Terry's Journey:  
A Sequel to Abigail's Journey  
A Love Story  
by Judith Bronte

As a survivor of abuse, Terry Davis is determined to make a difference in someone's life the way his best friend, John Johannes, had changed Terry's so many years ago on a school playground. Having seen John's daughter, Abigail, rescue Jake Murphy from Jake's tortured past, Terry is more intent than ever to offer a lifeline of his own to someone in desperate need. But it won't be easy.

Protective of Terry's wounds, John has tried to keep his friend from helping anyone too much, knowing from Terry's former experience as a volunteer hotline crisis counselor that Terry's nightmares would return. Then she arrived in all her painful helplessness-- Madison Crawford with the haunting gray eyes and secretive past, needing to be rescued while claiming to need no one. As Terry tries to help Madison and then becomes involved with her on a more personal level, John's concerns deepen for the dear friend he loves like a brother.

This may be Terry's journey, but Terry won't be making it alone.

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Terry's Journey contains some scenes that include S.I. (self-injury), i.e., "cutting." If you are recovering from S.I. and wish to avoid potential triggers, visit http://judithbronte.com/terry/T_1.html and look for the settings option at the bottom of the page to hide those scenes while you read online.
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Chapter One

Four Years After Abigail's Journey

"And I said, Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away, and be at rest. Lo, then would I wander far off... I would hasten my escape from the windy storm and tempest."
~ Psalm 55:6-8 ~

The past no longer existed for Madison Crawford.

She had left it behind-- buried with him, with the pain she had been forced to accept. The rush of freedom quickened her pulse, fed her wildest dreams of living a normal life. The thirty-four years of her entire existence, the existence that led up to this moment, would never be remembered again. She wouldn't allow it. Let the memories haunt her, let them come and see how far they would get. Her heart would be numb to their cries, her ears would be deaf to their torment. She refused to be the pathetic puppy who cried when the food dish remained empty, only to be beaten later for making so much noise.

An ache stirred within Madison as she watched the dark terrain speed past her bus window. She had to forget. She would forget. Tonight marked a new beginning, a life untouched by agony or the familiar terrors that for so long had refused to let go. The tortured voice within her screamed until she trembled, but Madison hardened herself against the pain. If running long and hard could erase the past, then she would succeed. She had gathered what little she could and bought a ticket to the farthest destination she could afford. It didn't matter where, as long as her surroundings wouldn't remind her of him.

She had to be dreaming. Here she sat-- alone on a dark bus, on her way to nowhere in particular with fifty-two cents in her pocket. She moved the grocery bag at her feet, touching it once more like a child clinging to a treasured blanket. Some old clothes, a mirror, a hand brush. Nothing worth stealing, but they meant the world to Madison, for they were all she had.

If she were awake, surely she would feel more than she did.

The bus rolled to a stop, and the driver turned in his seat and again stared at her. For the past few miles she had been the only passenger left, deepening her awareness of being so very much on her own.

"This is your stop, ma'am," the driver said with a harmless smile.
Distrust made her unable to return the gesture. Ever since the last passenger disembarked at Chaumont, Madison had been especially grateful God had placed her seat at the back of the bus. The driver looked at her too much, too long, too hard to make her feel at ease.

Despite the announcement that her journey had come to an end, Madison felt an unexpected, hesitant fear at the prospect of leaving. She stared out the window, shuddered at the night that obstructed her view. "Where am I?" she asked. When the driver didn't answer, she turned, saw the look of concern in his face.

"This is Three Mile Bay, ma'am. You bought a ticket to come here, remember?"

She remembered, though she had no idea where Three Mile Bay was, or what awaited her through those bus doors.

"Is there anyone I can call for you?" The driver's growing concern frightened Madison, and she shrugged off his question with a quick, unconcerned reply.

Locating her grocery bag, she took a deep breath and stepped off into the jagged unknown. It took strength to hide her nerves from the driver, to look as though she belonged there, that she had someplace to go. As if to punctuate the loneliness of her resolve, the bus pulled away, leaving her to stand in the dark.

A cold September wind cut through the thin protection of her pullover, and she scrambled to put on the flannel shirt rolled up in the grocery bag.

A large, solitary moon hung over the water in the distance, lending its light as her eyes grew accustomed to the dark. So this was freedom. From here on out, no matter what happened, things could only get better.

* * * *

The smell of rich coffee stirred Terry Davis from his sleep, long before he intended to drag himself out of bed. Hadn't his best friend in all the world, John Johannes, promised to sleep in this morning? After a late night of conference calls with the tech team in Osaka, Terry had been clutching to the promise of catching up on lost sleep.

The mini stampede outside the bedroom door made him groan. Reaching with one hand, Terry blindly grasped at the LED clock on his night table, while hushed giggles crowded around his door.
Eight-thirty.

Okay, not as bad as Terry had thought. The fatigue pulling at his eyes, however, made him feel as though he’d just fallen into bed.

"Un-cle Ter-reeee," a singsong voice called to him through the closed door.

"I'm still sleeping," he answered, rubbing his aching eyes.

"Then why are you talking?" came the voice.

Terry grinned. "I'm talking in my sleep."

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am."

Silence followed. The voice consulted her sisters on how best to counter Terry's claim, and he smothered a chuckle. He rolled onto his side, watched the door and pictured the three of them in the hall, one of them designated to be the one to twist open the doorknob.

"You can't fool us. You're awake," said the voice.

"No, I'm not."

"But you're talking, so you have to be up."

Terry grinned even harder. "You're listing to a recording. I made it to frighten away all little munchkins who dare to wake their Uncle Terry."

With a burst of giggles, the door pushed open and three blonde-headed four-year-olds with startling blue eyes, tumbled into the room and onto the bed.

"Oh no!" Terry pulled the blankets over his head as they swarmed over him. "I'm surrounded by little people!"

Lizzie poked her head beneath the covers, grinned with laughter as he made a funny face. Someone climbed onto his stomach, and he let out an "Oomph!" at the same time another tugged at the blankets.
"Okay, okay, I’m up!" Terry dropped the covers, pushed himself upright in bed while the child sitting on his stomach—Ruthie—went along for the ride. "Take pity, girls. I didn't get much sleep. See these eyes?" he leaned toward the one on his tummy, pulled his bottom eyelid open. "Bloodshot. Both of them. And do you know who I have to thank for that? Your daddy! He forced me to stay up, way past my bedtime!"

"Daddy stayed up, too," Lizzie said, getting to her knees for her turn to look at Terry's eyes. "Just as I thought. You're teasing."

"I beg your pardon, I earned every bit of these red eyes, and I refuse to admit they're anything but bloodshot."

In typical Johannes triplet fashion, the third sister insisted on her turn. Terry made sure no one felt left out, then lifted Ruthie from off his stomach so he could breath. "Okay, you three. Who's who? Are you going to tell me this time, or am I going to have to guess?"

Grins spread throughout the sisters, and they lined up beside the bed to play their game.

"Let's see," Terry frowned in deep concentration, "this one is... Ruthie."

The girl laughed, and Terry feigned shock. "Not Ruthie? Then you must be Ruthie," he said, tapping a finger on Debbie's nose. Debbie fell onto the bed in laughter, then the girls went about setting their befuddled uncle straight. Terry didn't mind playing the game. The triplets delighted in confusing strangers, though among family, they rarely could stump anyone.

Which explained why they delighted in Terry's game so much.

In January, after the girls' fifth birthday, Terry figured they would be too old for such things, and planned to phase the game out. Until then, he continued to tease them all he wanted. As fraternal sisters who bore a strong resemblance to each other, the Johannes triplets were often mistaken as identical. They had Providence and strong family genes to thank for that-- Izumi's deep blue eyes and long lashes, John's blonde hair and quick grin. When the triplets combined their laughter, they could melt even the strongest determination to keep a straight face. Except of course, when a more determined parent wanted them to settle down and be quiet.

"Girls!" John's voice broke through the laughter and giggles, and Terry looked up to see his friend coming into the room with a mug of coffee in his hand. "I thought I told you to leave Uncle Terry alone this morning!"
"It's all right," Terry leaned over the bed to plant a kiss on each small forehead before John filed them out of the room, "I don't mind."

"You're spoiling them," John warned, handing Terry the mug painted with a bright yellow smiley face. "Did you give them permission to barge in on you?"

"Not exactly." Terry sipped the French Roast. "Oh, this is good. This was worth getting up for."

Barefoot and still in pajamas, John went to stand in the doorway as Terry pushed back the covers and climbed out of bed. "I keep telling them to wait for permission, but if you don't stick to the rules, one of these mornings, they're going to burst in on you when you don't want them to."

"Nah, won't happen. When I want privacy, I lock the door." Terry took another sip and let the caffeine do its work. Soon, he would be one-hundred-percent awake, and not just standing with his eyes open. "Any word from Osaka, yet?"

John lifted his brows in mock surprise. "What? After all the work we put into that code, you think they'll have the nerve to call again?"

"Absolutely." Terry smiled as they moved down the hall, through the living room and into the kitchen where Izumi stood at the dishwasher, putting away last night's plates. "Since when did good planning ever trump Murphy's law? Anything that can go wrong, will. Not even those highly educated techie's in Osaka can stand up to Murphy. We're going to hear from that bank again, and when we do, mark my words-- they're going to have another networking problem with our software."

With a tired groan, John took a seat at the breakfast table. "I'm beginning to wish one of us had flown to Japan, and put in some one-on-one with their team. This might've gone easier."

"Yes, it might've," Terry acknowledged, pulling out his chair and taking his usual place at the table, "but we were trying to get away from all that traveling, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember."

Terry lifted his smiley face mug and saluted Izumi. "Thanks for wrestling power away from your husband, and making the coffee."

With a laugh, John grabbed the box of cereal and dumped corn flakes into his bowl. "You don't like my java? I'm hurt." He poured milk, handed the carton to Terry. "I'll be grateful when this
account closes. They pay well, but the overtime is killing us. I suppose it's one of the drawbacks of being independent contractors– no one stops you from running yourself into the ground."

Grabbing a spoon and a napkin from the stack on the table, Terry chuckled. "Didn't you know? That's one of the bennies of working from home."

A child skipped into the kitchen, perched herself beside Terry's chair and stared at him intently. "Speaking of Murphy's law," Terry went on, pretending not to notice Debbie, "has anyone heard from San Diego yet? I thought Abby was supposed to have called by now."

"Uncle Terry," Debbie tugged at his pajama sleeve.

Smiling, Terry tossed a wink at John.

"No, Abby hasn't called yet," John said, as he shoveled in another spoonful of breakfast. He crunched cereal, and eyed Debbie with amusement as she continued to stare at Terry. "Now that Jake is a college graduate, they need to decide where they're going to live. I'm glad we could be there to see him in a cap and gown, but I'll be even happier when I see them both where they belong-- which is right here."

"I wish we could put in another good word for Three Mile Bay," Terry said, shaking his head at the debate happening on the West Coast. "That little yellow house has sat empty for too long."

After putting away the last of the dishes, Izumi joined the discussion at the table. "When they've reached a decision, I'm sure they'll let us know. Debbie, stop bothering your poor uncle."

"But," Debbie looked at Izumi with tremulous blue eyes, "Uncle Terry promised!"

"Promised what?" John asked.

Nursing his coffee, Terry crossed ankles and leaned back in the chair. "Don't you know what day this is?"

John frowned. "Of course I know-- it's Saturday. Oh... I see. Allowance day, and the money is burning a hole in her pocket."

Swallowing more of the French Roast, Terry smiled at the button-nose standing by his chair. "Where to this time?" he asked, enjoying the moment despite the interruption it would mean to his morning. "Watertown again?"
Excited, Debbie nodded.

"Of course," Terry said with a weary laugh. "By now, the owner of that science store must know us by name. What is it this time-- astronomy or botany?" Debbie opened her mouth to answer, but Terry stopped her with a small pat on the head. "It doesn't matter. I'll take you. Just give me a chance to eat breakfast and get dressed."

"While your at it, you might want to shave," John said, nodding to Terry with a grin. "You're looking shaggy."

Lighthearted amusement dancing in her blue eyes, Izumi pinned John with a teasing tilt of her head. "Look who's talking. You've needed a shave for the past two days."

"But at least I'm not planning to go out in public before I do. Besides, you told me this morning that you liked my stubble."

"I was being polite."

A playful, knowing look crossed John's face, but he said nothing more. As the private joke exchanged between husband and wife, Terry decided not to ask questions. When Izumi went to sit on John's lap, and John gave her a lingering kiss on the back of her neck, Terry could guess John's meaning. Terry wondered if all women loved to be kissed, even when the face kissing them needed a shave. Dismissing the question as having nothing to do with himself, Terry focused his attention on finishing breakfast. He admired the way his friends still loved each other after twenty-three years of marriage. They shared genuine affection, and whenever he looked at them, he knew he saw the real thing.

In a purely intimate gesture, John murmured something against Izumi's ear. She leaned her forehead against John's, took a sip from his mug, then offered it back to her doting husband.

Debbie continued to stand there, as though fearful that if she left, Terry might forget.

"I'll take Debbie into Watertown for you," John said, as two more little girls came to the table, hungry for their usual ritual of cereal and orange juice. "I have some time, and could make the run for you."

The look of disappointment on Debbie's face tugged at Terry's heart. Terry knew she enjoyed these trips with him, with just her and Uncle Terry, and didn't want to spoil it for her. He turned down his friend's offer, gulped down the last of the now lukewarm coffee, then pushed away from the table.
A marked look of relief on her small face, Debbie skipped behind him before he stopped her at his bedroom door.

While Terry brushed his teeth in the adjoining bathroom, he could hear Debbie waiting for him in the hall. True, he would've been grateful to laze on the sofa with his laptop this morning, instead of having his arm tugged from its socket by a four-year-old enthusiastic on science. But he would do anything for those girls, and everyone there knew it. As Terry thought back on those tender moments between John and Izumi at the breakfast table, he felt a subtle eagerness to get out of the house.

Terry studied his reflection in the bathroom mirror as he buttoned the long sleeve shirt he had received for his forty-seventh birthday, earlier that year. The same age as John, and a few years older than Izumi, Terry surveyed the familiar reflection with a critical eye.

An ordinary man peered back at him, his straight brown hair uncombed, his mouth lopsided. Terry knew talking to himself wasn't necessarily a healthy thing, but since no one could overhear, he did it anyway. "Try to defend yourself. You're approaching the big five-oh, but what do you have to show for your life? What do you have to say for yourself after all this time?" The reflection swallowed hard, but he pushed harder. "Can't you do anything right?" Maybe too hard. Hurt brown eyes stared back at him, forcing Terry away from the mirror.

Definitely time to get out of the house.

He tucked his shirt into tan slacks, pulled out a comb and ran it through his hair without bothering to check the results in the bathroom. Tugging his coat from a hangar in the closet, Terry paused to listen. When he heard Debbie chatting with someone outside the bedroom door, he smiled. Providentially, he wouldn't be left alone with his thoughts. He thanked God for the blessings of his family, then grabbed the jeep keys before heading out the bedroom door.

With a shout for him to wait up for her, Debbie ran to get her coat.

* * * *

Once any of the triplets started talking, it took a miracle to turn them off. Not that Terry ever discouraged the girls from talking. He enjoyed their childish prattle, surprising observations, and the thoughts that just happened into their sweet little heads. As he pulled the jeep onto the main road, Terry heard Debbie's voice from the back, where she sat harnessed in her booster seat.
"Who's that lady?"

"What lady?" Terry asked, glancing in the rear view mirror as Debbie craned her head to look at something they had just passed.

"She doesn't belong here," Debbie said, settling back in her booster. "Her clothes look strange."

Terry slowed the jeep as Vince Russo, a neighbor and Terry's sometimes fishing buddy, jogged from one side of the street to the other, on his way back from visiting a friend. Terry couldn't help noticing the fly rod with the serious looking reel in Vince's hand. Terry waved to Vince, and Vince waved back before disappearing into his garage. Vince owned a boat, and not just any boat. A twin-engine diesel sport fisher. That baby could do fifty-five knots plus, making it a dream to navigate the channels around Thousand Islands, just North of Three Mile Bay. But their freshwater bay topped Terry's list of favorites, the perfect place to go boating, lay anchor and do some serious fly fishing.

"Uncle Terry?"

"I'm sorry, what?" He tossed Debbie a quick glance before turning his eyes back on the road. "Go on. This time I'm listening."

For a long moment, Debbie seemed to give something careful deliberation. "Does everyone have a home like mine?"

"No, Sweetheart, not everyone. You're blessed that you have a home, and a happy one, at that."

A sad sort of sigh came from the back seat. "I don't think she has one."

"Who, Sweetheart?"

"The lady with the grocery bag."

"What lady? I didn't see anyone but Vince."

"Uncle Terry," Debbie sighed with a great deal of patience, "we passed her as we left the house. Maybe you need glasses."

"Watch it, kiddo," Terry said with a laugh, "keep that up, and you'll wind up talking yourself out of a hamburger and fries."
Debbie giggled, and the subject of the lady with the bag dropped without further mention.

Just as well, thought Terry, as he turned the jeep toward Watertown. Homelessness wasn't something he really wanted to discuss with such a small child, though it surprised him that it could happen in Three Mile Bay. The people who lived around here usually had money, for this was a vacation town, a place where people came to get away from hectic city lives, to spend some peace and quiet while regaining their sanity via a fly rod and lots of water. Terry couldn't recall when he had ever seen any homeless in the area, and figured Debbie must have been mistaken.

After a lengthy visit at the science store, where Debbie peppered the owner with questions about black holes and galaxies, Terry treated the youngster to her favorite fast food restaurant. Of course, he loved that restaurant as well, but it suited Terry's main purpose of making Debbie happy. He wanted Debbie to enjoy her outing, and at the same time, he found himself appreciating the morning more than he thought he would. Conversing with the small child soon made him smile and forget his troubles, including that morning's losing conversation with the bathroom mirror. The cell phone rang only once, for Izumi wanted to know how everything went and whether or not Debbie was having a good time-- a question that even Izumi acknowledged was unnecessary. The triplets always had a good time with Terry. Since he had cleared the hamburger and fries with Izumi before leaving home, the mother knew not to expect them for lunch.

With satisfied bellies, and the afternoon almost over, Terry and Debbie started for home with Debbie's new DVD about the solar system, tucked in the store bag in her booster seat where she could hold it every once in a while.

It was a beautiful day, despite the fact the wind was moving in with the jet stream, making the cold feel even colder.

Tired of all the excitement, Debbie napped in the back seat of the jeep, giving Terry a long stretch of quiet as they drove back to Three Mile Bay. Long ago, Terry had custom work done on the jeep to make the back seat safe for car seats and booster seats. He wanted to be able to take the triplets places, without having to give up Abby's old jeep. Call him sentimental, but he loved this vehicle-- chipped green paint and all.

The thought of his red pickup hauling Abby and Jake, and their son Ricky, all around San Diego, put a smile on Terry's face. Before Abby and Jake, (or AJ, as close family and friends sometimes called them), left New York four years ago with their new baby, Terry had traded vehicles with the young couple and had finally fallen in love with the jeep as much as he had his old crew cab.

Yes, sir. When it came to cars, Terry could be one sentimental guy.
At first, thoughts about family distracted Terry from seeing her. Something dark brown flashed by, barely registering from the corner of his eye. His gaze went to the rear view mirror, and there she stood. Debbie's bag lady. He only caught a quick glimpse, but the grocery bag slung from her hand, the shabby clothing, all gave Terry the rapid impression of homelessness.

Eyes focused back on the road, he adjusted his seat belt and frowned. Very strange.

The jeep turned off the main road, and pulled to a stop in front of the Johanneses' house. The sound of a vehicle must have caught John's attention, for he stepped out the front door and waved to Terry.

Terry rolled down a window as John came to greet him.

"I see Debbie fell asleep," John said with a smile to the back seat. "You guys have a good time?"

"Sure did," Terry grinned. "Say, would you unstrap her for me? I have an errand to run, and it'd save me some time."

"No problem."

The girl barely stirred when her daddy lifted her from the booster. With a nod to Terry, John carried his daughter inside.

The errand could wait a few minutes, Terry decided, as he pulled back onto the main road. First, he wanted to get a closer look at that homeless woman. But it was easier said than done, for when he returned, he could find no sign of her by the road.

For the next half hour, Terry drove around Three Mile Bay, searching for the slouched figure in the long sleeved brown shirt. Everywhere he looked, he came up empty. He had even checked with Vince, and Vince had given Terry a kind look and apologized that he hadn't noticed her. Oh well, Terry thought, and turned the jeep into the nearest gas station. After completing this errand, he would go home.

As Terry stood at the pump, filling his beloved vehicle with unleaded, Gus, the manager of the station, approached Terry with a "Howdy!" and a greasy rag hanging from the side pocket of his uniform.
"How are the triplets doing?" Gus asked, leaning against a pillar for a friendly bit of conversation. After they exchanged minor small-town news, Gus cocked back his faded baseball cap with an air of importance. "Did you see the woman?"

"What woman?"

"The woman with the bag, of course. Me and the boys down at the marina have a bet going. They say she's a prostitute, and I say she's lost. What woman dresses like that if they want to attract attention? All I can say is, if she's making a living with her body, she must be starving. That's no way to advertise the merchandise, if you know what I mean."

"Have you ever seen any homeless in Three Mile Bay?" Terry asked, placing the pump back in the holder.

"Homeless, huh?" Gus scratched his face, leaving a smudge of black on his chin. "I never thought of that. Can't say I ever remember seeing any. Maybe a panhandler once, but that's about all. If people are in these parts, it's usually because they're on vacation, or they're weekenders, or live here all year round."

A sedan pulled up to another pump, and Gus left Terry to go chat with the customer.

It wasn't Terry's problem. He knew it, understood it implicitly, and knew the sensible thing would be to go home and forget he ever saw the woman. The gas paid for, Terry sat behind the wheel of his jeep. Early evening touched the clouded sky, though it would still be several hours before it turned dark. Turning the key in the ignition, Terry pulled out of the station and headed toward home. Since Debbie noticed her near the house, that's where Terry decided to go back and look. If he still couldn't find the woman, he would assume she'd gotten a ride and left town, simply a hitchhiker passing through. Dangerous, Terry reasoned, but not as unusual.

Tall trees stood along the edges of the road, but no hitchhikers. Frowning, Terry passed John's house and made his way toward the Old Mill Campground, which was within walking distance of where Debbie had spotted the woman. It was getting close to dinnertime, and Terry understood that if he didn't return soon, his family would start to worry. Tugging his cell phone from a shirt pocket, Terry pulled to the side of the road before dialing home. After letting them know he might be a little late, Terry resumed his drive.

