show started, Caroline was distressed to feel the tightening of her abdomen.

She'd had many Braxton-Hicks contractions, but they'd never caused any discomfort. Did she feel a slight pain now? No, she was just worrying too much. She breathed deeply, hoping the excitement of the evening was the cause of her dilemma, because she had no desire to go into labor and ruin the night for Toby. His award categories would be some of the last announced and she had to make it through. It would only be a few hours and after that, her daughter could come anytime she wanted.

Still, as the evening progressed, Caroline was forced to admit to herself she was indeed feeling pain. Nothing she couldn't handle, but she had a feeling she was in the very early stages of labor. She didn't dare tell Toby yet. He would whisk her away to the hospital in a flash and it would ruin his evening. This night was for him. He deserved it. Besides, labor could go on for many hours. She may as well spend those hours here, with her mind occupied. She shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

Toby took her hand, smiled at her. "Feeling okay?" he whispered.

Caroline smiled back. "I'm fine, Toby, now, stop asking me that."

He raised her fingers to his mouth and kissed them.

Close to the end of the program, Toby and his band left their women with kisses on the cheeks and made their way backstage. Caroline glanced at her watch, took a breath. What had started out as slight pain had progressed over the past hour or so into regular labor. She was almost sure of it. The contractions were becoming stronger. Strong enough to make her dread the next one and they were coming every twenty minutes on the dot. It seemed the awards show was moving in slow motion. The men going backstage was a signal that it wouldn't be much longer and she was grateful for that.

Jeff's new girlfriend, Bethany, leaned over and tapped Caroline on the shoulder. Caroline looked up to see the women-folk of Toby's band members all looking at her.

"You're in labor, aren't you?" Bethany asked.

Caroline started to shake her head when Ace's date spoke up.

"Don't deny it. I can tell. I have three children of my own. How far apart are the contractions?"

Caroline sighed. "Twenty minutes."

"How bad?"

Caroline frowned. "Pretty bad."

"And you didn't tell Toby because you didn't want to ruin his time in the spotlight, right?"

Caroline shrugged guiltily. "I think I can hold on. We're almost done now."

"Promise me you'll tell me if it gets down to ten minutes apart, because that's about as close as you want to push it. Believe me."

Caroline nodded. "I promise."

They looked up from their conversation as Toby Nash was introduced, singing his hit song from the nominated album of the year, *In the Wink of An Eye*. Unfortunately, a contraction began just as Toby did. Caroline gasped as it hit harder than the others. Bethany and Sheila moved to sit on either side of Caroline. Sheila took her hand.

"Okay, honey. Breathe for me."

Caroline nodded. "Y'all watch the guys, please. Don't make it look obvious or I swear Toby will jump down off that stage on national television and make a big scene."

The women all turned their heads and smiled up toward the stage.

Caroline had to laugh. "It's over," she sighed, checking her watch.

"And?" Sheila asked.

"And it's down to eighteen minutes." Caroline sniffed. She was such a cry baby.

"Oh, sweetie, don't cry. It'll be okay," Bethany comforted.

Caroline quickly wiped at the tears. "Oh, the song's almost over. Y'all get ready to give them a standing ovation."

The women looked up toward the stage. They had no idea how their men had performed. They assumed the performance was great as usual as they sprang to their feet, applauding heartily. Caroline knew the cameras would be trained on her to see her reaction to her husband. She rose carefully, clapping her hands and blowing a kiss to her husband on stage.

Unfortunately, standing had been a bad idea. Gravity came into play. It was as if everything inside Caroline's body suddenly had room to shift downward. Another contraction began immediately. Caroline gripped her abdomen and sat down quickly. "Oh, no," she whimpered.

"It's not even been five minutes," Sheila informed her. "We have to get you out of here."

"No, wait," Caroline said breathlessly through the pain. "I think maybe it's just because I stood up so quickly. They'll slow back down. I'm sure of it."

"You'd better hope so, or you're gonna be having a baby on national television."

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Toby and the guys joked around backstage. They would announce the winner of the album of the year next and they were told to stay put until after the presentation.

Toby motioned to the backstage camera man. "Hey, ya wanna get a visual of the prettiest girl here tonight?"

"Let me guess," the man answered. "Would it be the woman in row three, seat four?"