The Old Mill Campground consisted of the main office, where campers went to register, some bathrooms, a Laundromat, a parking lot, and tenting grounds where people pitched their UV resistant polyester domes and played wilderness for a few exciting days. Due to a recent change in ownership, the place had been shut down for renovation.
As Terry pulled into the construction-filled parking lot, his eye caught movement near an empty campsite. He pulled the jeep to a stop. At the base of a tree sat a white grocery bag, its handles caught in the wind and waving about in a wild dance.

Probably just trash, Terry thought. Just wasting my time. He tugged off the seat belt, opened his door and immediately, something moved beside the tree. Terry pulled off his sunglasses to get a better look. Probably just the bag again, but he could have sworn he saw moving feet.

Pocketing the sunglasses, Terry approached the grocery bag. "Hello? Anyone here?" When he received no response, he stooped to look inside the bag. Some wadded up shirts, a hairbrush with several missing teeth, a broken mirror. Pitiful remnants that might easily be considered as trash, had not Terry sensed they belonged to someone who hadn't thrown them away. Terry moved the bag around to see if he could find a logo on the front, something to indicate where it had come from. Nothing. Just a generic grocery bag, in an empty campground.

"Anyone here?" he called out again, hoping to get some response from behind the tree. He leaned forward on the balls of his feet, peered around the trunk and saw nothing but thick bushes. "Do you need money? I can give you a few dollars to help you get where you're going."

No response, though Terry could feel someone's presence nearby. Call it gut instinct, or a voice whispering in the back of his head, but someone watched him from close range.

"Listen," he dug into his pocket, pulled out a wallet, "I've got twenty bucks and eighty cents in change. Do you want it?"

No response.

Strange, Terry thought, taking the twenty-dollar bill from his wallet and placing it into the bag. Who turns down money?

Terry straightened. "I'm going now," he said, backing away from the tree. "I hope you're careful who you accept a ride from. Hitchhiking isn't safe." That is, if she's even a hitchhiker, Terry thought as he returned to the vehicle. She's probably homeless. That had been his first impression, but if she wouldn't come out from hiding, he couldn't do anything more than pray for her.

As Terry swung open the jeep door, he saw a figure emerge from the bushes. She wore a brown-checkered flannel shirt, baggy jeans with holes at the knees and a baseball cap pulled low over her eyes.
"I put the money in the bag," he called to her, taking a step in her direction. She edged back to the bushes and Terry stopped. "Do you need help?"

The baseball cap moved side to side in a definite "no." He couldn't see the eyes beneath the brim, but had a deep down feeling they stared at him with uncertain fear. Her whole posture said, "Go away," but Terry stayed put. He looked her over, the thin cheekbones, the baggy men's clothing. "Are you hungry?"

Again, a very pronounced "no," but Terry sensed a very probable "yes."

"I'll tell you what-- I'll go get you something to eat. Would you like that?"

No answer. Not even a "no."

Encouraged, Terry climbed into his car. As he pulled away, the figure retrieved the grocery bag, then went back into the bushes.

"Why do I have the feeling she'll be long gone by the time I get back?" he sighed to himself. "Oh well. I have to try."

When Terry returned with a fast food take-out bag, the shadows stretched long on the ground. The smell of onion rings and hamburger meat had made him hungry, but he restrained himself and the food remained intact. He went to the bushes, looked around, found nothing, then placed the meal beside the tree where the bag had sat about a half hour earlier. He called out, but she didn't answer.

Terry waited for several minutes, all the while wondering at himself at the effort he put into helping this woman. Blowing out a sigh, he at last gave up and went to the jeep. She had evidently left the area as he had thought she would, while he stood around looking like an idiot. Oh well. At least he had tried to help.

Movement from the other side of the parking lot made him pause. The woman stepped out from behind the main building, the grocery bag dangling from her right hand. She stood there, obviously caught off guard by his presence.

"I got you some food," he said, pointing his chin toward the take-out beneath the tree.

She put her hand into her grocery bag and pulled something out.
Frowning, Terry saw her take a few steps forward, then place his twenty dollars on the ground. She didn't go near the food, but turned her back, leaving the money to sail away in the strong breeze.

"Hey!" Terry called after her, but she kept going, until her frame disappeared behind the main office. Everything around here had been locked up tight-- Terry thought it very probable, but he followed a short distance just to make sure this very strange woman wasn't guilty of breaking and entering.

When she kept going, Terry felt satisfied that this was no burglar or vandal. Or at least, he didn't think she was. She also wasn't a prostitute, of that he was fairly certain.

Disturbed by her refusal to accept help, but unable to do a thing about it, Terry picked up his twenty, then returned to the jeep. No need to tell John about this, he thought, staring at the car keys for several long moments before unlocking the driver's side door. So he had tried to help someone, and it hadn't worked out again. No big deal. John didn't need to know.

* * * *

Upon returning home, Terry felt a pang of discomfort when John asked him what he'd been up to, and he only responded with a silent shrug. The odd look on John's face, and John's subsequent change of subject, weighed Terry down with additional guilt. Without having said a word, Terry felt as though John knew his secret: He had gone out on one of his crusades, and after promising to stop.

Terry hated that word-- crusade-- and all the Don Quixote oddities it implied. He hadn't been out fighting windmills that day, but trying to honestly help someone. Couldn't John understand that? Of course he could, Terry thought, taking out the warm leftovers Izumi had left for him in the oven. He just doesn't want me getting hurt again. And I didn't. End of story. Still, Terry despised keeping secrets from his friend. They were as close as brothers, and it felt like betrayal to not at least tell John that he'd broken his word by chasing after another needy person. Needy person, crusade. Somewhere along the way, Abby's language had slipped into Terry's own vernacular, and the mere thought of their past conversations made Terry feel ridiculous for what he'd done that day. In a stroke of merciful Providence, Abby and Jake were in California, and not here in Upstate New York. Knowing Abby, she would roll her eyes, and say, "Oh, Uncle Terry. Not again."

Biting into the warm dinner, Terry ate at the table while the house readied for bed. John strode into the kitchen, set the timer on the coffee maker so they'd have a fresh brew in the morning.
"Long day," John said, dropping into a chair at the table and blowing out a tired sigh. "I'm glad tomorrow's Sunday. I can use the rest."

"About today--" Terry stared at his plate. "I broke my word to you. I tried to help someone."

For a long moment, John didn't speak. "An old friend from the crisis hotline?"

"No, just someone I thought needed help. Apparently, it wasn't wanted, but I felt I had to try."

"You don't have to tell me this."

"But I gave my word."

"No, you gave your word and I refused to accept it. There's a difference."

With a sigh, Terry looked over to John. He truly didn't look angry, just very, very sober. Terry couldn't blame him. After what he'd put his best friend through the past several months, John's sobriety was understandable. His volunteer work as a hotline crisis counselor had been a mistake. Terry could see that now, but at the time, it had seemed like the right thing to do.

The weary smile on John's face put Terry at ease.

"You have a kind heart, Terry. Sometimes, I think it must drive your guardian angel nuts, but, on the whole, I think it's a good thing. I just wish you'd look before you leap, sometimes. In your zeal to help, you're the one who usually winds up getting hurt."

"I know."

"Are you sure this person isn't from the crisis hotline? This has nothing to do with child abuse, incest, rape, torture or any other violent crime against humanity?"

"No, just someone I saw on the road."

"Well, at least that's an improvement. You don't need more nightmares."

"I know," Terry sighed. "I know."

"If I were you," John said, moving to his feet, "I wouldn't tell Izumi any of this if you don't have to. Don't lie about today, but don't mention it, if it doesn't come up. And Terry, you don't have
to report to me or to anyone else about how you spend your time. You're a grown man. We can't lock you in your room until you come to your senses."

Hearing the humor in John's voice, Terry grinned. "Thanks. I'll remember that."

"See you in the morning," John smiled, and went to go help Izumi get the triplets ready for bedtime.

* * * *

That night, Terry fell asleep without clicking off the reading lamp over his bed. He had been reading a Sci-fi by his favorite Christian novelist, when even the excitement of the plot could no longer keep his eyes open, and he dozed off with the book still open on his lap. When he stirred several hours later, he realized what had happened, smiled to himself, then switched off the light.

Then he heard it. The hard pelting sound on the roof.

"I didn't know rain was in the forecast for tonight," he said with a yawn. Pulling up the covers, Terry slid deeper into the warmth of his comforter.

Then his eyes popped open. The homeless woman. Or the hitchhiker, or whatever else people wanted to call her. She was at the Old Mill Campground, and could have no possible shelter from the rain. Without a place to stay dry, and with all that cold wind, she could be in a lot of trouble.

Sitting up in bed, Terry clicked on the reading lamp. He sat there, debating with himself on what to do. He could call Sheriff Peterson's house, since he would likely be at home at this late hour, and tell him there might be a transient hidden at the campground. Of course, if she had previously left the area, Terry would look like the kindhearted idiot he sensed the townspeople already thought he was.

Terry's breakdown six months ago had been widely whispered about, though they could hardly know of the nightmares, the flashbacks from his own childhood abuse that had resurfaced in glowing pain. And all because of Terry's driving need to help others. John and the rest of the family had kept the matter private, but after an incident in the grocery store, people had easily guessed Terry was having a difficult time. If only he'd kept it together until he got home, if only he hadn't wept in the produce aisle over a heartrending story someone had told him only a few hours before, no one would ever have known the grief he was in. All those months working the hotline, listening to the tears, the panic, the stories of horror and shame, and through it all,
offering the emotional support and crisis counseling they so desperately needed. It had finally gotten to him, had flared up his own past and then John had to come running to wake him from the nightmares that haunted him for weeks after.

Now that he'd overcome the flashbacks once again, put the past in the past where it belonged, Terry didn't want to do anything to jeopardize that peace.

Heaving a deep sigh, Terry swung his legs over the mattress, went to the window, pushed back the shade and looked out. The rain came down in hard sheets of water, and he knew she had to be absolutely miserable out there.

"God, if You don't want me to do this, please show me a sign. Give me a flat tire, so I can't back out of the garage. Strike something with lightning-- preferably not me, but do whatever it takes to keep me from hurting my family again." Terry waited. Huh. No lightning. He dressed, shrugged on a heavy coat, then passed through the living room on his way to the garage beside the house. Maybe a tire would be flat. If it was, he'd call the sheriff and go back to bed. So he'd look like an idiot. What else would be new?

As Terry unchained the front door, he heard footsteps padding down the hall. Terry turned, saw John in his pajamas, sleep clouding his face.

"Where are you going?" John asked in bewilderment.

"It's raining," Terry said, looking up at the ceiling as the rain grew even heavier.

John followed Terry's gaze upward. "And your friend from the road is out there, in all that bad weather?"

Terry zipped his coat shut. "I think so."

With a sigh, John rubbed his face with both hands, most likely in an effort to wake up more fully. "Are you going into a dangerous situation?"

"No," Terry answered quickly. Then he thought about it. "I don't think I am."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"No, I can handle this on my own."

A kind but skeptical smile crossed John's face. "Where have I heard that before?"
"This time, I mean it. I have things under control."

Reluctance seemed to permeate from John's general direction. "Do you have your cell phone? You'll call if you get into trouble, right?"

"There won't be any trouble."

John took a step toward him. "Do you have your cell?"

With a pat on his coat pocket, Terry assured him that he did.

"I'm not going to tell Izumi until you get back," John said, turning to leave but apparently not finding the willpower to walk away just yet. "If she finds out I let you go by yourself, she'll send me after you." John groaned. "Just get home safe, or I'm never going to hear the end of it from the girls."

Pulling up the hood of his coat, Terry ducked into the kitchen to locate the emergency flashlight. After a prayer in the living room with John for safety, Terry stepped through the front door. A burst of arctic wind stole his breath, and he put his head down to keep from getting a mouthful of leaves.

John took one look at the weather, then shook his head as he closed the door behind Terry. Kindhearted Terry strikes again, Terry thought with glum realization as he splashed through the puddles on his way to the garage. Still, Terry had to hand it to John for not trying to bodily stop him. Or for locking his bedroom door. But if the jeep had a flat, the whole thing would be called off before it even started. It would be obvious to Terry that God didn't want him making another tragic, but well-intentioned mistake.

Hoisting the garage door open, Terry flipped on the overhead light. No flats on any of the three vehicles there. Okay, he thought, pulling out the car keys, he could take a hint.

* * * *

The smell of food nearly drove Madison crazy. After the strange man left, and she could no longer hear his footsteps behind her, she carefully circled back to the tree, following the irresistible smell of hot food and the urging of a hollow stomach. Her hope faded when she saw the large, muscular dog, tearing apart the bag and making short work of her food. Madison's heart dropped lower than the ground.
Her food. It hardly seemed fair, when the dog already looked well-fed and sported a handsome leather collar. It belonged to someone, someone who cared enough to feed it regularly and give it nice things, when she had no one and hadn't eaten a bite since before she'd gotten on the bus. She had arrived yesterday night, exultant at her first taste of freedom, then more subdued as the darkness wore on and the biting coldness grew worse. Only when the sun had warmed the air, did she feel able to breath again.

Sinking to her knees, she watched the dog trot off with part of the bag hanging from its jaws like a trophy.

Already the air felt icy, and she could sense the chill of night approach. The shadows were growing long, and though the sky still held light, she knew from last night's experience, what lay ahead.

Maybe that dog would let her sleep in its doghouse, Madison thought with a grim tug on her heart. It didn't seem fair. She smeared her eyes, then went to pick up the crumbs the animal left behind. A half eaten onion ring, a slobber-coated slice of tomato from a hamburger. Madison cleaned it off, squeezed her eyes shut, and ate the few remaining bites of food left her. She hoped that dog suffered the biggest stomachache of its miserable life, and found some measure of satisfaction thinking up things she wanted to befall it for stealing someone else's food. A few moments later, the thought of the poor creature, reclined in its spacious doghouse and suffering unspeakable agony, soon made her repent of such thoughts.

She just didn't have it in her.

As the cold darkness set in, not even the remaining shirts in her grocery bag could keep Madison warm. The sky grew ominous with gathering clouds, the wind whipped up to sting her face, and she finally discovered a small measure of refuge by scratching at the ground and pulling dead branches over her body. Then the rain came, driving the freezing chill deep into her muscles until her very bones ached with cold. She shook until her teeth threatened to shatter from being knocked together so hard, and then, strangely, things became better. The sky grew darker, the rain heavier, but she felt a comforting need to sleep. After the fatigue of hunger, the violent shaking, the drenching wetness, the enticement to sleep came as an unspeakable relief.

Such relief as had been denied her for so long, she had forgotten its existence.

Slipping in and out of consciousness, Madison tumbled about in ever growing numbness. Something within her screamed to fight. Somewhere, she had a vague idea that she might be dying. The possibility lay in the back of her mind, yelling at her to wake up, prodding her to not
give up. "God, don't let me die." The words tumbled into each other from numb lips, slurring the sound to her ears.

A sharp wedge of light splashed across her face, blinding her vision even though it was night. She tried to raise a hand to shield her eyes, but every limb felt plastic.

"God, help me." Madison's eyes grew heavy as the light came nearer. Maybe this was that light at the end of the tunnel she'd heard the people on television speak about. Maybe Heaven lay at the end of that bright wedge. Please, God, make it be Heaven and not the other place.

It moved closer, but the light forced her to keep her eyes shut.

"Dear God." A voice spoke, but Madison didn't recognize the husky sound as her own. She heard the relief when it added, "Thank God I'm not too late."

Dry warmth suddenly enveloped her shoulders, something dropped down over her head. She panicked, struggling to move but finding her body slow to react.

"Do you need medical attention?" That voice again. Who was it? Had she died? Was that an angel, come to lead her through the pearly gates, just as the pastor on TV said happened to those who were dead? She frowned, though her face felt numb to movement. They had medical attention in Heaven? Confused, she pushed at the thickness over her head, her fingers dull to the feel of the heavy fabric. Someone had placed a thick garment around her, and she could feel the comforting warmth of its former owner.

"That light," Madison squinted against the beam, and it suddenly moved elsewhere. A crouched form silhouetted above her against the clouded over night sky. Dim fear throbbed through Madison. Angels were supposed to glow in the dark, weren't they? Her thoughts grew as heavy as the surrounding shadows, slowing her ability to reason.

"Do you need a doctor?" it asked. The tree branches moved away, and the beam swept over her body. When she didn't answer, the light flicked to her face. "Are you hurt?"

"I--I'm fine." Madison forced herself to respond, though the words caught in her throat so badly they came out in a hoarse whisper.

"Fine? How can you possibly be fine? It's freezing wet out here!" The beam lowered, and when the voice spoke again, it towered above her. "Can you stand?"
"I don't think so." She shrank in the coat as the light clicked off. A vague impression of man formed in her tired mind. Guardian angels were usually men, but this one didn't glow in the dark. Weary of trying to get her mind working, Madison shut her eyes.

"We've got to get out of the rain," said the voice.

Suddenly, she found herself rising from off the ground as though she weighed nothing at all. This was more like it. Maybe she was getting wings, or something else just as Heavenly. She smiled, but the relief slipped away as she became aware of the form holding her-- the solid arms, the muscles moving beneath the wet shirt. Fear shuddered through every frozen fiber of Madison's body.

"Calm down, calm down," said the hot minty breath as it plumbed into contrails before her hooded face. "We're almost there."

She had to be dreaming. Despite the adrenalin pulsing through her veins, the fatigue, the bitter cold and lack of food, forced her to remain limp in his arms. Her head fell against his, the water pouring from off his hair and into her coat. Or was it his coat? Madison felt the material rubbing against her cheek, and realized he'd taken off his coat and given it to her. She felt too weak to resist, and barely had enough strength to remain upright when he shifted her to her feet and her shoes touched ground.

"Hang on," he said, as a door swung out from nowhere, nearly colliding with her head as she slumped forward, her knees buckling against her own weight. "Don't go rag doll on me-- not until I get you into the jeep." Her legs slid across a seat, her back rested against something soft, and all without having to will herself to act.

Her breath caught as she watched the very male figure jog around the hood of the vehicle. When he yanked open the driver's side door and jumped in, full realization jarred into Madison.

This was no angel, but a flesh and blood man.

Panic welling, her fingers groped for the handle at her side. She had to escape, but the door wouldn't work, and neither would her hands.

Rain and dim moonlight glinted in his hair, though his features remained hidden in shadow. A heavy voice drummed in her ears, but this time, Madison couldn't distinguish the words. His presence sank into thick blackness, and every sound throbbed in her head like distant thunder. A wild scream pierced her senses, the darkness eagerly rushed up to embrace her.
Then all was silent.

"I am in a great strait [a very bad situation]: let me fall now into the hand of the LORD; for very great are His mercies: but let me not fall into the hand of man."

~ 1 Chronicles 21:13 ~
Chapter Two
New Mercies

"Hear, O LORD, when I cry with my voice: have mercy also upon me, and answer me."
~ Psalm 27:7 ~

Stunned shock arrested Terry's breath, and for several long moments, he just sat there, the sound of that one wild scream still echoing in his brain. Could it be possible that a human had made that unearthly sound, let alone this slight woman who weighed nothing at all in his arms? Now quiet, and slumped against the seat, she showed no signs of life. Terry put out a hand, touched her shoulder to get a response.

"Hey, wake up." When she didn't move, Terry felt a swallow squeeze its way down his dry throat. Please, God, let her be alive. Don't let this woman die in my jeep. How will I ever explain this to Henry Peterson? Terry pictured the handcuffs circling his wrists, the pained look on Sheriff Peterson's face as Terry tried to explain what happened. "She took one look at me, screamed like a banshee, then keeled over in the seat. Honest."

Pushing back any rational fear for himself, Terry lifted an ice-cold hand, rubbed the unresponsive fingers between his palms. "Ma'am? You need to wake up, and let me know how badly you're hurt."

A small groan eased Terry's apprehension. The hood fell back as she turned her head against the seat, allowing an unobstructed view of her face for the first time. The sight of her made Terry's breath catch. He questioned his eyes, wondering if he had plucked an angel unawares from the mud, and not a mortal like himself. Maybe that explained the unearthly cry. Rubbing his eyes, Terry looked at her again, trying to decide whether he was going crazy, or just in bewildered shock from the scream.

Faint silvery moonlight filtered through the clouds, lending a storybook air of wonderment to Terry's already dazed mind. He saw a slender face, delicate skin, even features that could of come straight from the pages of one of the triplets' much-beloved books of fairytale princesses. Maybe this was no angel at all, but a fairytale princess come to life. With that crown of blonde hair and cute little nose, maybe Terry had found Sleeping Beauty outside her castle walls.

Angel to princess, Terry sighed at his own nonsense. This is what came from reading one too many children's books to the girls.
Without warning, a pair of large, dramatic eyes blinked open. They stared at Terry in such profound horror, it startled him even more. He wondered if she saw something frightening over his shoulder, and turned only to find his own reflection in the window.

With a sharp gasp, Sleeping Beauty twisted in her seat. She tugged at the passenger door, and before Terry could stop her, it swung out into the downpour. She leaned through the opening, but lacking strength, tumbled onto the ground with a splash and a cry of pain. Terry burst from the driver's side, ran around to collect the woman who was behaving as though she'd lost her mind.

Maybe Sleeping Beauty was off her medication.

A frantic arm pushed away his hands when he stooped to lift her from off the ground.

Terry wiped the rain from his eyes, stayed crouched and watched in bewilderment as the woman moved to her knees, struggling to stand but unable to get upright.

"You're going to hurt yourself!" he shouted. "Let me get you back into the jeep, and I'll take you to a hospital."

"No." The word sounded definite, as though her mind was made up and no amount of talking could persuade her otherwise.

By now, Terry was shivering convulsively, having given his coat to the princess who knelt in the rain. She stared at the ground, her frame shaking with cold and something else Terry couldn't quite place.

With a stab of reality, Terry realized it was fear. She was afraid of him.

"Sorry, I forgot to introduce myself," he grinned, hoping it would encourage her to calm down. "My name's Terry Davis. I live nearby with my family, and I work with computers for a living. You can trust me."

The woman turned her head. The sarcasm in that glance was easy to recognize.

"Okay, so that's no reason to trust me, but I'm turning to ice as we speak. I need to get into the jeep, and so do you. How about it?"