Toby watched as the camera man panned the audience. He focused in on Caroline, then started to move on. "Wait," Toby said, stopping him. "What the..."

"Toby," Jeff called. "Ricky just announced our name. We just won. Are you going out there or not?"

Toby looked up, then back at the camera. "Focus on her again."

He watched as she came into view. Caroline's lips were pursed as
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if she were blowing out, her hands gripped her belly.

"Toby," Jeff called. "Now!"

Toby looked up, his brow creased with a moment of indecision. Finally, he ran past Jeff and out on stage. He quickly grabbed the award and moved to the podium.

"Thank you everyone. Please don't think I'm being ungrateful, but I believe I've just discovered my wife is about to have our baby."

There was a murmuring from the audience as the cameras panned, but the backstage camera was already there, focused in on her face as she grimaced in pain, then moving to view her swollen belly.

"Someone do me a favor and call an ambulance."

He was at her side in seconds. "It's okay, baby. We're gonna get you to a hospital."

She nodded. "Toby, I'm sorry. I tried to make her wait. I didn't want to mess up your night."

"Caroline, you could never mess up my night, but you should have told me. How far apart are the contractions?"

"Four minutes," Sheila answered for her.

He shook his head. "Good grief. Babe, if I help you, can you stand so that we can get out of here?"

She nodded. Slowly, he pulled her to her feet, but the moment Caroline was fully upright, she felt a strange sensation. A tiny– ploop, was how she would later describe it. A second later, there was a splash as Caroline's water broke. She looked up at Toby, her eyes wide. He was calm. So calm.

"It's okay," he comforted. "I got you. Don't worry, but I'm not gonna have you walk." He scooped her up in front of the world and carried her out to the lobby.

He helped her lie down on one of the padded benches.

"Oohhh, Toby," she cried as another contraction hit, the worst one yet.

"Breathe, baby. Breathe."

Jeff and the guys joined Toby and the women.

"Ah, man. She's really having the baby?" Jeff asked in a panic.

"You guys keep the cameras away, please," Toby commanded. "Where is that ambulance?"

Caroline felt as if someone had a vise grip on her, squeezing, never ending. She reached out for Toby in a panic as the next wave of pain started its crescendo. "Oh, no, here comes another one." She was

scared. She'd never dreamed it would hurt this much.

"How close, Sheila?"

She shook her head. "They're coming one right after another."

Toby took a breath, threw off his jacket. "Jeff, Ace, give me your jackets. He placed his jacket under Caroline's hips. "Baby, I have to see if she's crowning, Caroline."

She understood and allowed him to remove her underclothing. He draped one of the jackets over her knees and looked at the situation.

"How is he staying so calm?" Bethany asked. "Any other man would be running around like an idiot by now."

"He's a farm boy," Jeff answered. "He's brought horses, calves, puppies, kittens, you name it, into the world."

Toby looked up at Jeff. The look he gave him let him know he was not nearly as calm as he appeared. "Caroline, she's coming. I can see the head." He smiled at her to keep her calm. "She has a head full of dark hair."

Ricky Kino arrived, fending off the cameras like a pro and making a barrier between the crowd and Caroline. "I'm certified EMS," Ricky stated quickly as he turned to tend to Caroline.

"I'm sorry, Toby. I didn't mean for this to happen," Caroline cried. "I thought it would be a long time. I thought I could make it."

"Shh, shh, now. This is a happy time."

"Yeah, it's a really happy time," Jeff added. "Because the paramedics just got here."

Toby looked up, relief on his face. Ricky moved out of the way.

As the paramedics approached, Caroline cried out. "Oooohh, Toby. The baby's coming. Oooh, it hurts so much."

The medic barely had time to kneel beside her. Toby moved out of the way just in time for the medic to catch the head. "Hold on, now," the man said as he pulled on gloves. "Don't push. Pant. That's right. Just pant, little small breaths." Caroline looked up at Toby as she did as ordered. He smiled at her. "You're gonna have a baby in just a minute."

She closed her eyes with the pain of the next contraction.

"Open your eyes," the medic ordered. "And look at me. Okay, now push with this contraction. Push. That's a girl. You're very strong. Push. Don't stop."

She let out her air with a whoosh.

"Take another breath and push," he ordered.

Toby helped hold her up slightly. "Push, baby. You can do it."

Caroline squealed as the baby moved forward into the light. Immediate relief washed over her. First from the vanishing pain and second from the sound of their daughter's healthy cry.

She laughed with elation and cried with happiness. Toby kissed her over and over. "You did it, Caroline. We have a daughter."

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Toby stood in the threshold of their little nursery, watching as Caroline held their baby daughter to her breast. What an amazing sight. Procreation. A true gift from God. The baby was only four weeks old, yet he couldn't remember life without her. The same for his wife, his beautiful Princess Caroline. They'd decided to name their daughter the same name as another princess, Princess Grace. It was the name of the wonderful nurse who had taken care of Caroline. It was also what they'd found in Jesus when they'd accepted Him into their lives. In only four weeks the name had mutated into Gracie and Gracie already acted like a Princess, for she truly ruled the roost. Caroline stroked Gracie's cheek as she nursed, cooing to her.

Less than a year ago, Toby and Caroline were living in a world of hurt. Neither one of them believed real love was possible. Caroline thought she could never be a mother, while Toby was planning a loveless marriage. Since that time, their world had completely changed, all because God had a plan. Our God is an awesome God, Toby thought, his heart full to bursting.

"Hey, darlin'," Toby whispered from where he stood.

Caroline looked up. "I love it when you say that."

He grinned. "I love it when you tell me you love it, but most of all, I love you."

She smiled. "I know."

✝✝✝

Jeremiah 29:11

"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."

✝✝✝

Father, I'm so grateful for all of the lessons You've taught me over the years. I'm grateful for the burdens you've asked me to bear and for the healing You've granted me. I realize those burdens have made me
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strong and I trust in Your wisdom. Thank You, Father for Your love. I ask that all who read this book be truly blessed with love and joy and healing from any and all trauma, both physical, mental, emotional and spiritual, in Jesus' powerful name. Amen.

Note: I thought you might find it interesting to know that the first two chapters of the book you just read, Suffer the Children In Jesus' Name, had bits and pieces taken from my real life. At twelve years of age, I really did travel to Tennessee to babysit for a family and their friends on New Year's Eve. I really did babysit for that family every day after school for a few hours. I really did manifest the effects of abuse and parental alcoholism. I really did hit my head while babysitting and playing in a dark hallway on New Year's Eve. I had a giant goose egg on my forehead. The house in Tennessee was as I describe it, a wonderful place. Sadly, there was no Toby there. ; )

*The Dandelions Never Die - In Jesus' Name Series* ***so far*** consists of 14 novels, and 1 novella prequel, each bringing a different message of love and hope and God's healing light. Even though some of the books can stand alone and be read out of order, you will get much more out of them if read in sequence and save the prequel to read after book #8 because it has some spoilers. This is not a ploy to get you to buy more books for all books are free on my website, mccartneygreen.org. All the books involve the Kino family in some way, some more than others.

I love to hear from readers. I love to hear your testimonies of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.
Email me at mccartneygreen@gmail.com
Wishing you much love and joy,
mccartneygreen.org

A Note from McCartney Green...

I will go where God leads me. I will write what He puts in my head. I will strive to learn God's will for my life, and I will do His will always. I know He has been with me and I know He is real. Jesus Christ is real. I love Him and pray His blessings upon you all, always. In Jesus' mighty name, Amen.

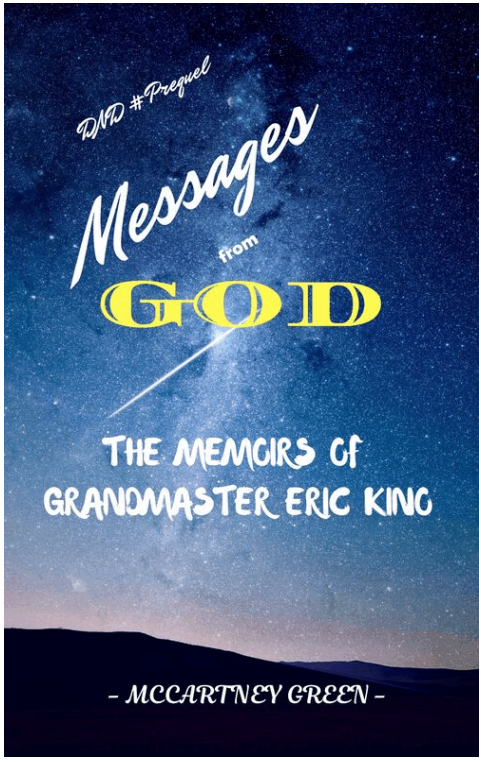
Messages From God: The Memoirs of Grandmaster Eric Kino

Before the story begins...