She made no answer, just sank forward in a lifeless heap-- face-first, into a large puddle.
Before she drowned in two inches of rainwater, Terry lifted her back into the vehicle. This time, he made no effort to revive her. He snapped on her seat belt, started the engine, then turned up the heater to its highest setting. Maybe doctors frightened her, and that was why she refused to go to a hospital--Terry didn't know--he only knew that if he couldn't take her there, it would have to be a homeless shelter in Watertown. If he could find one with empty beds this late at night. A recovering drug addict had once told Terry that those places tended to fill up early, for if you didn't grab a cot before nightfall, you often weren't able to get one at all.

Still numb with disbelief, Terry turned the jeep around to head for his little-used apartment in Chaumont. He thought of taking Madison home to John and Izzy, but the thought of their kind but exasperated disapproval that he was "doing it again," prevented Terry from considering it any further. Besides, Terry had already put his dear friends through enough heartache, to last them a lifetime. No, Terry reasoned, he had gotten himself into this predicament, and he must get himself out.

An occasional moan from the passenger seat assured Terry that the woman still lived. Not that he felt anymore fear over her dying. Freezing and weak, and soaked through to her skin, she had too much fight left in her to be very hurt.

As for him... man, was he ever cold.

The three-mile drive into Chaumont couldn't go by fast enough for Terry. Getting off the main road, he navigated surface streets until coming to a wide, two story brick building. He parked, jumped from the jeep and ran to the shelter of the small porch above his apartment door. After shoving the key into the handle, Terry fumbled with the second lock. What a time to have remembered to put on the deadbolt! He shoved open the door, flipped on the light switch, then forced himself back into the rain to get the woman.

She moaned when he lifted her into his arms. He kicked the jeep door shut, then carried her into the apartment. The heat wasn't turned on, but it came as a welcome change from outside.

Through the small living room, around the half-bath, up the stairs to the second floor and straight ahead to the bathroom. He placed her, fully clothed, into the empty bathtub, turned on the overhead shower, twisting it to the warm position. She had done some thawing in the jeep, but her teeth rattled as liquid heat soaked her shoulder-length hair, his coat, and every stitch of clothing already sopping with rainwater.

Leaving her to the warm shower, Terry went to his bedroom, just down the short hall on the same floor, to change into dry clothes. He would have liked that shower, himself, but knew she needed it more.
He jerked clothes from the closet, dressed as quickly as he could. Grabbing a pair of sweatpants and a matching top from his dresser, he returned to the bathroom. Aside from her closed eyes, she was as he had left her. To his relief, the color had returned to her skin, giving her princess face a rosy glow of health.

"What's your name?" he asked.

She lowered her head, tucking her chin against her shoulder. Then the trembling returned.

Puzzled, Terry felt the spray of water from the shower. Still hot. Not too hot, but certainly comfortable. "Are you still cold? Here, put these on. You'll feel better when you're dry."

No response, not even when Terry placed the clothes near the bathtub and prepared to leave.

"No one is going to take advantage of you," he said, trying to assure her into relaxing a little. "You're safe here-- a whole lot safer than hitchhiking or sleeping out at the Old Mill Campground by yourself. You're welcome to stay the night, to use the phone and call your family, or a friend, to come and get you. If no one can, I'll give you money for bus fare so you won't have to hitchhike or place yourself in needless danger. In return, I ask you not to trash my apartment, or to take anything from it that doesn't belong to you. Except for the clothes by the bathtub. Those, you can keep. Fair enough?"

She remained silent.

"Nod your head, so I know you heard me."

A slight nod made him feel better.

"That's fine, then. Leave the wet clothes in the hall, and I'll put them in the wash." He swung the door shut, making sure he did it with enough noise to let the woman know he had gone.

"If I were in her shoes," Terry muttered as he trotted downstairs, "by myself, and with a stranger I didn't know, I'd probably be just as terrified as she is right now. It's understandable." Moving through to the end of the dining area, he turned right and entered the narrow kitchen. He filled a saucepan with water, placed it on the gas range, then twisted on the fire with a click-click. Even with dry clothes, the cold still clung to him, and he craved something warm in his belly to chase away the last of the chill.
He tore open two packets of sweetened cocoa powder, dumped them into two mugs. The cell phone in his hip pocket started singing the theme song to his favorite fly fishing show, "Bassin' the Weeds with Dennis." Not needing to check the number to know who was calling, Terry pulled out the phone, took a deep breath and answered the call.

"Hi, John."

"Hey, Terry. Is everything all right? When you didn't come home, I got concerned."

"No, I'm fine." Terry squeezed his eyes shut. He should have called John a long time ago; now the calmest person in the family was trying to hide the worry in his voice. "I'm just getting some things taken care of, but I should be home in an hour or two."

As hard as John must have been trying to conceal his concern, he couldn't mask a great sigh of relief. "And your friend from the road?"

"Is thawing out under a hot shower."

A long stretch of silence, then John sighed. Terry had mentioned a shower, and that could only mean one thing. The "friend from the road" was in Terry's apartment.

Sounds from upstairs had Terry looking up from the floor, where he had been staring holes in the brown kitchen linoleum. "Don't worry. I'll only have a houseguest for a day-- two at the most."

"It's your apartment, Terry," John blew out another sigh. "Just be careful, okay?"

A loud clatter sounded above Terry's head, followed by an odd scooting noise of something moving across bathroom tile.

"Terry?"

"Huh? Oh, right. I'll be careful. Tell Izzy not to worry. Bye!" After switching off the gas range, Terry hung up on John as he hurried through the dining area, on his way to the stairs. Taking two steps at a time, Terry made a beeline for the bathroom door.

"What's going on in there?" he called.

No answer.
"You'd better speak up, or I'm coming in!" When his warning met with more silence, Terry tried the door handle and found it had been locked from the inside. He ran downstairs, headed back to the kitchen to search through the junk drawer for keys to the inside doors. Locating the key ring beneath a bag of open rubber bands, he cocked an ear to the floor above him, but heard nothing. Frowning, Terry ran upstairs.

It was awfully quiet up there.

He jammed the key into the handle, threw open the door.

At first, his mind didn't accept what he saw. A small shelf with decorative bottles he'd once been given as a housewarming present were scattered over the bathroom floor. The wicker laundry hamper under the shelf had been moved into the bathtub, beneath the single frosted window high above the shower. It was a narrow opening, made even more inaccessible by the need to climb on something to even look out. But the woman had managed it, slid open the window, and popped the screen. All that remained of Terry's houseguest was a sopping wet pile of clothes.

Horror reeled through Terry as he bolted from the bathroom, headed downstairs to the front door.

That window was two stories off the ground.

His heart racing faster than his feet, Terry rounded the apartment building. And there he saw her, two stories up, clinging to the side of the wall, her feet precariously balanced on the narrow decorative ledge that ran the entire length of the building.

Terry nearly dropped in his tracks. He wanted to shout to her to stay still, that he'd get her down but to not move an inch or she might fall. Not wanting to frighten her into doing just that, Terry ran to the apartment complex shed where the gardener kept his tools. Reaching for his keys, Terry realized he didn't have them. He'd given them to Lauren.

"Please, God, don't let her fall!" Terry panted as he ran to Lauren Moore's apartment. He banged on the door, and after several moments, a middle-aged woman in a bathrobe finally appeared.

"Terry? What's wrong?" she asked, cinching the robe shut as her sleepy-eyed husband came to see who had interrupted their sleep.

"I need the keys to the shed!" Terry paused to catch his breath. "I can't explain now, Lauren, but I need those keys I gave you-- the ones to the tool shed."
Bewildered, Lauren went to get the keys while her husband, Ralph, yawned and scratched his head.

"It sure is cold out," Ralph said, first looking at the vapor trails huffing from Terry, and then at Terry. "Is something wrong?"

"Not unless I don't get those keys." Terry forced himself not to shout into the house to hurry Lauren. She scurried to the front door, handed Terry the keys in question.

"When you get a moment, Terry, I need to talk to you about Mr. O'Shaughnessy's kitchen sink--"

"Later," Terry said, already speeding back to the shed. He unlocked the door, lifted out the ladder, kept up the prayers as he carried the heavy object around to the back of the building.

Thank God, she was still on the ledge, and not a large splatter on the ground. Her knees trembled, her body hugged the wall in a fierce spread-eagle against brick and mortar. The blood drained from Terry's head as he propped the ladder against the wall, to her right. When she made no move to reach for the ladder, he began climbing just as footsteps sounded behind him.

"What on earth?" came Lauren's voice, followed by an equally amazed Ralph's, "That woman must be crazy!"

No more than I am, Terry thought with numb disbelief as he neared the woman. He slowed, not wanting to frighten her into letting go before it was safe.

"Ma'am?" He tried to keep his voice calm, not alarmed and panicked as his heart kept telling him he was. "Try to move toward me, but don't look down. Can you do that?"

The woman closed her eyes, but didn't move or answer.

"You can't stay up here much longer. Your legs are cramping, your muscles are tiring, and you're bone cold. Thank God, the rain stopped, or your feet would have slipped off this ledge long before now. You must reach for the ladder."

The woman gasped as her balance shifted on unsteady legs, and when Terry moved behind her to stop her from falling backwards, she nearly let go. Ralph shouted that she was about to fall, but the woman regained her balance without Terry's help. Her steady refusal to accept help, bothered Terry. Why hadn't she accepted his arm, and used it to regain her balance, rather than
falling back against the wall? Why risk so much when all that was needed was a steadying shoulder? The question puzzled him, but he remained silent as she at last reached for the ladder.

"Is she all right, Terry?" Lauren came to him as soon as he touched ground, Lauren's eyes wide with alarm. "Who is she, and what was she doing up there?"

Not really knowing how to answer, Terry replied the best he could by not saying much. "She's fine, I think. Just a bit shaken up."

The woman reached the bottom of the ladder, put one bare foot on the ground, then the other, as though she were stepping onto the moon, and not planet Earth. Her shoulders hunched forward, she hugged herself with both arms, all the while edging away from the group.

Ralph pointed his chin in her direction. "What's with her?"

"She's had a hard day," Terry said, as the woman turned her back on them and began to walk away. "Thanks for the keys, Lauren. I'll lock up the ladder and return them later."

"Sure, Terry, but--" Lauren was unable to finish, for Terry had walked off in the same direction as the woman. Before Terry was out of earshot, he heard Lauren tell her husband in a loud whisper, "That's nice, he's finally seeing someone. Whatever their fight's about, I hope they smooth things over before Terry winds up old and alone."

Terry walked faster before he heard one syllable more. A familiar pained sadness welled in his heart, the same pain that visited every time someone made an assumption about his life, his inability to attract anyone, the inevitable scolding over why he hadn't gotten married yet. He would straighten out Lauren's misunderstanding later, make a few remarks about his houseguest to stop further speculation, but the comments still hurt. Why can't people just accept the fact I'm going to be single for the rest of my life? he thought. I wish they'd get over it, and leave me alone.

The woman slowed, and Terry did likewise. Her frame swayed, she sank to her knees and Terry knew she had to be exhausted. He glanced over his shoulder, saw the Moore's had gone back into their apartment. Thank God for small favors.

At a careful walk, he approached the woman wearing his sweatpants and top. She had fallen back and was sitting on her feet, her arms still hugging herself in a death grip. Vapor trailed from her nose, her mouth, and when Terry came around to face her, he saw her cheeks were glowing bright pink from the cold.
"You look tired." Terry controlled his voice, gauged the way she slunk back at his approach and measured his forcefulness to avoid further scaring the woman. "You haven't eaten since dinner. You're freezing cold, you don't have any shoes or socks on, and if you don't find some shelter soon, you're going to come down with something nasty."

"Just leave me alone." The helplessness in those handful of words struck Terry as nearing despair.

To avoid towering above her and seeming more threatening, Terry squatted, got down on her level. He observed the small nose, the downturned eyes fringed with long lashes, the soft brilliance of a peaches and cream complexion. If she didn't get out of the cold soon, that healthy glow would fade right along with her.

"What's your name?" Terry asked in a quiet voice. He waited for an answer, strained to hear when her lips moved.

"Madison."

"Do you have a last name to go with that?"

Her chin tucked against her shoulder, and she remained silent.

Okay, he thought, you don't have to answer that. He tried to determine her age, pegged her for about twenty-five but couldn't be certain. Some people didn't look their age, and maybe she was one of them.

"Are you in any trouble?" Terry asked, cocking his head to one side to see her face better. "Are the police looking for you? Are you a runaway? Maybe escaping an abusive husband? There's shelters for battered women, places you can go to be safe and not have to worry about your husband as much."

No recognition, no flicker of awareness in those downturned eyes and tightly pressed lips.

Terry looked at her, gave her a small smile. "Not even close? Or maybe closer than you want me to know?" He sighed at the continued silence. "Look, Madison, you need to get inside, get yourself warm, and get some sleep. I live three miles from here with my family, so you can have the entire apartment to yourself."

Her mouth moved, the words tumbling out in a barely audible whisper. "I'm hungry."
"You are?" Terry was surprised. "What about that hamburger I left? If you're hungry, why didn't you go back for the food I placed under the tree?"

A futile sigh passed her lips. "The rich dog ate it."

"Pardon?" Terry leaned closer to hear better. "Rich dog?"

She nodded. "The one with the fancy collar. He tore up the bag, ate the food and only left me a slice of tomato." Hurt sounded in her voice. "I'm so tired."

"Come back to the apartment, and I'll fix you something to eat. All you need is a good night's sleep, and then you can face life in the morning. Things always look better in the morning."

"Not my life, mister. Bad is always bad, and morning just means it starts all over again."

"After that bold maneuver on the wall?" Terry grinned, even though he felt like sitting down and crying. "I have a hunch you're a lot braver than you feel. Tired-hungry is speaking right now, not you."

Her mouth stretched into a weary frown. "I keep asking God for help, but it doesn't come. What if I can't hold out until He answers?"

Terry regarded her a moment before answering. "Are you a Christian?"

"Yes."

"If the answer doesn't come," Terry reasoned, "it either means 'no,' or He's going to answer you in some other way than you thought."

Panic touched her face. "I don't think I can hold out much longer."

Even though frustration nibbled at Terry like a starving mouse working through cheese, he refrained from tossing back any kind of a retort. She had prayed for help, and here he was, offering money and a free place to sleep until her family came. What more did she want?

"God promises us that His mercies are new every morning," Terry said, trying to encourage her as best he could. "All we have to do is hold out until morning. Come on, it's not that far away--just," he paused, glanced at his watch, "two hours till sunup. You can hold out until then, can't you?"
A defeated look faced off into nowhere, avoiding his direct gaze. "I thought it would be easier than this," she whispered, her voice so thick with disappointment, Terry felt her burden settle onto him as well. He didn't know what she spoke of, only her situation in general. Things didn't look good, he had to admit it, but he sure wasn't going to admit it to someone already grasping for hope.

"You can't stop, Madison." Terry's voice firmed as he spoke. "It's not over, until God says it is. If you had wanted to end things, you would have given up before now. Come on. Get up, and start putting one foot in front of the other." He reached to help her up, but she jerked away. "Okay, I won't touch you. But you need to get up. Now."

The forcefulness paid off, for Madison wobbled to her feet, her frame looking small in his oversized clothes.

Hands jammed into his pockets, Terry kept a careful distance as Madison took one slow step after another. For the first time, he noticed a limp to her stride. Maybe she had gotten hurt on the ledge, he thought, then realized that same limp had been there the day before, when he had followed her a short distance at the Old Mill Campground. It wasn't a severe hobble, but a noticeable one, once you were aware of it.

An image of an abandoned puppy dropped into Terry's mind. He wondered if someone had dumped her in Three Mile Bay, then took off without her. Maybe she had no family to call, and no one to come help her.

* * * *

For a brief moment, Madison didn't know which door belonged to the place she had just come from. Then she saw the light splashing onto the tiny front step, the door standing open in the night air.

She shivered, came to a stop without setting a toe inside.

The man who had called himself Terry, stopped as well, a few feet behind her back. She hated the feel of him watching her, as though he were trying to feel her out with just his eyes.

The way she saw it, there were only two options. Either go inside with this man, or stay out here and freeze to death.

What a choice.
With an audible sigh, Terry passed her without saying a word. She lurched to one side to give him plenty of room, then leaned through the doorway to see where he went. Terry moved down the length of the narrow apartment, turned right into a room she couldn’t see.

Cold wind battered her body, sending her into enemy territory before she was ready. Once inside, she closed the door without making a sound to give away her presence.

She stood there, shivering on thick, gray, wall-to-wall carpet with no place to go. Tidy furniture and lightly textured white walls gave the apartment a classy atmosphere that made her feel out of place. A black leather couch faced a polished TV cabinet, while a matching chair sat next to a solid wood coffee table. Bookshelves lined the wall, along with silver photo frames crowded with people that were no doubt Terry’s family. This guy must have money, she thought. He said he doesn’t even live here, and it's this nice.

The thought didn’t impress her very much. She didn’t even bother to satisfy her curiosity by getting a closer look at the photos on the wall. She needed to get somewhere safe, away from HIM.

Then she saw the stairs. Madison calculated how quickly she could get up them, find a room, and lock the door. Terry was in the back. He couldn’t run fast enough to catch her-- not if she was faster.

Her heart pounded as she bolted up the stairs. At the top, she passed the bathroom, fearful that when Terry needed to use the toilet, she would have to face him again. Instead, she rounded the banister, and went to the first door she saw.

It swung open with a small sigh, the hinges moaning like some stupid horror movie she’d once been gullible enough to sit through. It was dark in there, like a yawning chasm, ready to swallow her whole. The sound of a pan rattling downstairs forced her inside. She locked the handle, then collapsed against the door in a fit of weary relief.

Safe. Unless Terry had a key, or could knock down the door like they did on those cop shows. The thought made Madison weak.

God, don’t let him get me, she prayed before closing her eyes. Exhausted, she fell asleep before squeezing out an "Amen."

* * * *
Worry nudged itself into Terry's mind as he stood at the kitchen stove, heating the last can of food left in the apartment. He normally didn't stay here, so the cupboards were bare.

A familiar feeling haunted him, as though he had just seen himself in someone else, or even worse, saw something in that person that reminded him of a dear friend he knew. Really, several friends. How many times had he met with any one of those telltale behaviors—avoidance of eye contact, over-vigilance in maintaining distance from others, distrust to the point of madness, pain that went deeper than mere physical suffering? To Terry's way of thinking, every wounded heart reacted differently to physical or mental abuse, but to a small degree, they all shared at least some of those behaviors. Maybe not everyone, Terry admitted, pouring the pan of hot soup into a bowl, but enough so to make him a fairly decent guesser.

He had heard the door slam above him, off to his back, and Terry guessed that she had decided not to hide in the bathroom. Otherwise, the slam would have been directly over his head.

Maybe I'm thinking too much, he frowned. I've spent too much time with abuse, and now every person I see has to fit my profile.

But she is hiding up there. I may be naive, but I'm not an imbecile. Don't fight that, he warned. So he was a pushover for a person in need. John had said that was a good thing. Of course, Terry recalled, placing a spoon into Madison's bowl, John had also warned to "look before you leap."

I haven't made any leaps, and I don't intend to, Terry reasoned as he climbed the stairs with the bowl of hot chicken soup in one hand, a lukewarm mug of cocoa in the other. This houseguest was only staying for a day--two at the most--just as he had told John, and then Madison would be on her way. Out of Terry's life, and no longer Terry's problem.

The bathroom door stood open, confirming Terry's guess. He looked down the short hall, saw his bedroom door was also open. She wouldn't hide in the linen closet, so that left... He tried the door to the storage room, which was actually a second bedroom crammed with bookshelves, filing cabinets, fishing gear, and no bed.

No surprise when he found the door had been locked.

Okay, he thought, I'll just place the bowl and mug outside the door, and when she's ready, she'll eat.

Movement from inside announced she was still alive, and probably now smelling the food. He stepped inside the bathroom, wanting to close that window and get all those soaking wet clothes into a washing machine before mildew ruined his favorite coat.
He heard the storage door creak open, watched from the bathroom as it inched wider until a hand pulled first the mug, then the bowl inside.

"That's chicken soup," he said, as the door quickly slammed shut. "I hope you like it." Maybe it was something I said, Terry thought with a rueful chuckle.

Instead of visiting the community laundry for the apartment complex, Terry stuffed the clothes into a trash bag, to take with him and clean at home. He paused before heading downstairs, stared at the locked room where the woman ate hot soup and drank lukewarm cocoa.

"I'm leaving," he called. "There's no more food in the kitchen, but I'll bring some over later today."

No response-- not that he really expected any. He understood Madison was only there because she had no other choice.

Wishing he could get on the phone at that very moment to contact her family, Terry moved down the stairs with his and Madison's wet clothes. Get her to call home, give her bus fare and enough money to keep her safe during her trip, and then Terry could go back to normal.

Now all he had to do was face his family.

God help him, how he loved those people! Every single blessed one of them! But, oh, could they ever worry. Because they cared, they would pray at all hours, call at inconvenient times to make sure he was all right, and offer to go with him in the middle of a storm-tossed night to help a stranger.

Terry glanced at his watch after locking the front door. A full hour before sunup on a Sunday morning meant John and Izzy would still be asleep-- that is, if John had managed to keep his eyes shut and not think too much.

What had Terry told Madison? God's mercies are new every morning. He thought over those words, the meaning of that promise as he went to his jeep. Quite a promise-- new mercies for a new day. We need them, Lord, he prayed as he climbed into the jeep, tossed the bag onto the passenger seat where Madison had passed out a few short hours before. The memory of her terror drew a dark shadow across Terry's heart. People didn't behave that way unless they were either stark raving lunatics, or their past had taught them what to expect. In Madison's eyes, her fear was valid, and that thought disturbed Terry to his core.
His scars recognized hers, a survivor sensing the presence of another like himself. But she's not me, he cautioned. Compared to her, I'm almost normal.

Turning the key in the ignition, Terry leaned back in the seat to let the engine warm. "Give us new mercies, Lord," he said, letting the words spill from his heart out loud, "give us new mercies, before this world tears itself apart."

"This I [Terry] recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the LORD’S mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is Thy faithfulness."

~ Lamentations 3:21-23 ~
“Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.”
~ Matthew 5:3, 7 ~

Even before he opened the front door, something in the pit of Terry's stomach knew what to expect. The likelihood of being able to sneak into the house undetected, was next to nil, greater still when you mixed in a worried family.

Not that Terry tried to sneak, of course. He just didn't see why he should disturb anyone's Sunday morning sleep-in for no good reason.

He edged the front door open, then a little more, until a figure lying on the couch came into view. The click of locks had already woke the sleeping man, and as Terry came inside, John sat up and rubbed the bleariness from his eyes.

"I was hoping no one would wait up for me," Terry said with a rueful chuckle. He placed the trash bag on the floor, tugged the door closed.