Discover the extraordinary event that changed ten-year-old Eric Kino forever. This short prequel reveals the miraculous experience that shaped the man readers come to know throughout the series. An essential read.

Before Eric Kino became the man readers have come to know throughout this series, he was simply a ten-year-old boy whose life was changed forever. Messages From God is the beginning of that journey—a brief but pivotal story that sheds new light on everything that follows.

Although this memoir was written after the first eight novels, it tells the earliest and perhaps *most important story* in Eric Kino's life. If you've ever wondered what shaped the man who would become Grandmaster Eric Kino, this is where that journey begins.



Continue the Journey
The Dandelions Never Die—In Jesus' Name Series
*by McCartney Green*

#1 A Healing—In Jesus' Name
#2 Suffer the Children—In Jesus' Name
#3 Finding Home—In Jesus' Name
#4 Weeds Grow—In Jesus' Name
#5 Angels—In Jesus' Name
#6 The Worth of Souls—In Jesus' Name
#7 Warriors—In Jesus' Name
#8 June Flower—In Jesus' Name
#9 Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name
#10 Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name (Part Two)
#11 Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name (Part Three)
#12 Feed My Sheep—In Jesus' Name
#13 For Unto Us—In Jesus' Name
#14 Such a Time as This—In Jesus' Name

Prequel—Messages From God:
The Memoirs of Grandmaster Eric Kino

and just for fun... Kino Martial Arts Student Handbook

All Books Available for Free Download at: mccartneygreen.org

## About the Books

The Dandelions Never Die—In Jesus' Name Series currently includes fourteen novels and one prequel memoir. Each story brings its own message of faith, courage, love, healing, and hope while following the ever-growing circle of family and friends surrounding the Kinos.

Although each book contains a complete story and may be read on its own, the characters' lives continue from one novel to the next. Readers will experience the fullest journey by beginning with Book One and reading the series in order.

### #1—A Healing—In Jesus' Name

When Shelley Adams crosses paths with Grandmaster Eric Kino, she is still carrying wounds from a trauma that changed the course of her life. Eric sees far beyond the frightened, uncertain woman she believes herself to be—and recognizes the strength, beauty, and purpose within her.

A Healing introduces the Kino and Adams families, the Lee brothers, and the dangerous Crane brothers in a story of love, courage, spiritual healing, and freedom from the victim identity. It is the beginning of the family—and the journey—that will grow throughout the entire series.

### #2—Suffer the Children—In Jesus' Name

Fourteen-year-old Toby Nash is an ordinary boy with an extraordinary heart. He loves baseball, dreams of helping and healing animals, and thinks becoming a singer might be pretty cool someday. Then he meets twelve-year-old Caroline and recognizes the carefully hidden signs that something is terribly wrong in her life.

As Toby and those around him struggle to protect a wounded child, Suffer the Children confronts the devastating realities of abuse while showing the difference one observant, courageous

person can make. It is a story of rescue, patient love, faith, and the long road toward learning to feel safe.

#3—Finding Home—In Jesus' Name

Lisa Lewis has spent years building a successful life while distancing herself from the painful family secrets she left behind. When circumstances bring her to Pine Forest, Georgia, she encounters Chaz Stewart, his remarkable family, and the grandmother who never stopped loving her.

Finding Home introduces Chaz, Lisa, Maddie, Jodi, John, and the Pine Forest family whose lives will soon become closely entwined with the Kinos. Through romance, danger, buried truth, teen pregnancy, incest, and post-traumatic stress, this story asks what it truly means to come home.

#4—Weeds Grow—In Jesus' Name

The entire Kino family returns in a story centered on movie star and martial arts champion Ricky Kino and the fiercely independent Breanna Adams. Their love has never been simple, and the choices they make will affect not only their own future but the lives of the young people watching them.

As danger takes root close to home, Weeds Grow explores family relationships, fatherhood, personal identity, sexuality, fear, hatred, and the courage required to confront what has been allowed to grow in darkness. Some weeds can be pulled. Others fight to survive.

#5—Angels—In Jesus' Name

Widowed mother Lizzy Anderson is raising five little girls while working nights as a nurse and doing everything she can to hold her family together. Special Agent Keegan Tanner is dark, dangerous, driven—and carrying evidence that could expose a horrifying criminal operation.

When their lives collide, Lizzy and Keegan are drawn into a battle involving corruption, assault, child trafficking, and powerful people willing to destroy anyone who stands in their way. With help from the Kinos, the Pine Forest family, and Ameritech, they must discover whether wounded people can still trust love—and whether ordinary human beings can sometimes become angels for one another.

#6—The Worth of Souls—In Jesus' Name

Jeff Davis returns in a story that introduces Mickey, a fierce young woman who has spent much of her life believing she is expendable. When she is taken by people who place no value on human life, Jeff and the growing Ameritech family will risk everything to bring her home.

The Worth of Souls is a story of kidnapping, sacrifice, courage, first love, and the immeasurable value of every human soul. It also offers an unforgettable glimpse of teenage Jeffy Kino and Cameron Wallace—two young people whose connection will help shape the future of the series.

#7—Warriors—In Jesus' Name

Shelley's youngest sons, Mark and Joey Adams, are grown men now, each carrying the teachings, strength, and example of the family that raised them. But even the strongest warriors may find themselves facing enemies they cannot defeat with physical skill alone.

Warriors confronts domestic violence in its most recognizable and insidious form—the gradual isolation, control, fear, and destruction of a person's spirit. It is a story about recognizing abuse, finding the courage to escape it, and learning that true strength is not found in domination, but in love, protection, truth, and freedom.

#8—June Flower—In Jesus' Name

June Flower Kino—Jeffy to those who love her—has grown from the miraculous child introduced in Book One into a gifted physician whose discoveries may change the future of medicine. But there are powerful people who will do anything to prevent that future from arriving.

Her journey takes her across the world, into danger, loss, breathtaking beauty, and the lives of two unforgettable Ugandan children. As Cameron Wallace returns to protect the girl he never stopped loving, the entire cast of the series gathers for a sweeping story of courage, family, sacrifice, healing, reunion, and one final twist that reveals the story may be far from over.

#9—Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name

The next generation steps forward as the series moves between Hollywood and Pine Forest, Georgia. Young Eric Kino begins questioning the path laid before him, while Marine Raider Jacob Appel returns home and discovers that the girl he has known all his life may no longer be merely the little sister figure he left behind.

Meanwhile, fourteen-year-old Gabe Tanner—the charismatic only son in a family of beautiful sisters—is beginning a journey that will alter the lives of both the Tanner and Kino families. Love grows, danger gathers, and a shocking ending given to the author in a dream changes everything.

#10—Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name, Part Two

The story continues as Gabe Tanner and those who love him struggle with the consequences of what came before. Families draw closer, young relationships deepen, and faith is tested as darkness attempts to reshape the lives of the next generation.

At the same time, Eric Kino III begins to see his own path more clearly when he encounters a young woman stranded beside a highway. One act of compassion opens the door to a story larger than either of them expects, proving once again that a seemingly

ordinary moment may be part of God's extraordinary plan.

#11—Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name, Part Three

The consequences of what came before are still unfolding as Young Eric struggles to recover, families adjust to new realities, and the next generation begins stepping into roles once carried by their parents. Love deepens, new relationships take root, and healing proves to be as much about patience and trust as strength.

As Gabe and Taylor's influence grows and the expanding family is drawn toward Pine Forest, Georgia, long-awaited purposes begin to surface. Children become leaders, parents learn when to step back, and a new generation begins discovering that the work God has placed before them may be larger than any of them imagined.

#12—Feed My Sheep—In Jesus' Name

The family gathers in Pine Forest with an enormous goal: feed thousands of God's children, meet practical needs, restore dignity, and serve every person who crosses their path. But what begins as a Thanksgiving mission soon becomes something far greater than food.