"Yeah, well," John stood up in a stretching yawn, "I couldn't get any sleep."

"You didn't look like you were having any trouble, a moment ago."

John gave a half shrug. "I took a nap. What's in the bag?"

"Laundry," Terry said, pointing his chin to the bulging trash bag. "With all that rain last night, everything got soaked."

"Hmmm." John made no other response, his stare directed at the floor and not at Terry. "Everything go all right? Or would you prefer I not ask?"

"You can ask," Terry said with a lightheartedness he didn't quite feel.

John's gray-eyed stare moved from the floor to Terry. "Then did everything go all right?"
"Well," Terry rubbed his neck, trying to buy time so he could figure out the best honest answer possible. Escaping from a bathroom window two stories off the ground didn't exactly make it easy for Terry to shrug out a "Sure, everything's fine."

"I guess things could have gone better," Terry said at last.

The hesitance in Terry's answer, the length of time it took before he replied, caused a wary smile to crease John's mouth. "A cautious answer to a cautious question. I hope you're not holding back, simply because you're afraid of what I'll say."

"Not exactly you..." Terry slanted a look down the hall.

Wearing a dark red robe, and fuzzy blue slippers the girls had given her for mother's day earlier that year, Izumi came into the living room with Ruthie in tow.

"He's back," John said with a smile.

"So I see." Izumi looked Terry over, saw the bag and lifted her brows in an unspoken question.

"Oh, that's laundry," John said.

Though Terry appreciated his friend's attempt to shield him, Terry understood the inevitable next question. "Izzy, this time I'm being more careful. I give you my word."

"You've said that, before."

"This time is different."

"How is it different? Does this houseguest need money, a place to stay until who knows when, and emotional support until you're the one having nightmares?"

John blew out a heavy sigh. "Little Dove, Terry is doing what he feels is right."

Despite having heard John's loving pet name for her, Izumi pinned her husband with a solid stare. "Terry is setting himself up to get hurt again, and I seem to be the only one here who sees it coming."

"It's only going to be for a day or two," Terry said, venturing to put in a few words in his own defense.
"And," John added in a show of support, "this houseguest isn't from the crisis hotline. Relax, Little Dove. Everything is under control."

Izumi gave John a disbelieving look. "I'm not the one who slept on the sofa until Terry came home."

"Well, you're the one who kept talking about what could go wrong, and how could I let him leave without me..." John threw up his hands. "Let's face it, we were both concerned about him."

Izumi patted Ruthie down the hall, then turned to face her husband. "It's going to happen again."

"You don't know that."

Izumi sighed.

"Honey, I don't know what you want from me. Do you want me to lock Terry in his room? Is that what you want?"

For a long moment, Izumi looked as though she were considering the possibility.

"He's a grown man, Izumi. I won't do it."

The back and forth between John and Izumi filled Terry with regret. He hated to see his good friends struggle through disagreement because of him, more so, when a similar conversation had taken place a few months ago concerning a different houseguest. One regrettable but necessary eviction and a restraining order later, Terry still received the occasional call from the survivor of abuse Terry had met on the hotline. Victor. He had been molested as a child, turned to drugs as a teenager to drown out the pain, and now all Victor could see was his own suffering, his own needs. Everyone else didn't matter, not even the man who had gone out of his way to help.

Maybe Izumi had a point...

Then the slight image of Madison came before Terry. The discouraged gray eyes that were unable to meet his, the trembling he guessed wasn't related to the cold, the absolute and complete helplessness of the pain he could only sense lay beneath the surface. They meant big problems for Madison, no question about it, but why should that matter to him? He hefted the bag off the floor, weighed the consequences of his decision.

"Izzy, I have to do this."
"It’s his decision to make, Izumi."

Outnumbered two to one, Izumi shook her head in quiet protest.

"If I get the flashbacks again," Terry said in a solemn voice, "I promise, I'll move out until I'm back to normal."

"You'll do no such thing."

"You said that the last time."

"This time he means it," John said with a grin.

Terry sighed. "I also meant it the last time."

Head bowed in a moment of thought, Izumi looked at Terry. Even through her frustrated concern, Terry could see a great deal of compassion. "Take care of yourself, Terry. Over the years, you've not only been John's brother, but mine as well."

Izumi's words touched him, and he stooped to accept her offered hug.

"Be on your guard, Terry. Don't let anyone take advantage of your good nature."

"I won't, Izzy."

An unconvinced sigh escaped from Izumi, but she tried to believe him. Terry knew she tried, for after their talk, she took the bag of wet clothes from Terry, and offered to do the laundry for him.

Surprised but grateful, Terry thanked Izumi.

When she disappeared out the kitchen door on her way to the laundry room beside the house, John appraised the situation with a cautious but satisfied nod. "I think we won. Don't worry, Terry. She'll come around."
The kind but unrealistic statement brought a smile to Terry's mouth. Not even John considered Terry's most recent needy person a good idea, and they had yet to meet her.

Several poached eggs sat in a frying pan, sizzling and filling the kitchen with aroma by the time Izumi returned from the laundry room. She went to the table where her coffee waited, and seemed to enjoy letting the men be the ones to stand over the stove for a change.

"Your friend needs to lose weight," Izumi said, wrapping her fingers around the mug. "From the man's clothes, I'd say he's about sixty pounds overweight."

"Who?" Terry paused as he lifted plates from the cupboard.

"Your houseguest," Izumi said with a smile. "The guy you're trying to help. He needs to lose weight."

For a moment, Terry puzzled, then remembered Madison's clothes. "My houseguest isn't exactly a he."

Now John paused, his attention full on Terry. "Then what is he... exactly?"

"A she."

"A woman?" John's eyes went big with alarm. "Terry, are you trying to tell me you went to the Old Mill Campground last night, and took a woman you found there, to your apartment in Chaumont?"

"Yeah. So?"

"That's taking a big risk, isn't it?"

Frowning, Terry pulled out more plates. "I don't see how it's such a big difference from my last houseguest."

"But he was a man."

"So?"

"Terry, what happens if this woman suddenly decides she can get more from you by claiming you kidnapped her, or assaulted her? It would be your word against hers."
Puzzled, Terry shrugged. "Why would she do that?"

"It's called extortion," John said, his voice hardening. "You're really putting your neck on the line with this one."

"Madison wouldn't do that," Terry shook his head, his mind rebelling at the thought of the helpless woman being somehow mercenary. "She's too lost, too..." he searched for a better word, "too damaged to do anything but hide in my storage room."

The mug settled on the table, and Izumi's eyes widened like her husband's. "She's hiding? From whom?"

"Me, I suppose," Terry said with a shrug.

Izumi gave him a searching stare. "And why is she hiding from the man who saved her?"

"I don't know-- at least, not for certain."

"What do you know for certain?"

"Not much. But I do know she needs help."

"If she's hiding from you, then, yes, she definitely needs help." The worried frown returned to Izumi's face, and when Terry looked to John, he found the same expression on his.

"How soon is this Madison character leaving?" John asked.

"I hope to have her out of my apartment in a day or two."

"Is there anywhere else you can take her in the meantime? A homeless shelter-- anywhere that isn't your apartment?"

Terry focused on the multi-colored plates in his hands. "I don't think they'd take her."

"Why not?" The concern rising in John's voice worried Terry into momentary silence.

"Madison has problems."

"What kind of problems?"
"I'm not sure." Terry sucked in a deep breath, waited a beat to gather his courage. "She seems to be afraid of people-- men in particular, and she acts strange-- too strange for most homeless shelters to probably take her. Even for them."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Izumi asked.

"It means," John said, folding his arms, "that Madison is a few tacos short of a combination platter."

"What?"

"She's crazy." John turned to Terry. "Or am I wrong?"

"I don't think she's crazy. Just very, very hurt on the inside."

A groan slipped from Izumi. "I thought you said she wasn't from the crisis hotline."

"She isn't."

A silent exchange passed between husband and wife. It seemed Terry didn't need a hotline to find these hurt people. They could find him just fine without one. The thought remained unsaid by John and Izumi, but Terry felt it in the impact of their silence.

Without a word, John turned back to the stove and the poached eggs. Izumi picked up her mug, closed her eyes in what Terry guessed to be a quiet prayer, then took a deep breath.

"I hope you know what you're getting yourself into, Terry." Izumi touched the mug to her lips, then put the cup on the table without drinking, "For your sake, I pray Madison won't exploit the fact you're putting yourself at so much risk. What did John call you this morning? Mr. Nice Guy-- it fits you to a T."

A sympathetic smile creased John's face, but for once, John offered no encouragement. Terry knew, without question, they would stand by him come what may. He didn't take that fact for granted, but knew it in his heart. Their reluctance to deepen the debate proved it, as did Izumi's offer to go with Terry later that day, and help Madison contact her family.

* * * *

Fear snaked through Madison's veins like icy water, making the trembling even worse. It had found her. The monster lay coiled beneath the mattress, ready to be unleashed. It came to her
now, even though she refused to look over the side of the bed, refused even to stare at the ceiling. Squeezing her eyes shut didn't help, and didn't make the monster go away. It smothered her, made her lungs burn, made her heart hammer against her ribs until they cracked.

A low moan broke through her consciousness, followed by the very real sensation of pain. It radiated from her side, the anguish both familiar and calming. I'm dreaming, she thought with renewed hope. This pain is real. She willed her eyes to open, daring the monster to either appear before her or prove itself only a nightmare.

Was she awake yet? Madison blinked, her eyes focusing on a metal drawer, some sort of green filing cabinet with a logo on the front. She pulled herself upright, winced when she felt the searing pain in her hip. Sleeping on the hard floor made things worse, but at least she wasn't on a bed.

When had the sun come up? She squinted against the light filtering through the vertical blinds over the windows. It took effort to remember the night before, the rain, the man who had brought her to this place.

The stiffness in her hip protested as she stood up. She crossed the floor, pulled the door open, and seeing no one, eased her way to the bathroom with a low moan that matched each step.

The novelty of being somewhere new, someplace different than what she had known, occurred to her as something of a miracle. She was here, and not in the other place, the other life. Madison celebrated this fact, the ordinary things that made the moment real.

The fire in her hip, the cold bathroom tiles chilling her bare feet-- even the sharpness of hunger added to the certainty that she was not trapped in an unreachable dream. This was real.

After using the bathroom, Madison lingered at the top of the stairs. She waited, listened for some noise that might warn her of the man's presence. What was his name? Rubbing her forehead, it came to her. Terry-- that was it. He said she would have the apartment to herself, because he didn't live here. Who paid for a nice place like this, and didn't use it? The thought worried her, and the fear came that maybe this man who promised food and safety was nothing but trouble.

Her stomach rumbled at the thought of something to eat, and hunger prodded her downstairs to check the kitchen. Terry claimed there wasn't any food, but Madison had to see for herself. A search of the kitchen cupboards and the refrigerator proved him right.
Then another thought came to her, disturbing in all its possibilities. What if he never came at all? What if he never brought the food he promised? The memory of the dog ripping apart her meal, haunted Madison. The fear of being forgotten, tugged at her already ragged courage.

God, please don't forget me, she prayed in silence.

Going to the front door, Madison checked to see if she could get out, should the need arise. Just being able to touch the locks, to move them back and forth in their settings, made her feel more in control. Perhaps only a fool would stay to wait for a man to keep his word, but fear of cold and hunger stopped her from leaving.

Fatigued from too much thought and lack of food, Madison went back upstairs, one painful step at a time. She returned to her hiding place, remembering to again lock the door. God, don't let Terry forget me, she prayed.

When Madison woke the second time, the light in the room had changed. It was no longer morning, but later in the day. How late, she had no way of knowing, only that the emptiness in her stomach pleaded for something—anything, but this gnawing hunger.

Her hip complained, but Madison got up from off the floor and forced herself to move until the pain lessened. She paused beside the door, sniffed the air in the hopes Terry had left the food in the hall like last time. When she smelled nothing, she cracked open the door. No sign of food, or Terry.

She should leave. Leave before Terry came back, if he ever intended to, and get far away from this place before something bad happened. The man owed her nothing, and since he wasn't going to bother keeping his word, she decided to go while the getting was good.

Madison stood there, trying to will herself to act on the decision. Maybe it would be better to die here, forgotten, with at least some shelter over her head, than to die out in the open.

But what if he came back, had not forgotten her food after all, but wanted to frighten her into payment for staying as long as she had? The thought terrified her into action. Even though Terry had taken her clothes in the excuse to launder them, she must leave without her things. Without even her socks and shoes. So convincingly did she persuade herself into going, the opening door downstairs almost went unnoticed.

"Madison?" Terry called from below. "Are you still here?"

The sound of his voice made her freeze with dread.
Footsteps moved up the carpeted stairs, the small creaks giving away Terry's presence.

Trapped, she backed from the door until a filing cabinet pressed against her shoulders.

"Madison? Are you still in there?"

Too afraid to speak, she remained silent.

"If the door's locked, she hasn't left," Terry told someone in the hall. "Unless, of course, she went out the window again."

"Went out the window?" a woman asked in amazement.

"Well, yeah," the pause in Terry's voice gave Madison the impression he struggled to find words, "she kind of panicked last night, and went out the bathroom window."

"The bathroom window. This bathroom? The one on the second floor?"

"Yeah."

"Terry, what if she had fallen?"

"Hey, I didn't push her out there. I got a ladder, and she climbed down without a scratch. She just needs twenty-four hours, Izzy-- forty-eight at the most-- and she's on a bus for home."

No response from the woman called Izzy.

"One day, we're going to be able to laugh at this situation."

"I seriously doubt it," Izzy said. "Well, what now? What if she doesn't come out?"

"Madison?" Terry sounded more frantic now. "Would you unlock the door? You need to call your family, let them know where you are and that you're all right. Madison?"

"Where's the key for this door?" Izzy asked.

"In the junk drawer, downstairs."

"You'd better go get it."
Alarm pulsed through Madison. She backed into the farthest corner, pulled a stack of cardboard boxes in front of her, then crouched against the floor. Stupid, she thought, I'm so stupid. Now it's too late to get out of here.

Footsteps came to the door, a key twisted in the lock. Someone came inside.

"Madison?" Terry moved through the room, and her breath caught when his face loomed over the stack of boxes.

His eyes met hers, and the half smile slipped from his face. His brow knit together in an odd look Madison couldn't understand. He acted as though he were in pain, but she couldn't understand why, for she was the one straining her sore hip, not him.

A heavy breath parted his lips. He turned away, held up a hand to the woman coming inside. "I'll be with you in a moment, Izzy. I found her." He rubbed his face, then turned back to Madison. "I'm going to start lunch. When you're ready, you can join us downstairs. All right?"

Madison couldn't answer.

Terry's mouth formed a straight, grim line. "I give you my word-- as a Christian before God-- I won't harm you in any way. Do you believe me?"

Crazy with hunger, Madison nodded "yes," but crouched even further behind the boxes.

The look on his face deepened.

"Come downstairs when you're able," Terry said in a quiet voice. He shut the door behind him, and when the woman called Izzy began to speak, her voice was cut off by Terry's. Footsteps creaked as they went downstairs.

Ignoring the painful hip, Madison remained where she was.

The lopsided smile Terry had given her before going, had put a tight lump in her throat. If she hadn't known it to be impossible, she would have thought him only seconds away from tears.

"Terry, what's going on?" Izumi followed him into the kitchen where he set the bag of groceries they had brought from home, onto the counter.
Head bowed, Terry felt unable to give an answer. A gentle hand touched his arm, and he looked up to see Izumi's strained smile.

"Go sit down. I'll cook lunch."

"She's hurting, Izzy. I never saw anyone tremble so hard. And then when I spoke to her..." Terry steadied his voice. "When I asked Madison to trust me, she wet herself. I don't think she even noticed, she was so terrified."

"Two days, Terry. Then I'm going to do all I can to get her out of your apartment before she turns into another Victor."

"She's not like that, Izzy. She's different."

"She's different, all right." Izumi tied on the apron Terry kept in the cupboard beneath the gas range. "She hides like someone running from the police, and doesn't even come out to thank you for saving her life. Has she thanked you, yet?"

"No."

"See what I mean?"

Terry remained silent. "If you saw her, you'd understand."

"I don't pretend to understand all there is to know about pain, Terry, but I do understand what that pain can do to my family."

"I wonder what she's been through, to hide from us-- from me, that way."

"You've had enough nightmares," Izumi continued, sliding a pan of water over a burner. "What are we going to do if she doesn't come down to lunch?"

"She'll come." Terry knew it in his soul. "She's too hungry to stay away."

It occurred to Terry that they could leave Madison's meal outside her door, but he decided against it. It felt too much like a jailer feeding a prisoner, and if they were ever going to get Madison to call home, they would first have to get her to talk to them. That wasn't going to happen through a closed door.
Several minutes later, while Terry set a platter of hot spaghetti on the small table in the dining area beside the kitchen, Izumi took out her cell phone and called John. She and Terry had left church a few minutes early, so they could go home and get food to bring to Terry's apartment for lunch. Today, John would fend for himself in the kitchen-- a fact Izumi didn't necessarily like. By the time she got off the phone, however, Izumi seemed happier.

"It appears the girls are helping John make lunch," Izumi said, folding away her cell phone. "They're making quite a mess, but--"

The abrupt stop made Terry look up. He followed Izumi's gaze to the woman standing at the foot of the stairs. She wore a pair of Terry's old beat-up jeans, hiked about her thin waist and tied with what looked to be a length of nylon rope from the storage room. The oversized sweatshirt covered one hip, the other revealing the thick strand of rope that held the pants in place. His socks covered her feet, and her arms hugged herself in the familiar death-hug he had witnessed the night before.

"I--" Madison's voice quavered, "I'd like to thank you and your wife for letting me stay the night."

"Wife?" Izumi looked to Terry, an amused smile on her lips.

"You're very welcome, Madison, but Izumi isn't my wife. She belongs to my best friend." Terry tossed a wink at Izumi. "I like to think of her as an annoying little sister." He chuckled when Izumi laughed, for they both knew it wasn't far from the truth. "Hope you came hungry, because we have lots of spaghetti." When Terry turned his back to Madison, he smiled as he went into the kitchen for the garlic bread warming in the tiny oven. The aroma of that bread had gone straight to the storage room, coaxing Madison out of hiding and into a pair of faded blue jeans Terry had forgotten he owned. Tomato sauce with meatballs, parmesan, a fresh salad thrown together by Izumi, made it a meal too irresistible to pass up.

Terry hadn't had this much food in the place since... well, since Victor.

After pulling out Izumi's chair for her, Terry sat down and left Madison to fend for herself. He imagined she wouldn't appreciate the gesture, let alone remain in the room long enough to get some meat on that overly slender frame.

Terry watched Madison approach the table in quiet desperation. At first, she hung back, then took the seat closest to the living room and the staircase. Hands tucked under her legs, those wide gray eyes fastened on the food with a hunger that stunned even Izumi.
Suddenly, Terry felt bad about going to church, and not coming straight to the apartment with food. How long ago had she last eaten? From the way Madison kept avoiding their curious gaze, Terry guessed he wasn't going to get an answer to that question.

Terry said a prayer over the meal, then started passing food around the short table. As a guy, Terry figured to take more than Izumi, but his mouth fell open when Madison piled as much spaghetti on her plate as she could possibly manage.

"Don't make yourself sick," Terry said with a smile.

Madison ignored him, ladling on sauce and grabbing a slice of garlic bread before Terry could even unfold his napkin.

"So, Madison," Izumi gave one of her polite smiles, "what brings you into this part of New York?"

The eating stopped, then the chin tucked against her shoulder.

"It's okay," Terry told Madison, "we'll talk after lunch."

A large gulp slid down Madison's throat. She paused, then resumed her eating.

What Terry feared might happen, happened. Madison ate like a starving person who didn't know when, or if, she would ever see another meal. As a consequence, she overate to the point of rush-limping upstairs to vomit-- even though Terry tried to tell her the half bath on the bottom floor was closer.

Izumi followed after Madison, only to have the upstairs bathroom door slammed in her face.

When Izumi returned, she started clearing the plates from the table. "Calm down, Terry. She's had too much to eat, that's all."

"Did you see her limp?"

"I saw." Izumi let out a sigh. "You said I'd understand when I saw her, and you were right."

"She reminds you of someone we know, doesn't she?"

The cautious look in Izumi's eyes made Terry wish he hadn't said those words.
"She's been hurt in some terrible way, some point in her life. After this, I think that's obvious. But, Terry, Madison isn't Jake. Neither was Victor, or what's-his-name with the goatee--"

"Donald."

"Yes, Donald. Terry, you can't save everyone."

"I know that."

"Do you?" Izumi didn't look convinced. "I can't help feeling you're going to come out of this hurt. Somehow, some way, this isn't going to turn out well. Especially for you."

Pulling out his cell phone, Terry decided he needed to get Madison on her way before she proved Izumi right. It was too much to hope Madison would come down for anything besides food, and when Terry went upstairs and found the storage room locked, he realized his mistake. First the call, then the food, not the other way around.

"Madison," he knocked on the door. "I want you to let me in. Now."

It amazed Terry when she obeyed. She hunkered away from him, her nose pointed at the carpet.

"It's time for you to call your family, Madison. You can use my cell phone; I don't care if it's long distance, but I need you to call home." He held out the phone, but she didn't take it.

"I-- I don't have anyone to call," she said, her voice nearing a low whisper.

"No family?" Terry looked at her, and she shook her head, "no." "What about friends-- someone who could come get you? There's absolutely no one?"

By now, Izumi stood in the doorway, listening to every word. Terry glanced behind his back, saw the uneasy alarm in Izumi's face.

"Does this mean I have to leave now?" Madison's thin voice quaked as she spoke. Her eyes didn't seem able to lift to meet Terry's, but Terry heard the plea.

"You were hitchhiking when I first saw you-- where were you headed?"

A shoulder rose, dropped in an uncertain shrug.

"You had a destination, didn't you?"
The chin bobbed up in a look of understanding. "My destination was Three Mile Bay."

Terry felt his hopes rise. "Then you know someone in the area?"

Her head shook "no."

"Then why did you come here?"

Another shrug, followed by a cautious whisper Terry almost didn't hear. "It was as far as my money would take me."

"Are you running from someone?" Izumi asked over Terry's shoulder.

When Madison didn't reply, Terry repeated the question.

"There's no one to run from," Madison said in a flat voice. "I don't have a husband, and I don't have any children. I don't have a home, and I don't have any friends." She squeezed her eyes shut. "I don't have anyone but God."

Strange, thought Terry, to claim God was on your side when everything in your life pointed to destitution and pain. It intrigued Terry, made him hesitate when he felt sure Izumi wanted him to make a firm decision.

"Please, mister. I don't have anywhere else to go."

"I can't let you stay here indefinitely. You understand that, don't you?"

She nodded.

If Terry knew of a defense against the pitiful helplessness before him, self-preservation demanded that he use it now. But he had nothing, not even the alarm Izumi felt so needful.

"I suppose you can stay... for a few days." Terry felt Izumi's hot disappointment, but kept addressing Madison. "I don't know what to do about this yet, but for now, I think you should concentrate on regaining your strength. We'll talk about your future, later. Maybe you could find some sort of a job..." Terry turned to look at Izumi and saw the sigh coming.

"Do I have to do anything to stay?" The question slid Terry's attention back to Madison.
"What?"

Madison sucked in a breath, held it until her question came again. "Do I have to do anything to stay?"

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't trash my apartment."

"Besides that," Madison gulped. "Do I have to do anything special to stay here? Because if I do, I'd rather go back to the wild."

"That wasn't the wild, Madison. That was a campground."

"But..." she struggled to speak, and Terry had a hunch he knew what she meant.

"I don't expect any special favors in return."

The fear in Madison's face betrayed she thought he might force her to do just that.

With an exasperated groan, Izumi pushed past Terry, and looked at Madison with a flare of righteous indignation in her eyes. "Listen, Terry is one of the good guys. He wouldn't hurt a fly, let alone another human being. He's kind to a fault, and wouldn't accept payment if it was thrown in his face."

Terry smiled at the loyal defense. "Let me handle this, Izzy."

Shaking her head, Izumi returned to the bedroom door. "I wish John were here. Then again, he'd probably take your side. When you two band together like brothers, it takes dynamite to change your mind."

"Please, Izzy--"

"I won't stop you, Terry. You're old enough to make these decisions on your own. Sometimes, though, I wish I was your mom; I'd stand a better chance of protecting you"-- Izumi tossed a glance in Madison's direction-- "from problems like this one."

Evidently feeling the reproach of Izumi's statement, Madison ducked her head. "I can't pay you anything," Madison said in a quiet voice. "I have nothing."

With a sigh, Terry folded his arms, glanced at Izumi and saw the pity reflected on Izumi's face. "No one here is asking for payment, Madison. Find something useful to do with your life, and
give back to society when you have the chance. Do that, and you'll pay me back with interest. Okay?"

The chin came up long enough for Terry to see the bewilderment on Madison's face. "I don't understand you."

"That makes two of us," Izumi sighed over Terry's shoulder. "I have to get back to John and the girls. It was nice to meet you, Madison."

Izumi's polite remark sounded just that-- polite-- but Terry appreciated it, all the same.

"I'll come with you, Izzy. I just have one more thing to settle here."

With a growing look of dread, Madison backed a few more steps from Terry.

He pointed to her arms. "Roll up your sleeves."

"Why?"

"I want to see if you have any track marks."

"I'm not a drug addict."

"Then roll up your sleeves."

Madison complied, then pulled off her socks to show there weren't any puncture marks between her toes. Whoever Madison was, she had been around drug users. Perhaps she wasn't a user herself-- Terry could believe that-- but she knew the usual places of injection.

"Okay, you can put my socks back on. If I ever catch you with drugs, you're out of this apartment. No arguments, no appeals. Got it?"

She nodded in understanding. "What about the landlord? Won't he mind me using your apartment?"

"You're talking to him," Izumi said with a smile. "Terry owns the building. She has a point, though, Terry. You'd better let Lauren know about your houseguest."
"Lauren Moore is the building superintendent," Terry said to Madison. "I'll talk to her before we leave." Terry turned to go, then remembered something. "My business card is on the refrigerator if you need to contact me. Oh, and Izzy did your laundry; it's in the bag by the sofa."

* * * *

For several minutes after Terry and Izumi left, the shock of actually having asked to stay, amazed Madison. Only a moment before his return, she had been planning her escape. Maybe the arrival of food had given her courage, or maybe it had been the presence of that oriental looking woman with the deep blue eyes. The wife of his best friend, Terry had said. The statement piqued Madison's curiosity. Their exchange had been familiar, like a brother and sister, and not like a man and woman who were unrelated to each other.

This Terry was an odd person. He might even be crazy. Odd or not, crazy or not, Madison had a roof over her head for at least the next few days.

As she headed downstairs, she noticed the stiffness in her hip felt better.

A quick inspection of the kitchen brought a further smile. There were leftovers in the refrigerator, soda pop and a bag of chips on the counter. Madison filled her plate, felt something stir within her that she thought had died in the cold of those first two nights in Three Mile Bay. She felt renewed hope for the future, a real chance at a new beginning. She'd get a job, find her own place to stay, and in the process, become normal.

More than anything, Madison wanted to be like everyone else. To be carefree, to live without that energetic monster in the shadows. No one else had a monster.

Now she wouldn't, either.

"And now, Lord, what wait I for? my hope is in Thee."

~ Psalm 39:7 ~
Chapter Four

Clouds in September

"And of some have compassion, making a difference..."
~ Jude 22 ~

To his amusement on Monday morning, Terry awoke to three little girls all proclaiming that today they didn't have preschool. Of course, they hadn't had school all summer long, but the fact that tomorrow marked their first day back to Wee Ones Christian Preschool, made it a special occasion for the triplets. Never mind Labor Day, today they had no school.

Labor Day. In all the fuss over his new houseguest, Terry had quite forgotten about the Labor Day barbeque. After all the plans John and Terry made for the party, all the expectations of a relaxing time on the beach, Terry didn't feel like celebrating. Not after yesterday.

When Terry went into the kitchen for breakfast, John and Izumi didn't look in the mood for a party, either. They sipped coffee in silence, letting the girls have their day off without adding any rain clouds to their sunshine. No mention of Madison at the kitchen table, no talk of hurting people or the things Terry knew John and Izumi were thinking.

The dishes cleared away, John and Terry went outside to get the barbeque ready for that afternoon. Only when they were alone, did John bring up the subject of Madison.

"Are you going to see her this morning?" John asked, as he and Terry hauled a basin firepit onto the beach.

Though half fearing what John might say about him getting too involved in someone else's troubles, Terry answered anyway. "I was thinking about it."

John moved the firepit over a few inches, stepped back, wiped his hands against his jeans. "Mind if I come with you?"

"She might act weird."

"I stand warned." John hefted one side of the picnic table while Terry lifted the other. "For all this talk about Madison, I'd like to meet her, get my own opinion of who she is. Izumi said Madison was a broken heart, hiding in a broken body, and that I'd understand what she meant when I saw Madison for myself."
"Don't expect too much," Terry said as they lowered the picnic table closer to the firepit. "She hides a lot of the time, and I can't get her to open up about where she came from, the people she knew who might be interested in her welfare. She said she doesn't have anyone but God, and unless it's proven otherwise, I have to believe she's telling the truth."

John gave a thoughtful look. "No one but God? That's an odd thing to say."

"That's what I thought." Terry pulled a list from his back pocket. "Even though everything appears to have been going against Madison, she still has hope. I believe that says a lot about her."

"Careful, Terry." John slanted him a sidelong glance as Terry checked off firepit and picnic table from the to-do list. "She's a stranger, and as such, it's better to treat her with a great deal of caution. Agreed?"

"I don't think she's dangerous, John."

John gave a wry smile. "Izumi shares your opinion. Whatever happened at your apartment yesterday, Izumi has stopped being as insistent about Madison's hasty departure."

Terry couldn't help smiling. "You'll understand when you see Madison."

"So I keep hearing." John took the list from Terry, looked it over before handing it back. "Do we visit your apartment before, or after, the run to the grocery store for the wieneres?"

* * * *

The absolute quiet of the apartment didn't bother Madison. What did bother her, however, was the visit from the woman called Lauren--Terry's building superintendent and very pushy neighbor. The woman had rung the doorbell with such tenacity, Madison felt no choice but to open the door. From the front step, Lauren welcomed the newcomer to the complex, and when she couldn't gain entrance, kept talking nonstop. Terry had told her about one of his friends using the apartment, and as one of his closest friends, Lauren had rushed over to make Madison welcome. Terry mentioned something about leaving Madison alone, but Lauren dismissed it as nonsense. Of course she must come and make Madison welcome, and of course she must have Madison over to dinner sometime soon. The door narrowed several inches more, but Lauren had stuck it out and finally extracted a "maybe" from Madison.

What an insistent woman.
When the front step visitor left, Madison again locked the door and then closed the living room windows. If Madison hadn’t been caught watching the woman looking through the window, she wouldn’t have had to open the door in the first place.

Retreating to the room with the filing cabinets, Madison lay on the carpet, her knees tucked against her chest. No one could see her here.

Quiet settled around her, the only sounds small, off in the distance and unthreatening. She let out a breath, shut her eyes and wished for sleep. After two nights of shifting on the hard floor, getting comfortable was out of the question. So was the bedroom down the hall. But the sofa downstairs… sometimes, she imagined it called to her. Though her hip answered with every burning ache, she continued to ignore the conversation. Hidden behind the locked door and huddled beside boxes of who knew what, she felt safe.

A shudder passed through her heart when the doorbell sounded. Oh, no. Another visitor.

Hands pressed to her ears, she prayed the person at the door would go away. She had food. She had running water, and a place to keep out of the weather. Until she ran out of something, why couldn’t everyone stay away?

A muffled knock sounded nearby. She lied a hand, realized it came from the door to her hiding place.

With a swallow of tremoring resolve, she pushed herself upright. The visitor had to be you-know-who with the jeep and the lopsided grin.

"What do you want?" she asked, expecting Terry's voice to respond. When it did, she gave a dull sigh. Not that she wasn't grateful, but why couldn't God have sent a woman to save her life, instead of that man?

"I brought you some company," Terry said through the door. "I asked Izzy and her husband to come with me so we could have a visit. I even brought Izzy upstairs with me, so you'll feel better about opening this door."

Better to not respond, thought Madison, so she remained silent.

"Are you okay in there?" Terry asked.

"I'm all right." Madison struggled to sound convincing. She was fine. Just fine. He could go away now. Any second would do. Just walk away and leave her alone.
"May I come in?" he asked.

"No."

"I'd like to see you."

"Why?"

"You don't sound all right."

"I can't help how I sound. Please go."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Madison."

"Why not? You know where the door is."

A long stretch of silence. Maybe he left, she thought with growing hope. To her dismay, the voice came again, this time more insistent than before.

"I'm responsible for you. Open this door so I can see for myself that you're all right."

Getting to her feet, she made her way across the room.

"Madison?"

"I'm coming," she said, biting against the blaze raging in her hip. She unlocked the handle, pulled the door open.

She found Izzy and Terry waiting in the hall. Madison didn't pay much attention to the woman, her whole being focused on the man.

Unlike last time, Terry wasn't dressed in slacks, but a pair of blue jeans and a white pullover shirt with a fish on the front. Perpetually casual in slacks or jeans, Terry gave Madison the impression of someone who tried to enjoy life. His lopsided smile greeted her, but he didn't come inside until Madison had first moved away from the door.

Hands in his pockets, Terry surveyed the room, then her.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.
"I told you, I'm fine."

He nodded. "How's the hip?"

Madison lowered her eyes. It was none of his business how her hip felt. She would have told him so, but lacked the courage.

"Do you have enough to eat?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm fine."

Terry blew out a breath. "I don't suppose you'd tell me if you were in any pain?"

"No, I wouldn't." She risked a quick glance at Terry. The answer didn't please him, for his brow wrinkled in thought and his shoulders heaved with another sigh. The discouraged expression he wore made her almost feel sorry for him.

Terry gave a sad sort of smile. "Izzy's husband, John, is here. I was hoping you'd go downstairs and say 'hi.'"

Madison remained quiet.

Head bowed, Terry stared at the floor. "It would mean a lot to me if you did."

Reason argued with her that she owed Terry this request. Even so, she hesitated.

"Please, just for a few minutes." His quiet voice pulled at her.

"I can't."

"Why not?" He looked up, his brown eyes unnervingly gentle.

Madison gave a half shrug. "I can't."

Turning, Terry glanced at the woman behind him. Izzy remained in the hall, but her slight frown communicated displeasure to Madison.

Feeling trapped, Madison backed from the door. "Please, don't make me go downstairs. Please, Terry."
To Madison's surprise, Terry gave a heartfelt smile. "Finally, you've stopped calling me 'mister.'"

"Please--"

Terry held up a hand to stop the begging. "I won't make you do anything against your will. The person I wanted you to meet is a very good friend of mine, that's all. If you don't want to come downstairs, you don't have to."

Hugging herself, Madison gave up. "Okay. I'll come."

"You will?" Terry grinned, turned and nodded to Izzy. "She's coming."

Even though Madison didn't think Izzy still looked very pleased, Izzy smiled at Terry, then disappeared down the stairs.

Not one word passed between Terry and Madison as they descended the steps. He went several feet ahead of her, and she followed behind. He moved slow, as though understanding she couldn't go very fast. The unspoken thoughtfulness made Madison shrink even deeper inside herself. They stepped into the living room while someone opened the windows Madison had closed earlier that morning. Terry said something about his best friend--a man named John Johannes--and Madison barely heard the words. She kept her eyes on the gray carpet, intent on bracing herself against running away.

John said something polite, and after an awkward silence, Madison realized it was her turn.

"Hi," she said, then backed away to the dining area and the nearest chair.

The conversation that followed took place without Madison's participation. Izzy said a few words about a friend watching the girls, Terry made mention of it being a holiday, and John said nothing at all. After what must have been minutes later, Terry moved over to the dining area.

"I noticed the bed upstairs hasn't been slept in. I hope you're not sleeping on the sofa when you've got a perfectly good bedroom all to yourself."

Hands tucked beneath her, Madison watched her socked toes wiggle.

"You are sleeping on the sofa, aren't you?"

Why did God put five toes on each foot? Why not six or seven? Did it make a difference?
"Madison," Terry's voice rose, "tell me you haven't been sleeping on the floor."

Frowning, Madison looked up from her toes. Terry stood by the table, his mouth drawn into a thin grimace.

"Is that where you've been sleeping? On the floor in the storage room?"

"Please," she fought the tremor in her voice, "stop asking questions. What does it matter where I sleep?"

"It matters, if it's hurting your hip."

"It's my hip."

"Then you are in pain?"

An inadvertent sigh slipped from her lips. From the way Terry went into the kitchen, Madison guessed he had taken that as a "yes."

He came back with a white bottle, popped off the cap, dumped pills into his hand. He placed them on the table in front of her, then went back into the kitchen. When he returned, he brought a glass of water.

"Take them," he said, setting the glass beside the two pills. "It'll help with the pain."

"I never said I was hurting."

"You don't have to say it-- I can see for myself. Now take them."

She had no idea what they were, but swallowed the pills down without further struggle.

"That was ibuprofen," Terry said, as though having read her thoughts. "I'll put the bottle on the kitchen counter. When you're hurting, take more, but make sure you read the directions first. You can read, can't you?"

"Of course I can read," she said, her eyes narrowing on Terry. "I'm not stupid."

"I never said you were." Terry pressed his lips together, waited a few patient moments before continuing. "This is over-the-counter pain medication. It'll help you."
"I don't want help."

"Maybe you don't, but your pain does." Terry took the bottle and empty glass of water into the kitchen. When he came back, he passed through the living room, and went upstairs.

The other two visitors-- John and Izzy-- remained quiet. Madison didn't look in their direction, but sensed their unease. At least they didn't try to approach her. She felt grateful for that. It was all she could do to manage Terry, let alone two more strangers.

Before she had worked up more alarm at being left alone with the Johanneses, Terry came downstairs carrying a stack of blankets, a comforter and two fluffy pillows.

Izzy and John didn't say a word as Terry made a bed on the sofa. Terry placed the television remote on the coffee table, then returned to the dining area where Madison sat watching.

"From now on, you sleep on the sofa. There's a bedroom if you ever change your mind, but until then, you sleep on the sofa. Not the floor. Got it?"

Bewildered, Madison nodded her head. Who was this person, and why should he care if she was hurting?

"I brought more food," Terry said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder toward the kitchen. "This time, it's healthier food, not the junk stuff we bought for Labor Day. I don't suppose you want to come to our picnic, do you? No? That's what I thought you'd say." Terry smiled, though the gesture looked distracted, as though he had a lot on his mind. "We'll leave you alone now. The next time I come, though, I want to see you on that sofa."

Again, Madison nodded without thinking. He seemed almost angry, but from the continued gentleness of him insisting she got some rest, she knew he couldn't be too angry.

When they left, she went to the kitchen to see what Terry had brought. Apples, bananas, an extravagance of fresh whole strawberries, and even a cantaloupe, sat on the countertop. The fridge held eggs, milk, cheese, yogurt, and in the freezer she found TV dinners of chicken, shrimp Alfredo, and even a frozen peach cobbler. All she had to do was pop them into the microwave. She looked about, easily located the microwave oven above the counter. Whole wheat bread and a carton of "Smart Eating" cookies sat beside the fruit.

So much food. It nearly caused Madison to pass out from giddiness. Instead of repeating her previous mistake of eating too much, too fast, she forced herself to reign in the excitement. She
never possessed an over-fondness for food, but when someone is used to very little, this bounty seemed like a great deal.

Taking a small carton of berry yogurt from the refrigerator, she found a spoon in the silverware drawer, then headed for the stairs. As she passed the sofa, she slowed to a stop.

The blankets and pillows beckoned, and even though her head kept shouting to go upstairs, her body demanded cushions. Taking a deep breath, Madison moved to the sofa, sat down on the blankets, and realized for the first time since her arrival, how good it felt to rest on something soft. She saw the remote on the coffee table, clicked it on, then curled up in the blankets with her sweetened yogurt. Terry had said it was all right, and that made it all right for Madison. The relief of such immediate wants came with a rush of fatigue. The yogurt half eaten, she sank against the fluffy pillows and shut her eyes.

The memory of the locked front door made it possible for her to relax, and when she realized that the fire in her hip no longer raged, Madison's comfort was almost complete. Shifting onto her other side, she hid in the blankets and fell asleep.

* * * *

Fishing never appealed to John the way it did Terry, and when it came to fly fishing, Terry far outstripped John in enthusiasm. Fly fishing required practice, a lot of skill, and more practice—all things John didn't mind doing, but not to simply catch fish. An ordinary fishing rod did John just fine, and as a consequence, he left all the fancy loops to Terry.

For almost as long as John could remember, his friend loved to stand at the shoreline with a fly rod, letting the line play over the water in a dance of graceful finesse John always admired. Presenting the fly to the fish took skill, an understanding of the factors that effected the all-important cast, such as wind and time of day. Terry knew his equipment, knew the fish, had a feel for the bay and the surroundings of Upstate New York. Unlike John, few things got in the way of Terry's fishing. On days where the wind wasn't too stiff, and the air not too cold, Terry would take his rod, walk down to the waterfront a short distance from the Johanneses' house, and fish his heart out.

That's what John called it—fishing his heart out. Though John never asked, he sensed Terry used those hours of fly fishing to ease the sensitive parts of his life into something more manageable. The quiet rhythm of the cast, soothed Terry. John understood this, knew it without having to ask, so whenever Terry didn't go out to the shoreline with his fly rod, it always gave John a reason for quiet alarm.
On the afternoon of the Labor Day picnic, the opportunity looked perfect to do some serious fly fishing. Two of Terry's fly fishing buddies-- Dr. Gregory and Pat O'Shea-- took full advantage of the near perfect weather by adding smallmouth bass to the already full menu of barbecued chicken, roasted wiener, Boston baked beans, fruit salad, and potato chips. John was used to manning the firepit while Terry fished, but today, Terry didn't join the others. Instead, he remained by himself, sitting on the sand with his thoughts, away from everyone. When the triplets joined the men on the shore with their small fly rods, and Terry didn't even look up to watch, John felt an undercurrent of trouble wash against his soul.

Izumi sat at the picnic table with Agatha Hopkins, a longtime friend of Izumi's. From his station at the firepit, John overheard them discussing Terry.

"Except for those clouds in the distance, it's a lovely day for a picnic," Agatha said, smiling at her husband as he strolled down the beach to watch the anglers ply their craft. "I notice Terry isn't fishing. Is he feeling well?"

Like a mother checking one of her children, John saw Izumi turn in Terry's direction. The picture of a usually upbeat man, sitting by himself while others had a good time, brought a frown to Izumi's lips; John saw her expression turn to one of worry, and understood what she felt.

The last time Terry declined to go fishing, Terry had been nearing his breakdown.

Excusing herself from Agatha, Izumi moved to the firepit and took John's apron from him. "I'll handle the cooking. Go sit with Terry."

Dispensing with the soothing assurances that Terry was fine, John accepted the offer in silence. He strolled to where Terry sat, took a seat next to him without explanation.

"Why aren't you fishing?" John asked, letting his arms rest on raised knees.

Terry shrugged. "I don't feel like it."

"I see." John watched a boat leave the bay, most likely, on its way for a pleasure cruise for the Thousand Islands. "You're getting in over your head-- you know that, don't you?"

Terry picked up a small pebble, flicked it toward the bay. "What did you think of her?"

"I only saw her once," John said, picking a smooth pebble for himself. "From the little I saw, I think you're in over your head."
Terry smiled. "Maybe I am."

"You've made up your mind to really help her, haven't you?" John pitched the pebble toward the water, grunted when it failed to match Terry's mark. "She's here to stay for more than just a few more days, and we both know it."

"You think I'm making a mistake?" Terry hurled another pebble, sighed when it only went as far as John's. "Do you think she'll turn into another Victor?"

John slanted a glance at Terry. "Do you?"

With a shake of his head, Terry chose another pebble. "I don't think there's a mean bone in Madison's body."

"Speaking of which," John gathered two pebbles at the same time, rolled them in the palm of his hand, "she's not that bad looking-- for someone who isn't Izumi, of course." He grinned when Terry tossed him a laughing smile. "You know I only have eyes for Izumi, but I'm warning you, Terry-- what Madison has, could get you into trouble."

Terry hurled the pebble, nearly missing the water. "I'm not doing this because she's pretty."

"I know you're not." John let the smooth stones drop from his hand. "I don't question your motives, only the wisdom in putting yourself in this position. She's the most helpless puppy dog I've ever seen, and knowing your big heart, you won't be careful about helping her too much."

Terry frowned.

"Just be careful, Terry. To the extent you help her, you will be responsible for her. That's a lot for anyone to take on, let alone you."

"She needs help, John."

"I know that. Just be careful."