As attacks mount and darkness works to stop the ministry, the Kinos, Tanners, Appels, Stewarts, and the next generation refuse to retreat. Families are strengthened, long-held wounds begin to heal, new bonds are made permanent, and ordinary acts of service become miracles in the lives of people who simply needed someone to see them. Feed My Sheep asks what might happen if serving God meant noticing one person at a time—and refusing to walk past.

#13—For Unto Us—In Jesus' Name

For the first time, celebrate Christmas with the Kinos, Tanners, and the enormous family God has gathered around them. But this season becomes far more than decorations, gifts, and

traditions as old wounds surface, former enemies return, strangers arrive carrying hidden needs, and forgotten places are given new life.

Through forgiveness, rescue, reconciliation, service, and unexpected second chances, the family discovers that honoring the birth of Jesus means more than remembering what happened long ago. It means becoming His hands and heart now—welcoming the unwanted, restoring what has been broken, and making room for those who thought they had no place to belong.

#14—Such a Time as This—In Jesus' Name

A mysterious stranger arrives in Pine Forest searching for answers about his family's past—and carrying the weight of darkness that has followed generations. His arrival may also bring an unexpected answer for Lily Tanner, who has begun to wonder whether everyone she loves has found their person except her.

But a far greater story is unfolding. Grandmaster Eric Kino discovers that he is not the only man whose life was changed by an angelic encounter at the age of ten. One by one, others emerge—men from across the world who disappeared for three days, returned with a calling, and were sent to teach.

As the Twelve are drawn together and darkness closes in, families, warriors, believers, and former strangers converge on Pine Forest. Old mysteries begin to make sense, lives are transformed, new love takes root, and a lifetime of seemingly separate callings begins to reveal a larger design—one meant for such a time as this.

## What Readers Are Saying

Featured Reader Review...

"I just finished book nine in this series—DND #9—and I can honestly say I've been hooked since I started a few weeks ago. I found the author's website and began listening to her read the books aloud, and I haven't been able to stop since.

"The best way I can describe these books is that they're like a "how-to" manual for living as a Christian, told through an incredible story. Despite being the best fiction I've ever heard, the characters stay true to their faith—they don't cuss, and they don't sleep around before marriage. Instead, they lead by example, showing what it means to live a life guided by Christ.

"The books don't shy away from real-life struggles either. They walk you through tough situations, showing how to respond with faith—when to pray, how to pray, and how to lean on God through it all. I've read the Bible so many times that, at one point, I started to feel a little numb to it. But these books brought a fresh perspective that reminded me why I love Scripture in the first place.

"I'd recommend this series over watching TV or just about anything else the world has to offer—except reading the Bible itself."

More Reader Comments...

"I know deeply in my heart that your books will indeed be used as training manuals. My spirit was a witness to that when I heard you speak it when I first started listening to the books. That lit a fire under me to listen to them all, ASAP!" Yvonne Espy

"Angels is my new favorite book! I had the weekend off and all I did was read. I couldn't put it down. I only have a few pages left but I don't want it to end. Plus when I finish I will have to wait until your next book comes out. I just wanted to tell you how much I LOVED reading this book!"

"Just when I thought your books couldn't get any better I was proven wrong with Weeds Grow! What an exciting, great book. I am having trouble getting my work done because I can't put it down. You are an amazing writer and I have to say WOW!"

"I absolutely love DND #1. I can't wait to start reading the other books in the series. I was amazed at how addicted I became to the book. I can't stop thinking about the characters and their stories. I can definitely relate to Shelley's self confidence issues. Her strength is so great and makes me feel like I can be as strong as her in whatever situation life has to throw my way. Thank you for writing such an inspirational and motivating book."

"I have read the first three books and I love them all. They are addicting! The problem is, I don't get enough sleep when I read them because I can't put them down! I am now having withdrawals because I don't have the 4th book.

McCartney- you are great."

"I have read everything you have put out and have been patiently waiting for more. I love them all as they are all unique and different. Can't wait for more.(a thankful fan)"

"Just wanted you to know I loved all your books. Now, I am doing something I only do with my all time favorites. I am going back and reading them again. Thanks for sharing your gift. P.S. You are the real deal!"

"Hey McCartney~ Thanks so much for sending me "Dandelions Never Die." I absolutely loved it! As a fellow writer and "professional romance novel reader" I can honestly say you are truly gifted with writing talent. I've added you to the list of my favorite writers and I'm looking forward to reading another one of your books soon. Hugs!"

I love to read books that make me think and have positive motivational ideas in them and I have to say, this book has it all. Well written and hard to put down, *Messages* certainly gave me something to think about. McCartney Green has a style of writing that makes people feel like we can make the world a better place. She is a true light and always makes me smile. I look forward to reading her future books.

~Melanie Glenise Schmitt~
Winnipeg, Manitoba

Once again, Author McCartney Green has delivered a well written title that deserves much attention and appreciation. The work is chock full of wisdom spoken through the mind and heart of the much beloved character in her *DND In Jesus' Name series*, Grandmaster Eric Kino, who is based on a personal epiphany. I absolutely adored this character, so it was a real treat for the author to give her readers more from the patriarch of this amazing family. Though I may not be in complete personal agreement with some of the spiritual aspects, I can certainly glean the truths and wisdom in this book for leading and living a more joyful and contented life. I found myself nodding in agreement more than not. Regardless of where you are in your spiritual life, there is something for everyone here. The only thing I would suggest as a reader of her series is to read that series before reading this book. There are a lot of spoilers here for the series if you haven't read it yet. Also, it will give you a better understanding of the heart and mind of the man that is Grandmaster Eric Kino. And as you read this title, you will easily be able to envision him telling you his story as you sit out on the patio of his beautiful home with wife Shelley by his side, taking in the ocean breezes while you enjoy a cup of cleansing tea.

~Marla Thompson~
Indiana


















Lots more pics in photo album on my website!

Continue with DND #3 Finding Home—In Jesus' Name
Sneak preview...

***"The wicked are overthrown and are no more,***
***But the house of the righteous will stand."***
***Proverbs 12:7***

*Lewis Home, Pine Forest, Georgia*

Pregnant? Oh, my, pregnant," Madeline Lewis declared softly.

Louise Lewis watched her mother as the news she'd just delivered registered. It took her mother only a few seconds to launch into her "perfect mom" routine– a routine Louise hated.

"Oh, dear, Louise, hon," her mother reached for her, took her by the shoulders, smiled kindly. "Everything's gonna be alright, dear, just you wait and see. Oh, sweetheart, how are you feeling? Do you know how far along you are? Goodness, that's okay, we'll figure it all out." Madeline Lewis put her arms around her only child. "Don't you worry about a thing now, my little LuLu. Your father and I, we're here for you. We'll all get through this together."

Louise shook her head. Her mother's sweetness grated on her nerves. Always had. Now she was finally gonna do something about it. She was gonna get the heck outta Dodge. She pulled away from her mother's hug. "No, Mom, we won't all get through this together. I'm the one that's pregnant."

"Who's the father? Does he know what he's done?"

The question came from her father and Louise rolled her eyes before she answered. "What *we* did, Dad. *We*. It's not like he forced himself on me."

"Well, does he know?"

"Yes, Dad, he knows. He wants to marry me and spend the rest of his life trying to make me and his child happy," Louise said, her voice laced with sarcasm.

"Oh, thank goodness," her mother sighed.

Louise glared at her. "I'm not gonna marry him, Mom. I'm not gonna marry anyone."

Madeline winced. "But Louise, honey, don't you think it would be the best for you and the baby?"

"No, I don't. I mean, look at the two of you. Do you think I want to

live your life?"

"There's nothing wrong with our lives, Lulu. There's nothing wrong with being honest, hard-working folks," her father argued.

"Yeah, honest, hard-working people who live in an old, rickety house, in an old, hick town and have nothing more to do on a Friday night but sit on the porch and shell peas. I hate this place."

"You're only sixteen, Louise. You don't know what you want yet," her father put in.

"That's where you're wrong, Dad. I do know what I want. I want to get away from here. Away from this house, from this town, from this whole freakin' state."

He frowned. "Don't you think that would be impossible now, in your condition? Realistically speaking, you're pregnant, but you're gonna have to work in order to eat and to afford a place to live. This is an impossible situation for you without help from us."

"Just watch me."

"Lulu, my sweet girl, what are you saying?" Madeline cried.