A sigh parted Terry's lips. "Izzy keeps telling me the same thing, but I think I know what you're trying to say. Madison is pretty, and because I'm in a position of responsibility, I can never take advantage of any authority I might have. I won't, John. I think you already know I won't, but I appreciate the warning."
John took a deep breath. Now was as good a time as any. "Izumi and I talked and prayed this over after we left your apartment. Neither of us think it's wise for you to be with Madison alone-- for your sake, as well as hers. Hold on, Terry, this isn't a no-vote of confidence. Izumi and I want to help."

"I don't understand."

"Whenever possible, bring Madison over to our house for extended visits; that way, you can help her, and we can help you."

"But I don't need any help."

"Careful, Terry, you're beginning to sound like the puppy."

The pebble-tossing forgotten, Terry shook his head. "This isn't just because you want to protect me. You're afraid I'm going to fall apart again."

"Are you?" John watched Terry's confident reply slip away before Terry uttered a sound. "I'm not trying to shake your confidence, only to offer more help with Madison. Don't do this alone-- not when you have us."

"So..." Terry squinted a bemused look at John, "Madison is going to be a family project?"

"More or less. You're first in line to help her, then Izumi and I come next."

"And all this, because--"

"Come on, Terry, don't make me get sentimental. Family sticks together. Nuff said."

"You and Izzy tried to help me with the others, but why is this one so different?"

John smiled. "None of your other needy people looked like Madison. Izumi thinks you need to be extra careful with this one, and I agree. And, unlike your other crusades, this one seems deserving of your help." John slapped Terry on the shoulder. "I'm hungry. How about some bass?"

* * * *

After John's talk with him, Terry felt able to enjoy the rest of the picnic. The triplets wanted to show Terry their casts, and even though they were pint-sized munchkins who didn't have much
reach, those little girls did pretty well. Not as good as Abby, of course, but then, very few were as good as Terry’s first pupil. He wished Abby were there to see her sisters fishing. She would have enjoyed watching them attempt casts, offering direction when needed. At heart, Abby was a teacher.

Before long, AJ would make their decision as to whether or not they would return to Three Mile Bay anytime soon in the future. All Terry had to do was wait, though he figured patience had never been one of his strong points.

As Terry ate bass at the picnic table, Dr. Gregory, the local veterinary and longstanding friend of the family, picked up a can of soda and turned to Terry with a shake of the head.

"John says you have a new houseguest."

"Yup. Her name is Madison."

"Is she staying long?"

"It depends." Terry accepted a wiener wrapped in a hot dog bun from John, and noticed John’s amused smile as John returned to the firepit. "She needs time to get on her feet," Terry continued. "How long that will take, I don’t know, I only know she needs help getting her life in order."

Curious, Dr. Gregory’s brows raised in an unspoken question.

"I don’t know what her problem is, but from what I can tell, she’s not a drug addict or a prostitute. Just someone who needs a place to stay until she can get back on her feet."

"Is she from the hotline?"

The simple question depressed Terry, for it proved he had a track-record to overcome.

"No, she’s not from the hotline. I found her hitchhiking, that’s all."

Dr. Gregory nodded. "John said she has some problems."

Picking up the ketchup, Terry squeezed red goop over the roasted hot dog. Another houseguest with “problems,” of course, meant the person was deeply troubled and probably needed psychiatric medication.
"She very well may have some issues to overcome, but she's not from the hotline."

Taking a bite from the wiener, Terry noticed the silent exchange of the guests around the picnic table.

"If there's anything I can do to help," Dr. Gregory smiled, "let me know."

A chuckle came from John's direction, and after a moment of thought, Terry caught on. The veterinarian who wanted to help the puppy. Terry smiled. Madison needed help all right, but not that kind.

However, it did give Terry an idea-- one worth considering in the future. For now, Madison had more pressing needs, and as soon as this picnic ended, and he had the chance, he needed to start addressing them. She would object, and he wouldn't force. She had already said "no" to it before, and Terry hoped she wouldn't continue to be so adamant. No fear of hospitals was worth the pain she was obviously in.

The conversation around the table made no more mention of Madison. Terry guessed they were uncomfortable talking about her, especially after Terry's previous failures. Aside from their best wishes, what were they supposed to say? "Hope you don't get hurt again?"

* * * *

When the doorbell sounded, Madison woke from her sleep. Her show had ended sometime ago, replaced by a courtroom drama that made her click off the television. The bell turned into a knock at the door, then a shadowed figure moved to the window and looked in. From the porch light, she could make out his face.

Terry. He had said he was coming back, but she assumed it to mean at a much later time. Not today, and certainly not this afternoon.

She pushed herself up from the sofa, took a blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders. The room felt cold, and she couldn't see very well as she went to the door. She glanced at the clock glowing in the television cabinet, saw the lateness of the hour and realized her mistake. The entire afternoon had slipped away while she napped.

"Madison?" Terry called from the other side of the door. "Would you let me in?"

Needing some time to think about it, she pulled the blanket closed.
"Madison, open this door."

She hurried to obey.

When Terry stepped inside, he took off his wet coat and hung it on the door handle. It was raining.

Fearing his anger, Madison retreated toward the stairs.

"Wait a moment," he called, "I want to talk to you. Why is it so dark in here? Have you been in the storage room, again?" He clicked on the light switch, illuminating the living room and part of the dining area. "Madison, come over here and sit down. I have something to discuss with you." A smile parted Terry's mouth when he noticed the rumpled blankets and pillows. "Good. You've been using the sofa. Get over here. I want to talk to you about something important."

Reluctant, but unable to do otherwise, she obeyed and took a seat on the sofa. To her relief, Terry grabbed a dining chair and placed it opposite from her on the other side of the coffee table. He sat down.

"Sorry, I forgot to bring Izzy along. I wanted to talk to you before it got too late, and she's busy putting the girls to bed. I'll only stay for a few minutes." He rubbed his hands together. "I've been doing some thinking. Tomorrow, I'd like for Izzy and myself to take you to the medical center in Watertown."

Madison shook her head. "I'm not going."

"I want you to choose a doctor to be your primary physician, and for you to make an appointment to get your hip looked at."

"No."

"Madison--"

"You can't make me go there."

"I know that, but I'd like you to at least consider it a little longer, before turning it down."

Madison waited for what she considered "a little longer," then shook her head, "no."
Terry sighed, leaned back in the chair. "What do you want out of life, Madison? What are your dreams, your goals? How are you going to make them reality, and what are you willing to do to get there?"

"That's none of your business."

"Maybe so, but I can't help you unless I have more information. To start with, a last name to go with Madison would be nice."

"It's Crawford. Madison Crawford."

"There, that didn't hurt, did it?" He smiled. "What do you want out of life, Madison Crawford?"

An avalanche of dreams and hopes tumbled into Madison, and for a long while, she had trouble picking out only a few. "I want a job," she said at last. "I want a place of my own, and I want a job."

"Good, that's good." Terry rubbed his hands together in a thoughtful manner. "Then you need to consider what you have to do to make that happen. First of all, you have to be in good physical shape, good enough to hold down a job."

"I can do it."

"I'm sure you can, but not in the condition your hip is in. You need to see a doctor."

Though the mere thought made her stomach turn upside down, she needed an answer to a longstanding question. Everything pointed to now being the time to ask.

"Would you promise not to tell?" Madison heard the quaver in her voice and ignored it.

"Tell what?"

"Not until you promise."

A flicker of understanding crossed Terry's face. "I promise."

Madison swallowed her pride long enough to get out the question. "Could someone get into trouble if the doctor saw things that weren't normal?"

The easy look in Terry's eyes faded away. "What do you mean?"
"If someone went to a doctor, and that doctor saw things that meant something bad had happened, could the person who went to the doctor get into trouble?"

Profound pain settled into Terry's expression. He asked nothing, sucked in a breath and stared at the carpet.

Panic tugged at Madison for having asked. Even so, she had to know the answer.

"Terry?"

"I'm not a doctor, Madison, and I'm no lawyer, so this isn't legal advice. Unless there's something specific the doctor is duty-bound by state law to report, I don't think they'll tell anyone what they saw."

"But what if it's really bad?"

"Doctors see a lot of people with all kinds of problems. I'm guessing they're hard to shock."

"But could I get into trouble?"

"Trouble for what? You haven't robbed a bank, have you? You're hurt, and the doctor is there to help you get better. They're not there to judge you, or make you feel ashamed for..." again, Terry paused. "They'll understand."

Dread made her pull the blanket even tighter. "They'll know. They'll know everything."

"Doctors can't always tell, just by looking. Unless something is drastically wrong, I'm guessing they won't know everything."

"But..." Madison quieted her protest. She wanted to ask more, but couldn't.

"Okay," Terry breathed, "let's take a hypothetical approach to the problem."

Uncertain what he meant, she remained silent.

"Let's say a woman was abused, and now needs to go to a doctor."

Shocked horror filled Madison, and she stiffened like a petrified board.
Terry's voice gentled even more. "This is hypothetical, remember? This woman who needs medical attention is afraid that if a doctor looks at her, the doctor will know this hypothetical woman's secret. I don't think a doctor can necessarily always tell, but let's say this particular doctor is really sharp, and has a hunch something bad happened. Our hypothetical woman should be protected by something called doctor-patient confidentiality. There can be exceptions to the rule, such as instances of suspected child abuse, and the exceptions will vary from state to state and from doctor to doctor. But in general, as far as I'm aware, this woman's problems should remain private. This isn't legal advice, but as far as I understand, this is the way things are supposed to work. It's why you need a primary physician, one who will establish a doctor-patient relationship with you, so you will be covered by that privilege. Do you understand?"

Confused at Terry's sudden change from the hypothetical woman to his use of "you," Madison didn't respond.

Understanding dawned in Terry's face and he backed off with an apologetic smile. "I don't think this hypothetical woman should worry about what her doctor will think. She needs to pay attention to her health, and maintain a safe environment so she can move on with her life."

Madison bit her lip until she tasted blood, the hurt steadying her nerves.

"Can you hear me, Madison?"

She nodded, "yes."

"Do you want me to take you into that medical center, tomorrow?"

"Yes, please."

With a look of heavy pain, Terry's eyes closed. "Dear, God..." he breathed the words, the remainder of the prayer fading into silence. The lids opened, and something very close to tears filled his brown eyes.

"Are you all right?" Madison asked. "Do you want the ibuprofen?"

He passed off her concern with a sad smile. "This Labor Day hasn't been very easy to get through."

"Maybe the next one will be better."

"Yes," he smiled, wiping the water from his cheeks, "maybe." He stood up, looked about the room until his voice steadied once more. "Izzy and I will come as soon as we can tomorrow morning, after the triplets start preschool, so Izzy can give you some clothes to try on before we take you into Watertown. Agatha Hopkins is about your height, and Izzy thinks you might be able to fit her clothes. Anyway, it'll give you something to wear besides my old sweats and jeans."

Becoming self-conscious, Madison felt grateful for the blanket covering her shabby appearance.

"Izzy will take you shopping later, but for now, our first priority is to set up an appointment with a doctor." Terry pulled car keys from his pants pocket. "Do you need anything before I go?"

Madison shook her head, "no."

"Okay, then. I'll see you tomorrow at nine." Terry strode to the door, grabbed his coat, and left without locking the apartment.

As Madison got up to put on the deadbolt, she noticed a low muffled sound coming from outside. Curious, she went to the window and peeked through the still open blinds.

There in the pouring rain, his coat not even zipped up, Terry leaned against his jeep. She studied the bowed head, the hand over the eyes, the shoulders that shook as though he had been holding something in until that moment. With a stab of reality, Madison felt the jarring sensation of knowing she had somehow caused him pain.

Terry was weeping.

His head moved to the side, and fearing she might be caught watching, she closed the blinds.

Numb, Madison went to the sofa, her eyes fastened on the front door. He was crying. The thought gave her a sharp twist inside. She pulled the comforter over her body, buried her face in the soft pillow and squeezed her eyes shut.

If she absolutely had to cry, no one but God must ever know.

"Be merciful unto me, O Lord: for I cry unto Thee daily."
~ Psalm 86:3 ~
Chapter Five
A Bleeding Heart

"Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear Him. For He knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are dust."
~ Psalm 103:13, 14 ~

It took Terry several minutes to get his grief under control. By the time he climbed into the jeep, his clothes were sopping wet and fast soaking the vehicle's upholstery. The thought came to him to be grateful the downpour hadn't spoiled their Labor Day barbeque, that at least everyone had a day on the beach before the rain started.

Terry tried to focus on that thought. God held back the rain until now. And Terry had held back his tears until leaving Madison.

Back to her.

Terry let out a low moan. Why did everything in his life have to come back to the pain? It seemed no matter what he did, life was bent on reminding him of what he tried so hard to forget. Madison's troubled gray eyes held seemingly terrible secrets, but Terry felt as though he shared in their quiet torment simply by being in her presence.

From her panicked reaction to the hypothetical woman, Terry knew his guess of abuse had been correct. What kind of abuse almost seemed irrelevant. Madison was a survivor. That was what mattered.

Focus on that, he thought, starting the jeep before the tears had a chance to come back. Remember God's grace, claim His precious promises, and keep moving forward.

I have to keep moving forward.

The renewed determination helped to staunch the fresh wave of grief threatening to overtake him.

I'm a mess, Terry thought. Thank God, John isn't here to see this. Or, for that matter, Izzy.

Every trace of grief must be wiped away before he could return home. Otherwise, Terry feared John's offer to help Madison might be taken back in a frenzy of trying to protect the wrong person. Madison needed the help, not Terry.
"Please, God, don't let me break down," Terry prayed as he turned the jeep onto the main road. "For her sake, make me strong."

* * * *

It didn't make sense to wait up for Terry after the triplets had been put to bed, although the thought had occurred to John to do just that. Wait on the sofa with a book, then doze off until Terry came home. The gesture would let the guy know someone had noticed he was gone. It would also make Terry feel like someone was watching over his shoulder every waking moment, and John didn't want to do that to his friend.

Rolling onto his side, John stared at the digital clock beside the bed. The time kept getting later, and still Terry had yet to come home.

Izumi's sigh broke through the silent darkness of the bedroom. "Why don't you call the apartment?" She leaned over to snap on the bedside lamp, turned to look at John. "Neither one of us are going to get a wink of sleep until we know he's all right."

John shook his head. "I'd feel like an intruder. He and Madison are probably talking, and Terry forgot about the time."

Another glance at the clock squeezed a distressed moan from John. "I think I liked it better when he was helping Victor. The man was a bloodsucking leach, but at least Terry didn't have the Madison factor to contend with." At the feel of Izumi's touch, John rolled onto his back, lifted an arm to let his wife come closer for some serious snuggling. "I wish I knew what God was thinking when He sent her to Three Mile Bay. With Terry searching for someone to save, it was only a matter of time before he found her. It was inevitable." John looked down at Izumi. "Not that I'm questioning God. He knows best-- obviously-- but I wish I had God's foreknowledge. It'd make getting to sleep easier."

"Why don't you call the apartment? Or Terry's cell phone?"

"I can't shadow the guy for the rest of his life, Little Dove. I am my brother's keeper, but even that has its limits. Do you really want me to call and ask if he's cried lately? We'd both feel like idiots. Besides, if Terry needs help, he'll let me know."

"Are you so sure about that?" Izumi tilted her head toward John. "If Terry was having a nervous breakdown at this very moment, would he burden you with that knowledge?"
Reaching out with a free hand, John grabbed the cell phone beside the clock. He would try Terry's cell, ask something work related, then mention in passing that he'd noticed Terry hadn't come home yet. It couldn't hurt.

The call rang only once before it answered.

"Hey, John. What's up?"

The strain in Terry's voice made John grip the phone.

"Hey, Terry. Listen-- about that Osaka contract-- did you send our recommendations to their office like they asked?"

"Sure did." Terry cleared his throat. "Everything should be set. Don't tell me you're worried."

"What, me? Nah. I was only checking. Say, when are you coming home? Izumi is getting concerned."

The statement prompted a jab in John's side.

"I'm home right now," Terry said with an ironic chuckle. "I'm sitting in the jeep in front of the house."

"Then why haven't you come in?"

"Because," a smile sounded in Terry's voice, "I just pulled up. Would you tell Izzy to stop worrying? And tell her Madison accepted our offer about the doctor. She'll be waiting for us tomorrow morning."

"Will do." John paused. "Everything all right?"

"I got caught in the rain again, but I'll live."

"See you in the morning then."

"Yeah, see you."

John waited, hung up when he heard Terry's dial tone. Had that exchange sounded like a struggling man? Knowing Terry as well as he did, John felt he knew the answer.
The front door in the living room opened, then shut with a quiet thud. Terry was home, but John remained in bed. Besides pray, what was John supposed to do? Go out there and make him talk? When Izumi made a motion to reach for her robe on the pretext of checking the girls, John pulled her back to bed.

"We can't always do the work of his guardian angel, Izumi. When he needs us, he knows we're here."

* * * *

Sleep was impossible, eating, out of the question. When nine o'clock neared, every car that pulled past the apartment sent Madison into a state of nervous anticipation. A dining chair beside one of the living room windows enabled her to keep watch for Terry’s jeep without having to remain on her feet all morning. The engine of an approaching vehicle made her breath catch. She leaned forward, saw the car pull into view, then sank back. Another false alarm.

Maybe he wouldn’t come. Maybe he had forgotten. The thought filled her with hope and anxiety at the same time. She wanted to talk to a doctor-- wanted it, but also feared it. What if she was even more messed up than she thought? What if it was too late to untangle the hurts into something treatable? Fingers locked around the edges of the chair, Madison tried to steady her fraying nerves.

After Terry had left last night, she thought of a hundred more questions to ask. In her current state, even the things he had said seemed jumbled together. Something about bringing clothes today, and coming at nine o'clock. The time read eight fifty. Ten more minutes to go.

How she needed to use the bathroom. If she got up, Madison feared she might miss Terry. He might knock, think she wasn't there and decide to go home.

When her bladder became urgent, she retreated to the half bath off the living room. Sure enough, as she washed her hands at the sink, the doorbell sounded.

"I'm coming," she called, knowing full well no one could hear her.

As she rushed out of the bathroom, the front door opened. Terry's head peered inside, and when he saw her, he flashed a brilliant smile. He must use whitening toothpaste, Madison thought as Terry stepped into the living room.
"Hope you're ready," Terry said, glancing at the sofa. "Izzy brought some clothes for you to try on. If they don't fit, we'll stop at a store before heading to the medical center. You're still using the sofa?"

Madison nodded, "yes."

"Good. Hey, Izzy," Terry stepped outside through the still open doorway, "do you need any help with that bag?" Madison didn't hear the reply, but when Terry remained where he was, Madison guessed Izzy didn't need help. "Looks like we've got a pleasant day for this," Terry said, car keys jingling in his hand. "Glad the rain is over-- at least for now. This is our wettest month, so I expect we're in for more of the same." He moved out of the way as Izzy came inside with a large bulging cloth bag.

A polite smile curved Izzy's mouth as she greeted Madison. "Good morning."

"Hi," Madison said in a low mumble.

Terry shut the door, then came toward Madison at the same time Izzy tried to hand her the bag. It was too much. Madison stumbled backward, then made a hasty retreat to a bookcase lining the wall. She gripped the shelf, let herself breathe again.

After a moment of silence, Terry slipped the car keys into his pocket. "Izzy, why don't you take Madison upstairs and see if any of those clothes fit?"

Uncertainty betrayed itself in Izzy's expression, but she gestured toward the staircase and Madison nodded, "yes." The women went up the steps, Madison following Izzy's lead into the bathroom.

Izzy sorted through the contents of the bag, picked out a denim skirt and white top, selected some undergarments, then handed them to Madison. "We don't have time to go through everything right now. Try those on and see how they fit."

When Izzy didn't leave the bathroom, Madison took the clothes into the storage room, and locked the door behind her before undressing. Five minutes later, she had on the new used clothing. With a hand pressed to her waist to keep the skirt from falling, she returned to the bathroom.

"Oh, my," Izzy said in obvious surprise. "That skirt is rather long on Agatha, but not on you. You're taller than I thought."
The statement didn't surprise Madison. To someone as petite as Izzy, Madison imagined the entire world must look tall.

"And that waist..." Izzy sighed. "Poor Agatha lost weight to get that slender, and you've got her beat by a mile. Let's see, I think there's a belt in the bag somewhere. Here it is. Put this on, then leave the shirt untucked to hide the gathers. I hope Agatha doesn't see these clothes on you. She isn't vain, but I'd hate to hurt her feelings."

Despite the uneasy openness Madison experienced with wearing a skirt, she forced herself to dress the way Izzy wanted. Izzy knew more, understood what it took to appear normal. Madison didn't.

The undergarments didn't fare much better. From the way they fit, Madison concluded that "poor Agatha" must carry all her remaining weight in her hips. Madison's chest felt constricted, her waist unprotected. Grateful for the belt, Madison put on ankle socks, then tried on the pair of brown canvas shoes Izzy found in the bag. Her narrow feet moved around in the shoes, but when the laces were tightened, they managed to stay on without falling off.

"There, that doesn't look too bad," Izzy said when Madison straightened. "You'll need to go shopping later, but at least you have something to wear for the time being." Izzy picked up her purse, put the strap over her shoulder and started for the door. "Terry is waiting, so we'd better get moving before the entire morning disappears."

When Madison descended the stairs, she heard Izzy call to Terry. He stood up from the black leather recliner beside the coffee table, put his hand into his pocket to dig out the keys, then paused when he saw Madison.

"If we have any time left after setting up the doctor's appointment," Izzy said as she headed toward the front door, "I'd like to take Madison shopping. Poor Agatha. It wouldn't be kind to let her see Madison in those clothes."

"What?" Terry came out of his trance, looked at Izzy. "What are you talking about?"

"Never mind what I'm talking about. I don't want you telling Agatha."

A puzzled expression furrowed Terry's brow, but after a moment of deliberation, he shrugged. Keys in hand, he followed after the women as they stepped outside. "First the medical center, then lunch," Terry said, turning to lock the apartment, "then I guess we'll go shopping. John doesn't know what he's missing."
Even though Izzy and Terry talked on the way into Watertown, Madison sat in the back seat and remained quiet.

The drive didn't last anywhere near as long as Madison expected. Much too soon, the jeep sat in the parking lot of an impressive three story building. Cars crowded the lot, a man in a motorized wheelchair passed by Madison's window. She tried to swallow, realized her mouth felt dry.

Terry climbed out of the jeep, circled the hood, then opened Izzy's door.

"Time to get out, Madison," Terry said with a coaxing smile. He opened Madison's door, and she willed herself to her feet. A cold breeze chilled her legs as they crossed the parking lot, went up some steps and passed through an automatic door.

Negotiating around an elderly couple, Izzy led the way to a reception area where they joined a short line cordoned off by fancy braided rope and metal poles. A man got in line behind Madison, causing her to shrink closer to Terry's back. Finding it easier to stare at shoes than faces, she kept her head down and her mouth closed.

A tug on her arm, and she looked up. They were already at the front of the line.

"She wants to know if you prefer a male or female doctor," Terry said, motioning to the desk where a woman sat with a computer.

"Female," came Madison's rapid answer.

The woman tapped at the keyboard, waited a moment for something to happen, then looked up at Madison. "The only one still accepting new patients is Dr. Anne Nelson. She's new to this center, and specializes in family medicine."

Madison blinked. She didn't understand.

"No one else is accepting new patients," the woman repeated with a hint of annoyance.

"Oh." Madison nodded. "Dr. Nelson is fine."

The woman tapped a mouse, then rattled off questions Madison couldn't answer. Phone number? Address? Terry moved forward and gave the needed information, then Madison heard,

"Do you have insurance?"
"No, she doesn't," Terry said, "but I'll pay her expenses."

Unsure what that might mean for Terry, Madison started to ask. Before she got out the words, he waved off the question as though it didn't matter.

"I need you to fill out some forms," the woman said, passing Madison a clipboard with paper and pen. "When you're done, bring them back to me."

Eyes fastened on a few of the questions on the topmost form, Madison nodded without listening. They wanted to know a lot.

"Let's sit over there," Terry said, leading Madison over to some padded chairs against the wall.

Taking a deep breath, Madison clicked the pen and began from the top of the first form.

Address? Madison whispered to Terry, and Terry relayed the information, then leaned back in his chair with his eyes carefully avoiding her paperwork. When she continued on to the more personal questions, she understood why he tried to give her privacy.

Some of the questions, while intrusive, were not too sensitive. Others were plain scary. When she came to "Pain during intercourse?" Madison hunched over the clipboard and circled, "Yes."

Please, God, don't let anyone see this, Madison prayed in silent desperation. Her pen shook when it came to the place on the form where it asked her to describe all of her symptoms, and when they had first appeared.

They only provided six lines.

* * * *

It took Madison over an hour to complete the paperwork the receptionist had given. A faster or more confident person could have done it in a fraction of the time-- though Terry didn't try to hurry Madison's progress. The strain on her face, the tremble of the clipboard, all betrayed the courage it took for her to sit there and answer those questions.

With a sigh, Madison stood up, stared at her handiwork, then looked to Terry for instructions.

"Go to the desk and give it to the woman."

"I"-- Madison bit her lip-- "I don't know if I gave the right answers."
"This isn't a test," he smiled. "Did you do the best you could?"

She nodded.

"Then take the forms to the desk."

Another sigh, then Madison went back to the line and waited her turn.

Izumi checked her watch. "When we're done here, we should take her to lunch before going shopping."

"Shopping?" Terry tried to remember their plans. He kept looking at the line, watching Madison to make sure everything went all right.

"She can't wear Agatha's clothes, Terry. The poor dear would be so embarrassed."

"Who? Madison?"

For a long moment, Izumi stared at Terry as though he had one ear missing. "It took her a long time to fill out those forms."

"Yes, it did." Neither one wanted to say it, though he figured they both had the same thoughts. Madison must have an interesting medical history-- or lack of one-- to have taken so long.

Minutes later, Madison reached the front of the line. For a seemingly long time, she stood at the desk, speaking and then waiting with the receptionist. When Madison looked to Terry with a plea in her eyes, he went to go help.

"Dr. Nelson can see me today." A dramatic gulp slid down Madison's throat. He could almost hear it.

"Great," Terry smiled. "What time?"

"Now."

Though Terry kept the thought to himself, it occurred to him that when Madison's paperwork had been forwarded up the chain of medical command, someone had decided her case merited prompt attention. He had no way of knowing how close this was to the truth, but from the renewed gentleness of the receptionist, Terry felt an uneasy certainty.
"Maybe we should come back tomorrow," Madison said, shifting from one foot to the other. From her movements, Terry guessed she was in pain.

"The doctor might not be available tomorrow. If they can see you now, it might be to your advantage to let them."

Her eyes darted to the floor, the desk, then back to the floor.

"Okay," she said with a hesitant nod. "I guess I should get it over with as soon as possible."

"That's the spirit. The sooner you start, the sooner it ends."

They moved to another waiting area, and once more, Madison sat in silence. Then a female nurse in bright medical scrubs appeared at a door.

"Madison?"

"That's you," Terry said, prompting Madison to get up.

As Terry watched the frightened woman disappear behind the door with the nurse, he said a quiet prayer. He hoped Madison stopped trembling long enough for the doctor to examine her.

* * * *

First Madison was weighed, then led to a room where her blood pressure and pulse were taken. She answered more questions.

The nurse smiled, promised the doctor would be with her shortly, then left the room. Alone, Madison waited on the examining table.

Nerves prevented her from thinking clear thoughts. She studied the white linoleum, tried to read the printouts tacked to a bulletin board about the importance of low cholesterol, then stared at the jar of tongue depressors on the counter.

A knock sounded on the door. The handle turned, an African American woman with a tapered haircut and a crisp white coat came inside. From the top of her head, to the tip of her patent leather shoes, she exuded an air of polished professionalism.
"I'm Dr. Anne Nelson." She stepped forward to shake Madison's hand. "How are you feeling today? Any pain?"

"Yes, in my hip."

The doctor gave a confident nod, reached for a clipboard and scribbled something with a pen.

Madison was asked to get up and move about the room, extend her hips, let the doctor see her range of motion.

I can do this, Madison thought. This isn't so bad.

Next, she was sent to a curtained dressing room and directed to change into a medical gown. Then came a large room with serious looking equipment and another table. A man wearing an odd apron asked her to get up on the table, and it took every ounce of Madison's courage not to cry.

The equipment took pictures of both hips, then the man sent her to the dressing room to exchange the gown for her clothes. Her fingers shook so badly, she nearly didn't get the belt on.

A nurse led her back to the examining room. This time, Madison had to cover herself with a white sheet, then take off her clothes below the waist.

Too frightened to disobey, she did as she was told.

The doctor returned, her face kind, but layered with a calm confidence that Madison couldn't help but admire. If only she could be as calm.

The results of the X-rays went over Madison's head like wind over the hood of a car. She struggled to understand, but kept nodding as the doctor talked.

The doctor and nurse put on latex gloves, then told Madison to lay back on the examining table, spread her legs beneath the privacy of the sheet, and place her feet in plastic stirrups.

As Madison complied, the tears began to fall.

* * * *

Unable to read the magazine in the waiting room, Terry folded his arms and tried to pass the time talking to Izumi. Some time later, a female nurse came to the door and searched the waiting
area. Terry expected to hear another patient's name being called, but instead of speaking, the woman stood there and looked. When she saw him, her brows went up.

"Are you Terry?"

He stood. "Is something wrong with Madison?"

"She's asking for you," the nurse said with such kindness, Terry knew in the pit of his stomach that something was most definitely wrong.

Without a word, Terry followed the nurse through the door, down a short hall, then into a small room. A doctor stood beside the examining table-- Terry assumed it was Dr. Nelson-- her voice struggling to calm the distressed figure lying prostrate beneath a quaking white sheet.

The doctor looked up, and Terry saw the professionalism of the woman slip when she asked, (with hope in her voice), if he was Terry.

"That's me," he answered.

A familiar head appeared from under the white sheet, then a pair of terrified gray eyes.

"Madison? What's wrong?"

"I'll give you a moment in private," the doctor said, surprising Terry by turning to leave with the nurse. "When she's ready to continue, I'll be outside."

The door shut, and Terry found himself alone with a very frightened Madison.

The raised knees beneath the white sheet trembled. He glimpsed a pair of empty white stirrups, felt his stomach turn slightly sick. "They aren't hurting you, are they?"

"No." Her voice sounded little more than a whimper. Her eyes were red, and he knew she had been crying.

"What's wrong? Did they frighten you? Is that why you asked to see me?"

She looked undecided, then shook her head, "no."

"Then why?" he asked.
She gave a watery hiccup. "I was afraid you left."

"You mean, left without you?" Frowning, Terry shoved his hands into his pockets. "I'm not leaving this building until you're ready to come with me."

"Promise?"

"You have my word."

"But what if you forget?"

"Madison"-- he blew out a sigh-- "I couldn't forget you if I tried."

"But what if you do?"

"I gave my word, what else do you want?" A thought came to him, and he retrieved the cell phone from his pocket. "I carry this thing with me everywhere I go. I'm never without it. Here," he said, and placed the phone on the sheet beside her, "hold on to that, and when you're ready to go home, you'll give it back to me. I wouldn't leave without my cell phone, would I?"

A hand crept from under the sheet, and took the phone.

"Are we good?"

She nodded.

"Okay then. I'll tell the doctor you're ready."

Fearing tears of his own, Terry didn't trust himself to look back at Madison before he left. He found the doctor close by, her face professional but very sympathetic. She said little by way of an explanation-- Terry understood to retain the confidentiality her patients relied upon-- but thanked him for his help.

When Terry returned to the waiting room, he felt drained of emotion.

"Is Madison all right?" Izumi asked in alarm.

"I think so," Terry said, dropping back into his chair. "She was scared I had left the building without her. She's calmer now."
"Left without her?" Izumi settled back with her purse. "It reminds me of something that happened last month with one of the girls. I went into the grocery store alone, and forgot Ruthie was sleeping in her booster seat in the back. I realized my mistake only minutes later, but by the time I got back to the car, she was crying so hard she couldn't speak. It was only ten minutes, but I still carry guilt."

T erry tried to smile, but stopped when it felt shaky. John was right, he thought to himself, I really am in over my head.

* * * *

Clutching the printouts the nurse had given her, Madison made her way slowly down the hall, paused to gain her bearings. Which door had she come through? Which one led to the waiting area? A nearby nurse must have recognized the confusion, for she nodded to the door on the right before disappearing into an office.

It hurt to walk, but Madison pushed open the door, breathed in relief when she saw Terry and Izzy waiting in some chairs.

Dropping his magazine onto a small table, T erry moved to his feet and came to Madison.

"I see you made it out alive," he said with a lopsided grin. When she made no response, he sobered. "Did they say you can go?"

Madison nodded.

"Okay, this way." He started toward yet another reception area and another woman with a computer. "You'll need to give her the paper the nurse filled out and handed to you," T erry said as they moved in front of the desk.

This time, there was no line.

The paper turned in, Madison steered back as Terry pulled out his wallet. The receptionist said something-- a number in dollar amount-- and Terry handed the woman a credit card. He waited, then smiled as Izzy joined them at the desk.

"We're almost done here." T erry glanced at Madison. "Did they give you any prescriptions?"
It took a moment for Madison to locate the blue slip of paper between the printed sheets of instructions and medical explanations. She showed the slip to Terry, then tucked it back into the papers when she realized what the writing said.

Terry gave a good-natured shrug. "Don't worry, I didn't read it. What happened between you and your doctor will remain private." He slipped the credit card back into his wallet. "Let's get out of here. I'm starving."

* * * *

Even from his limited vantage behind the wheel, it didn't take much observation for Terry to notice Madison wasn't feeling well. His eyes kept darting to the rear view mirror, hoping the slumped rag doll in the back seat would recover some of the color missing from her cheeks.

"Are you hungry?" he asked, hoping to coax a relaxed answer from those pale lips.

She gave a thin smile.

"There's a good restaurant near here. They make excellent corned beef sandwiches. Very fancy, lots of vegetables."

Another glance in the mirror found his audience with her eyes closed.

"I don't think she's feeling well enough to go into a restaurant, Terry." Izumi peered around the seat, smiled at Madison with a kind concern Terry appreciated. "Are you going to be sick? Do you need Terry to pull over?"

"No, I'm fine," came the weak response.

"She needs something to calm her stomach, Terry." Izumi straightened in the seat, looked out the window and pointed to a fast-food restaurant. "Pull into the Hamburger Plaza drive-through, and we'll eat in the car. Some french fries and soda should make her feel better."

Terry hoped Izumi was right. Madison made no effort to ask for anything when it came time to place their order, but nodded weakly to anything Izumi suggested.

In the parking lot, a shady area beneath some trees afforded privacy as Terry parked the jeep. He got out, went to open Madison's door so the breeze might do her some good. She slumped against the seat, and when Terry started to unfasten her seat belt, she tried to pull away.
Fingers trembling, Madison undid the seat belt herself. She slid onto her side, hugged her knees to her chest and lay down on the short bench seat Terry had installed so he could haul the triplets around in their carriers and boosters.

"You don't look well," Terry said, taking off his jacket. He rolled the garment, placed it beneath her head for a pillow. "Have you eaten anything today? Anything at all?"

A sigh escaped her lips. "I wasn't hungry."

"You can't keep skipping meals, Madison." Terry passed the carton of fries, the small soda cup to her. "You'd better sit up to eat. I don't want you surviving the doctor's office and no breakfast, only to choke to death on fries."

"It hurts to sit," she mumbled, cramming a single french fry between her lips.

Terry frowned. "Is it because of the exam?"

"Yes."

"Did they give you anything for the pain?"

Madison nodded. "That's what the prescription was for."

"For pity's sake, why didn't you say something sooner? We could have gone to the pharmacy first."

"But you said you were starving."

"It was a figure of speech, Madison. I could have waited." Terry almost slammed the door shut as he left her to her fries and cold soda. Forget the pain-- make sure Terry gets his lunch on time.

He jumped behind the wheel, tugged the door shut and stared out the window in a fog of anger and self-reproach.

"Terry?" Izumi handed him a large hamburger in a wrapper. "Try to eat. She needs you to calm down."

Turning his eyes to the rear view mirror, Terry glimpsed Madison's frightened face staring back at him.
He accepted the hamburger, said a quiet prayer, then pulled back the wrapper to reveal a triple layered burger with lettuce and lots of cheese. Just the way he liked it.

"Madison." He nodded to her in the mirror.

She paused her timid nibbling of a french fry, and blinked at him.

He forced a grin. "You're forgetting something."

The reminder was met with complete bewilderment.

"My cell phone. I want it back."

The half smile as she pulled the phone from her skirt pocket, almost made Terry's day. She held it over his shoulder, and he accepted it without explanation to Izumi.

"After you're done with those fries, we're heading to the nearest pharmacy to get that prescription filled. Okay?"

Madison nodded, and resumed her nibbling.

* * * *

It would take an hour before the prescription at the MegaMart pharmacy would be ready. Terry wanted to tell the man behind the counter that Madison needed the medicine right now. Couldn't he see her limp? Terry hoped the prescription was to help her hip, but couldn't be sure. The exam had made it hurt to sit-- that was what Madison had said-- and the medicine was to help with that pain. But what about her hip?

"Do you need to sit down?" Terry asked, looking about for a store bench so she could rest.

Madison shook her head.

"Sorry"-- he sucked in a breath-- "I forgot. Sitting hurts." He hesitated. How he wanted to ask more.

"It's all right, Terry. My hip isn't too bad right now. The exam made the other things worse than usual, but the pain will go away."
Terry stiffened. Other things? The remark had been meant to make him feel better, but it held implications Madison probably at first didn't realize. She had more than one injury separate from her hip. And those injuries made it difficult to sit.

Regret and shame chased their way across her face. She had said too much-- Terry saw it in the downcast eyes, the tremble of her lip.

In an effort to distract Madison, Terry grabbed at the first suggestion within reach. "Since we have to wait for an hour, and we're at the MegaMart anyway, why don't we do our shopping here? How about it? Are you feeling well enough to pick out some clothes?"

When Madison accepted, Terry sensed it was more to change the subject and erase the memory of that one unguarded comment, than anything else.

Happy to get Madison out of her friend's ill-fitting hand-me-downs, Izumi led the way to the women's clothing section. After perusing the racks, she suggested some garments, handed them to Madison, then pointed out the dressing room.

It took a long time for Madison to emerge-- so long, Izumi went to see if she needed help. When Izumi returned, she explained in a hushed voice how Madison preferred baggy clothing. If the clothes showed her figure, they were immediately set aside. Madison would rather wear the men's clothing Terry had first seen her in, than choose something that actually fit.

"She has her reasons, Izzy."

The response made Izumi sigh. "I'm afraid she's going to come out of here with maternity clothes. Terry, there is something very wrong with her."

"I know."

"How much do you know?"

Terry paused before answering. "I can guess."

"She's been abused, hasn't she?"

"That's very probable."

"Oh, Terry." Izumi closed her eyes a moment. He could sense the warning to be careful coming, and breathed a sigh of gratitude when it didn't materialize.
Something else that didn't materialize-- Madison from the dressing room. Once more, Izumi went to go check, and once more, Izumi exchanged clothes with others from the racks.

By the time Madison emerged, she wore an oversized gray shirt and baggy jeans several sizes too big. Despite all her efforts, a young man moved past them, gave Madison an appraising grin that drove her to hide behind Terry.

"I think we've done enough shopping for one day," Izumi said, leading Madison to the dressing room to change back into her old clothes. "If those oversized shirts and jeans are what you want, then they'll have to do for now."

After going through the checkout, Terry led the way to the store pharmacy with Madison's shopping bags in hand. To his dismay, he noticed the limp in her gait seemed more pronounced than before. The stress of choosing new clothes had wilted her like a squashed flower being trampled on by yet more feet.

To make matters worse, when Madison received her prescription, Terry realized it was only a pain ointment, not some powerful drug meant to wipe out her other problem. Namely, her hip. Since the ointment required a prescription, Terry hoped it meant it was powerful enough to actually do some good.

Her hip was another matter, one he intended to ask about at a later time.

As Terry carried the shopping bags into the parking lot with Izumi, Madison began to lag farther and farther behind. He came to a stop, waited, then moved on more slowly.

The whimper that squeezed from Madison's lungs as she climbed into the back seat of the jeep, sent a pang of remorse into Terry. He had been the one to suggest they shop for clothes in the MegaMart, and now she was in worse pain than before.

Couldn't he do anything right?

He took Izumi aside and spoke in a hushed voice. "Would it be okay if I brought her to our house for dinner, tonight?"

"Terry, look at her. She needs rest."

"I'll make a comfortable place for her on the living room sofa. She'll get plenty of rest. Please, Izzy? I don't want her to be alone."
"Terry, your heart is bleeding all over the pavement."

He grinned.

"If she's coming," Izumi sighed, "I'd better set another plate for dinner. Please don't leave her unsupervised around the triplets, though. I don't know her well enough for that."

"Thanks, Izzy."

"I don't know why you're thanking me. You've been fighting sadness all day, and now you won't get a break until after dinner."

Though he wanted to refute Izumi's claim, Terry realized she was right. One look at the back seat, however, and Terry pushed aside his own feelings.

Home meant a safe place, a shelter from the hurts of others. He always found refuge with his family, and now Madison would, too.

"Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me: for my soul trusteth in Thee: yea, in the shadow of Thy wings will I make my refuge, until these calamities be overpast."

~ Psalm 57:1 ~
"Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity [love], it profiteth me nothing."
~ 1 Corinthians 13:3 ~

The road looked familiar, as did the trees, the houses, that stretch of water growing bigger and bigger outside the rear window of the jeep. They recalled images she wished to forget. She had walked this road, on her way to nowhere, only to shudder against the wet cold and almost die. The memory of it caught in her throat, tasting like bile.

Why was she here? Why was Terry bringing her back to this place? Fear squeezed the air from her lungs. Wet stung her eyes. He was taking her back to the campground, to leave her where he had found her.

"Madison?" She looked into the mirror and saw Terry flick her a glance before returning his eyes to the road. "What's the matter? Please don't answer with a shrug. I can't hear a shrug. I heard a whimper back there, and I want to know if you're all right."

"I'm here."


"Please"-- Madison forced down a dry swallow-- "where are we going?"

"We're going home. I told you that as we all left the MegaMart."

"But this isn't the way to the apartment."

"I meant, we're going to John and Izzy's home, the one they let me share with them. It'll only be for dinner, then I'll take you back to the apartment."

"Oh."

"That sounded shaky." The glance in the rear view mirror narrowed on her. He looked back at the road, let out a sigh. "As soon as we get home, you're putting on that painkilling ointment. You look like you've been put through the spin cycle on a washing machine."
Unspeakable relief flooded Madison. She wasn't going back to the wild.

The shimmer of the water no longer felt like an unforgiving glare pushing her from its view, though it still made her squint. She turned from the window, let her head rest against the glass. It bumped lightly when the tires began to crunch with the sound of gravel.

The jeep slowed to a stop in front of a wide white house. The front door opened, and the man Terry had introduced as John, stepped out with three cute little girls no taller than his waist. They tagged behind him like happy yellow ducklings following their parent to water. Madison knew, for she had once seen a nature show about waterfowl and their young.

"We're home," Terry said, unsnapping his seat belt.

Izzy opened the passenger door, a smile on her lips as John came to meet her.

"First day back to preschool, and everything went smooth," John said, planting a kiss on his wife's cheek. "No temper tantrums, no tears, just giggles and lots of finger painting." John lifted a girl, and she presented her mom with a paper covered in kiddie bright colors. It vaguely resembled a flower.

"Oh, my. It's beautiful, Lizzie. We'll put this up on the fridge."

The child beamed brightly at her mother's encouragement. Then the other two girls presented their gifts, equally unrecognizable masterpieces that had their mommy declaring the fridge was fast filling up with talented artists.

"I see we're having company." John said it to Izzy, though his look traveled to Madison.

Izzy put a hand on John's arm, leaned forward and whispered several somethings into his ear. It didn't take much to guess that Izzy was giving John the highlights of their outing.

A girl climbed into the jeep with a sheet of paper clasped in her right hand. Kneeling in the passenger seat her mother vacated, she peered into the back of the vehicle.

"Who's that?"

"Her name's Madison. She's going to have dinner with us." A relaxed look of parental pleasure crossed Terry's face as the girl continued to stare.
"Hi." The child blinked at Madison, a pearl white smile showing beneath a pair of large blue eyes and a fall of blonde hair. Those blue-blue eyes stared at her, waiting for a response.

Sucking in a breath, Madison pushed out a one word greeting. "Hi."

"My name's Debbie. I'm four years old and I go to preschool with my sisters."

"Oh." Madison didn't know what to say. Those eyes kept staring, as though expecting much more than she had to offer. "That's nice."

"Our favorite color is pink. What's yours?"

Madison looked to Terry for help, but he only smiled.

"I don't know."

"That's silly. Everyone knows their favorite."

A small tug on Debbie's shirt had the child looking at Terry. "We don't call our guests silly. If she doesn't know, then that's that."