"Let me see if I can spell it out for you, Mom. I'm gonna have a baby. I'm not gonna marry the father and I am leaving here."

"Oh, Lawrence, we messed up. Did we forget to teach her about family and about love? Where did we go wrong?"

Lawrence only shook his head, because he was at a loss.

Madeline turned back to Louise. "But where will you go? Please, baby, you just have to listen to reason. Your father and I, we love you. We want to take care of you. Let us help you."

Her father took her by the shoulders and forced her to look up into his face. "Why now Louise? If you wanted to leave us, why now, when you're pregnant and life is about to get tough? At least wait until after the baby is born."

"Are you kidding me? How dumb can you be, Dad? Look, this pregnancy is just something that happened, but I can deal with it."

Her mother put her hands to her heart. "Oh, Lulu, don't tell me you plan to..."

"What? Have an abortion? No, I'm not. I've decided to keep the kid. I've always wanted something that was mine. Only mine. And now, I have it and you can't take that away."

"Honey, a baby is not a possession. It's a real person. A little person that needs to be fed and loved and cared for."

"I'm completely capable of taking care of myself and my baby."

"What did we do, Lulu, to have you hate us so much?"

"Don't start, Mom. I didn't say I hate you. I just need to get away. I'm suffocating. I need to get out of this hick town. The only things that thrive in middle Georgia are the mosquitoes. When I went to Atlanta for

that student conference and people asked me where I'm from, no one had even heard of *Pine Forest*. I have to get away. Do you realize we don't even have a movie theater? We have two grocery stores, a gas station, a *Dairy Queen* and a *Family Dollar*."

"First of all, you're exaggerating, and secondly, can't you wait?" her father asked. "Look, I understand baby girl, that you're feeling a little oppressed. I understand your need to get out and experience the world, but can't you wait, just until this baby is born and you graduate from high school and maybe until..."

"Stop. I'm not waiting another year and a half, Dad. I'm not waiting another week and a half. I'm outta here."

"But Lulu, honey," her mother cried, "school is about to start. It's your junior year. There are so many exciting things to do. You'll get to go to Prom and..."

"And what Mom? Go to prom in a designer maternity gown?"

"Oh, honey, we can work this all out. Please."

Louise hardened her heart against her mother's pleas and her father's look of exasperation. She wanted out. She had come to hate the picture of perfect homey bliss they presented to her. As far as she was concerned, that picture had bars. She hated everything to do with her home, her town, her school, her friends. She even hated her own name. Louise Lewis. Who would name their child Louise in this day and age? So, she was named for her mother's dead sister. So what? How selfish was that to make their own daughter suffer with such a horrible name? And to add insult to injury she looked just like her mother, a tiny, petite woman with a turned up nose and honey blond hair. They looked like mother-daughter elves. Ugh!

Louise hardened her heart against the tears on her mother's face. She didn't want to think about that. She wanted to think only of herself and that is exactly what she intended to do.

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Ephesians 6:1-3

"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.
"Honor your father and mother"—which is the first
commandment with a promise—"so that it may go
well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."

"My, my, how I love pi!"

3.14159265358979323846264338327950288419716939937510582097494459230781640628620899862803482534211706798214808651328230664709384460955058223172535940812848111745028410270193852110555964462294895493038196442881097566593344612847564823378678316527120190914564856692346034861045432664821339360726024914127372458700660631558817488152092096282925409171536436789259036001133053054882046652138414695194151160943305727036575959195309218611738193261179310511854807446237996274956735188575272489122793818301194912983367336244065664308602139494639522473719070217986094370277053921717629317675238467481846766940513200056812714526356082778577134275778960917363717872146844090122495343014654958537105079227968925892354201995611212902196086403441815981362977477130996051870721 

God used pi to teach me that His universe is not random.

To the human eye, the decimal sequence of pi looks like total randomness—endless, chaotic digits spilling out into infinity without an obvious repeating cycle. People look at their own lives and trials the exact same way: "Why this tragedy? Why this random pain? It's all chaos!" But just like pi, God's universe is mathematically, divinely ordered to the infinite degree. Every single digit, every step, every trial is ***already known*** by the Creator. Placing pi at the end of the books isn't just a quirky signature—it's an eternal stamp declaring: "There is no chaos. God has done the math."