"But, Uncle Terry--"

"Go help your mommy put the pictures on the fridge."

The child tossed him a bright smile, hopped out of the jeep and ran after her parents as they went inside.

"That was Debbie. She's precocious, as are the other two. I have to watch what I say around them, because they'll remember every word."

"They look alike."

Terry grinned hugely. "They're triplets. Not identical, but close enough to keep newcomers to Three Mile Bay guessing. Mix them up once in a while, and they'll love you for life." He stepped out of the jeep, circled the hood, came to Madison's door and opened it before she made up her mind to get out.

"Pass me your shopping bags. I'll snip the tags off, and get everything into the wash so you won't have to use the community laundry at the apartment. Come with me."
She obeyed without knowing why. Following Terry into the tidy white house snugged against trees and a stunning waterfront, she wondered why. That breathtaking view didn't hold the answer.

Because he said so. It was the only reason she could find.

Stepping through the front door, Madison found herself in a comfortably large room.

"Wait right here. I'll be back in a moment." Terry dropped the bags onto the living room carpet, then headed for another part of the house.

Feeling like the outsider she was, Madison slunk against a wall. The house had an upscale feel to it, like the owners had money but didn't like to flaunt it. Beneath the well-lived-in comfort, she saw an affluence that made her wonder who these people really were. As in Terry's apartment, the couch and recliner were of soft leather. Unlike Terry with his black and white decor, color hugged this room with hues of blues and browns. Yellow and green throw pillows sat on a chocolate sofa, powder blue curtains hung before a large bay window that filtered light onto blue-brown carpet. The carpet was new. She could tell, could almost smell the sharp scent of it peeking above the hungry aroma wafting through a door that probably led to the kitchen.

Izzy was fast. She already had something cooking.

A girl ran down a long hallway, darted through the living room with a flash of curiosity at Madison, then slowed to a stop. A large sheet of paper splashed with paint dangled from her hand.

"Who are you?" The question proved the girl couldn't be Debbie, despite the strong resemblance.

"I'm Madison. Which one are you?"

"Ruthie."

Though Madison wanted to say something further, her strength failed. Her knees buckled. She pressed a hand against the wall to keep the room from spinning.

The girl stared a few moments longer, then went in the direction of the aroma.
A second girl dashed through the room, this one not even noticing Madison, a stream of paper and bright colors fluttering behind her.

They were putting the pictures on the fridge.

"Hey! Wait for me!" John strode down the hall, paused when he saw Madison. "Go ahead and make yourself comfortable on the sofa. Terry will be with you in a moment."

Madison just stood there, braced against the wall, unable to speak.

With a sigh, John went into the kitchen where Madison could hear the clamors of children mixed with the sounds of pots and pans. Someone turned on a faucet, she heard the splashing water, then the clatter of something falling.

A child laughed, followed by John's hearty chuckle. From the sound of it, a mess had been made, though no one seemed too upset.

"What's going on in there?" Terry asked, striding into the living room with a large comforter in his arms. He didn't seem to expect an answer, but went about unfurling the blanket on the sofa. He gave her a sidelong glance. "If you think I'm going to let you stand, huddled against the wall like that all evening, you don't know me very well." He straightened, looked at the sofa as though he'd just done something brilliant. "There. All ready. But first things first." He pointed his chin down the hall. "First door on your right, through the office, there's a bathroom."

"I don't have to go."

"Yes, you do. You have to put on that medicine. Have you read the directions yet?"

She shook her head.

"Then you'd better sit down and start reading." He nodded to the sofa. "Go on. It's all for you."

"No thanks. I'd rather stand."

"You won't be standing for long, not the way you're bowed over, ready to collapse. Get over here, and sit down."

The force of his words had their effect. She obeyed.
When she tucked the printouts from the doctor’s office beneath the comforter, the curiosity on Terry’s face was obvious. He didn't ask what they said, though she knew he wanted to.

The small writing on the instructions that came with the ointment made Madison's eyes hurt. There were possible side effects-- none of them very likely. But still. The knowing it might, put a tight knot in her stomach.

Shouldered against the doorway that led to the kitchen, Terry waited and studied the carpet in silence. She stole a glance at him every few minutes, wondering when he might leave. He didn't budge, just stood there with his arms folded, his face thoughtful. When she spoke, he looked up with a ready smile.

"The bathroom?"

"First door on the right," he said, pointing down the hall. "Don't pay attention to the mess in the office. John and I haven't cleaned up in awhile."

A little girl came behind Terry, tugged at his hand with a plea to come see the fridge.

"Okay, Debbie. Just a moment." He looked at Madison. "Please don't wait much longer before you use that ointment. It's hard seeing you in so much pain."

"It's my pain."

His mouth opened, then closed without comment. When his back turned into the kitchen, Madison heard his voice turn playful. "Hey, we've got quite an art gallery going here! Looks like Jake isn't the only artist in the family."

It took effort to stand, move toward the hallway when her knees wanted to buckle. The unforgiving stress wore at her, made her hand shake as she pushed open the first door on the right.

So this was Terry's office. The one he and John shared. They worked from home? How lucky was that? Blessed was more like it, she thought, glancing around a room with heavy executive desks, plush leather chairs and filing cabinets of dark rich wood. A dartboard hung on the opposite wall, the pocked drywall evidence of someone’s many misses. A basketball rested on a stack of folders on the floor. Laptops sat on the desks, one of them open and showing an aquarium screensaver. A shiny briefcase stood open beside one of the chairs, papers stuffed into its open jaws.
Tucked into all this was a metal rack loaded down with free weights. Large, intimidatingly solid, and after Madison stepped forward to look at the writing on some of the discs, as heavy as forty-five pounds. These guys did some serious workouts, she decided, taking in the elliptical bike and treadmill squeezed between the filing cabinets. A damp towel hung from the bike, evidence of its being used recently.

John. He probably did a workout while Terry and Izzy were away.

Did Terry use those forty-five pounders? She recalled the muscles beneath Terry's shirt when he lifted her in the rain, and concluded that he did. Dread made her shudder. Why did men have to become stronger? Weren't they strong enough?

The sound of footsteps in the hall forced Madison to locate the bathroom. She ducked inside, pulled the door shut behind her as someone entered the office.

The handle had a lock, and she used it.

Whoever it was, didn't say anything, and after several moments, Madison turned to her medicine. How she hoped it would take the edge off the pain.

* * * *

No sounds came from the bathroom, not even the splash of running water in the sink. Could he usually hear the faucet when it was on? Now that he thought about it, he wasn't sure. Crossing his ankles, he leaned back in the swivel chair and made a mental note to check later.

"There you are." John poked his head through the office door, grinned. "Dinner's almost ready. Where's you-know-who? I didn't see her on the sofa."

Terry inclined his head toward the bathroom. "Do we usually hear the sink running from here?"

"I don't know. Never thought to notice." John moved to Terry's work desk, folded his arms and took a deep breath. "What did the doctor have to say about the hip?"

"I don't know." Terry puffed out a sigh. "I guess she's all right. If it was really bad, wouldn't the doctor have given a prescription?"

"I guess."
Eyes fixed on the closed bathroom door, Terry shook his head. "All this not knowing is getting to me."

"Why don't you ask? It beats guessing."

The door cracked open. Like a mouse skirting danger by clinging to the walls, Madison made her way around John and Terry.

"Did it go all right?" Terry asked.

Without answering, she headed back to the living room.

John lightly punched Terry's arm. "She's not much for words, is she?"

Getting to his feet, Terry moved into the living room where he found Madison lingering by the front door. Her hand rested on the doorknob, her face a picture of indecision.

"You haven't eaten dinner yet."

"I'm not hungry."

"If you want me to take you back to the apartment, I will. Say the word, and we're gone. Before you leave though, I'd like you to get comfortable on the sofa so I can bring you some of Izzy's homemade dinner. What do you say? You need to eat."

The hand dropped from the doorknob.

"I know you're tired. Just hang on a little longer, and you'll start feeling better."

A mild scowl creased her mouth. "You can't promise that."

"Prove me wrong. Let me get you some food."

A sigh slipped from Madison. Her feet moved as though they weighed several pounds each, her slight frame tremored even though Terry knew she had to be exhausted. The way she eased herself onto the sofa had him grimacing.

"How's the pain? Let up any?"

She gave a weak shrug. "In places."
"How about your hip?"

"It still hurts."

"What did the doctor say was wrong?"

Sinking beneath the comforter, Madison looked like a small child snuggling to escape her troubles. She tucked her legs beneath her, rested her head against the back of the sofa. And closed her eyes.

Frustration nipped at Terry. He pushed into the kitchen, pulled the ibuprofen from the cupboard while Izzy watched.

"She won't tell me what's wrong. How can I make it better, if she won't tell me what's wrong? That's some doctor. She let Madison leave without anything for the pain." Terry dumped two pills into his hand as Debbie scooted past him with an armful of plastic plates. He was about to question the wisdom of the entire medical profession, when Ruthie got under foot on her way to the table with two handfuls of silverware. "Sorry." He maneuvered around the triplets, carrying his ibuprofen and frustration into the living room.

John met him coming down the hall. "Dinner ready yet?"

"I don't know. I guess. The girls are setting the table." Terry moved to the sofa, was about to hand Madison the bottled water and painkillers, when he noticed the slight rise and fall of her blanket.

Too late. She was fast asleep.

It wouldn't do any good to wake her, only to feed her ibuprofen. Terry set the water and the pills on the small end table beside the sofa. Then he saw them. The printouts Madison had received at the doctor's office, staring up at him from an edge of the blanket.

Temptation pushed hard at Terry. He wanted to take a small peek, to see what he was dealing with, how to help Madison, how to make her feel better. Surely, it would be all right.

A voice deep inside Terry sounded a warning. He knew it would violate trust. He had given his word. If Madison wanted to take her secrets to the grave, it was her decision. Not his. Her life wasn't in danger by keeping these things from him, and a doctor had examined her. She was in good hands.
He backed away, but not before tucking the papers beneath the blanket so they couldn't taunt him.

At least she wasn't in pain in her sleep.

* * * *

The girls were hungry, and John didn't see any reason to wait. He led the family in prayer over the food, then helped serve the children while his ears trained on the living room.

"Daddy?" Ruthie munched on a baby carrot, her eyes troubled in thought. "Why doesn't Uncle Terry want dinner? Isn't he hungry?" Two more sets of blue eyes looked to John for an answer, two more little girls worried about their Uncle Terry.

"Everything is all right. He has a lot on his mind right now, that's all. Mommy is keeping his food warm in the oven. He'll eat later."

"But why doesn't he eat now?" This time, Lizzie was asking the question. "Is Uncle Terry going to be sick again?"

He wasn't sick the last time, John thought with a sharp pang to his heart. How do you explain a weeping man to four-year-olds? And to do it without frightening them? Almost impossible.

"Daddy? What's wrong with Uncle Terry?"

"What's wrong?" Debbie and Ruthie chimed in.

As John prayed for wisdom, he saw Izumi's pained face and knew she was doing the same.

"Do you remember, the last time Uncle Terry didn't feel well, I said it was because his heart was hurting? It isn't the heart that pumps blood that hurts, but the heart in here"-- John touched his chest-- "the place where we feel things for each other. The place where love comes from. Your uncle knows what it's like to hurt inside, so when he sees someone else hurting, that place inside of him, hurts as well."

The girls exchanged looks among themselves, a silent form of communication between triplets that only they understood.
"Your Uncle Terry has a very big heart. Bigger than the Grand Canyon-- it's that big. And when he sees someone who needs help, his heart fills up so much he forgets his own needs." John looked from daughter to daughter to daughter, their somber faces a testament of love. "It's our job to take care of Uncle Terry. He's going to need lots and lots of hugs, and as many smiles and cuddles as we can give. Okay?"

Debbie sighed. "Daddy? Can I bring Uncle Terry his dinner?"

"I want to bring his grape juice!" Ruthie sat up straight. "Please, Daddy?"

Eager to do her part, Lizzie slid from the chair, gathered Terry's untouched fork and napkin and proceeded to take them into the living room.

With a nod of assent, Izumi retrieved one of the plates warming in the oven, made sure it wouldn't burn any little fingers, then gave it to Debbie.

A glass brimming with grape juice was pressed between Ruthie's small hands. After a promise to be very careful, she balanced her way into the living room while John held his breath.

"She spills that, you'll never get it off the carpet."

"This is good for them, John. They need to do something for their uncle."

John stood. "Give me the other plate. Madison needs to eat, and if she doesn't, I have a feeling neither will Terry."

*   *   *   *

He only intended to stay for a few minutes, to keep watch over her sleep until he felt better about going into the kitchen for dinner. Then those sleeping lids flickered, the hands clenched, and those awful sounds struggled up from somewhere deep inside Madison. A soft writhing moan, hushed with fear, yet too painful to be absolutely quiet.

Grief tore at him. It didn't matter if he frightened her, she had to stop. She had to come out of that dream, whatever it was, and rejoin the living. Those sounds came from the grave, unearthly smothered wails that Terry doubted anyone in the house could hear but him.

If he hadn't been sitting in the overstuffed recliner, guarding her sleep, he would never have heard.
His hand trembled when he touched her arm.

Instead of waking, Madison turned beneath the comforter. Her body jerked at his touch, but mercifully, the keening stopped.

Thank God, it stopped.

Terry gripped his hands together to keep from shaking. He dropped into the recliner, bowed his head and prayed in silence.

He couldn't do this. He wasn't Abby, and Madison sure wasn't Jake. Please, God, not nightmares. Not flashbacks. Not her.

Not Madison.

The patter of feet had him looking up. Lizzie stood before him, a fork in one hand, a crumpled napkin in the other.

"What's this?" he asked in surprise.

"It's time to eat." Lizzie spoke with an air of self-importance. She handed him the fork, unfolded the napkin and tucked it beneath his chin. "Daddy says we have to take care of you."

"I appreciate the thought," he hushed his voice to coax Lizzie to do the same, "but I'm not very hungry right now."

Just then, Debbie entered the living room with a plate of leftover meatloaf. After her came Ruthie, balancing a precarious glass of carpet-staining juice in her little hands.

"I'll take that." Terry reached for the glass, puffed out a sigh of relief when it didn't spill. He set it on the end table, just as John came into the room with another plate.

"Why is she sleeping?" Debbie asked, staring at the woman on the sofa. "It's not time for bed yet. See? The clock doesn't say eight."

"Maybe she's sick." Ruthie joined her sister and they both stared at Madison. "Yup, definitely sick."

"Please, keep your voices down." Terry shifted the plate onto his knee, bent to pick up the fallen fork. "Madison is sleeping. She's had a busy day."
"So have I," Lizzie said, folding her small arms, "but I'm not sleeping before I have to."

"Hush-- you heard your uncle." John held a plate Terry suspected was for Madison. "Go back to the kitchen and finish your food. I'm sure Uncle Terry is glad you brought him his dinner."

"Yes," Terry smiled, careful to keep his voice to a near whisper, "I appreciate the meatloaf. Thanks."

The triplets flashed him a smile, then went back to the kitchen debating on whether or not the woman on the sofa was dying.

"She's not dying," Izumi said from the kitchen, her voice hushed but not so hushed Terry couldn't overhear. "Her name is Madison, and I'll thank you three not to wake her before she's ready."

John smiled, kept holding the plate and looking embarrassed. "We didn't know she was asleep," he said in a whisper.

"It's okay. I'm awake."

The men looked over at the sofa. Madison blinked back at them, her hands gripping the edge of the blanket.

"Since you're awake," John stepped forward to give her the plate, "you can have this. It's meatloaf, and it's leftover from... Wow. I don't know how long that's been in the freezer. Izumi cooks something, and if there's any leftovers, it sometimes gets shoved into the freezer until we get desperate." He shrugged. "I guess we got desperate. Save room for dessert. I hear there's pie and ice cream later."

John returned to the kitchen.

Terry pulled away the napkin under his chin. Those sweet munchkins. He had tried to tell them he wasn't hungry, but how could he turn away all that loving helpfulness? Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Madison pray, pick up her fork and try a bite. She tried another, then another, until she was eating without pause.

Good idea, John, Terry thought, starting in on his own plate of meatloaf. Getting the girls to bring him his dinner, and then John following up with a second plate, so they could coax Madison into eating.
Brilliant. He wished he had thought of it, himself.

* * * *

After dinner, the triplets came to say good night to Terry, stare at Madison, then scoot off to bed under protest. They had a nap during preschool that day, and were a little more wide-awake than usual. It was Izzy’s approach to let them get good and tired, so by the end of the day, they would fall into bed, and not be ordered into it.

Tonight, they needed to be ordered.

From the recliner, Terry saw John picking up a discarded doll in the hallway. Madison sat tucked on the sofa with the comforter, her new clothes laundered and folded into grocery bags.

Pushing up from the recliner, Terry walked down the hall, looked at the doll in John’s hand. "They sure are growing up fast. I remember when we brought them home from the hospital, just little dolls, themselves. Remember Abby? How she kept crying and we had to drive her around late at night, until she fell asleep? Those were the days."

John smiled dryly. "They sure were. Insomnia and poopy diapers. Can't beat that." He rubbed the back of his head, tossed a glance down the hall. Though John said nothing, Terry knew his friend wondered when Madison would go home.

All evening long, Terry postponed the inevitable. After dinner, Madison had fallen asleep for an hour, giving him a handy excuse for why they weren't leaving. Then a show came on television, and Terry decided to wait until it was over so they could see the end. Now it was bedtime for the triplets, and John and Izzy were making noises about turning in for the night.

Through it all, Madison remained snugged in the blanket, silent and watchful of all that went on around her. She offered no conversation, her passive eyes reflecting someone who lacked emotional energy. She had spent it all.

"Terry?" John’s voice rose in growing alarm. "You are planning to take her back to the apartment, aren't you? She's welcome here, but shouldn't she leave for the night?"

The perception of his friend startled Terry, for Terry had been considering the question all evening long. "Why does she have to leave? She's not causing any trouble. She could sleep on our sofa, use the office bathroom--"
"Terry," John placed a hand on his shoulder, "it's not Madison I'm thinking of, it's you. You need to get away from all that sadness, and give yourself a breather."

"I'm fine. It's not me I'm worried about, it's her."

"Spoken like the person I know and admire." John shook his head, sighed deeply. "I don't know, Terry. I think it'd be best if she went home."

For a moment, Terry toyed with the idea of telling John about Madison's bad dreams. He didn't know if they were flashbacks, and in a way, he hated to speak in case John might think him slightly off his rocker. Someone has a nightmare, and automatically it means they're having flashbacks of abuse. It could just be a bad dream.

"Terry?" John's concerned voice broke through. "Are you all right? You've been awfully quiet tonight."

"Sorry. I was just thinking." Terry looked down the hall, not seeing anything but the image in his mind.

A limping puppy.

Well now. If he didn't get a hold of his emotions fast, and start thinking more rationally, the tears would come and he might lose all opportunity to help Madison. He would be of no good to her shattered.

"I guess you're right"-- he managed a smile at John-- "I need a break. Please try not to worry, I'll take her home."

John gave a long, thoughtful pause. "If you think it's necessary for her to stay the night, she can stay. Izumi and I are around, so it's not like there aren't any chaperons."

The very idea of John being a chaperon, gave Terry a twinge of bittersweet amusement. Terry had never had a girlfriend, or anyone who even came close to that special title. Even now, it didn't count. Madison was just someone who desperately needed help, and happened to be a woman.

"Thanks for the offer," Terry nodded to John, unable to bring a smile to his mouth though he tried hard, "I'll take her home."
Another long pause from John. His eyes narrowed. "If you were in over your head, would you tell me?"

"John--"

"You'd tell me? Right?"

A slow breath moved through Terry's lungs. "I'll admit the water is lapping at my chin right now, but I'll be all right. Every time I think I'm about to sink and touch bottom, I keep treading water."

"And if that water gets choppy?"

Terry forced an easy shrug. "It won't happen, but if I need help, I'll ask."

"That sounds like a non-answer." John straightened as Izzy emerged from the triplets' bedroom. "You'll ask me, or someone else?"

Terry let loose with a wide grin. "Someone else, if I can help it."

"Just as long as you ask someone," John continued. "I prefer it to be me, but ask. Don't drown and no one not know."

"We're just having another brother-to-brother talk," Terry said to Izzy. "Someone we both know and love is getting in over his head again, but"-- Terry gave John a hearty slap on the shoulder--"I don't mind jumping in to save a buddy. He needs a lot of taking care of, this guy. Always needs something, but what's family for, right?"

"Very funny."

"Anytime, John."

Izzy folded her arms. "Does anyone care to tell me what's going on?"

Cracking a smile, John shook his head. "I'll explain later. Say goodbye to our knight in shining armor. He has to return his lady fair, then go fight some windmills."

"Funny." Terry nodded to John. "Very funny."
The sparring match had put a smile on Terry's face that stayed. He turned to leave, saw John grin at him. They were brothers. In every sense of the word but birthright.

The thought steadied Terry as he went into the living room to collect Madison for the drive back to Chaumont. He had solid ground beneath his feet, a foundation on which to face the world and everything in it.

As Terry watched Madison struggle off the sofa, he was reminded how very blessed he was. Resolve strengthened his heart. That blessing would not end with him. He would pass it on to someone else, or die trying.

"Freely ye have received, freely give."
~ Matthew 10:8 ~
Chapter Seven
Fighting the Dragon

"Thou God seest me..."
~ Genesis 16:13 ~

The darkness sat heavy. It pressed against her body, cutting off the very air she breathed. Rope bit into her flesh with an eagerness that made every writhing moment seem like the last. She clawed, twisted to get free, but the rope held fast around her neck.

Death gazed with longing, and oh, how she wanted to follow. Just a few more breathless seconds and it would all go away. There would be peace.

The rope relaxed, and horror shuddered into her soul.

No, God, please no. Life flooded back into her lungs, and the darkness began to lift. She hadn't died. Fear doubled inside her, and still she refused to open her eyes. If she did, she knew what she would see-- what she would be forced to see for hours on end. But before that, would come the pain.

Now it would begin.

A scream tore through her consciousness.

Her eyes sprang open. She shoved herself upright on the sofa, gasping in the air with huge, greedy gulps. Where was she? Terror clutched her heart as she forced herself to look about the room. It required courage to look. Evil could emerge from the shadows, the rope dangling from its hand to begin again. It had happened before.

Her chin edged up until the room around her came into view.

On the wall, a silver photo frame greeted her, winking in the morning sunlight that filtered through the closed blinds covering the windows. It was the picture of two young men, posed side by side in the cap and gown attire of a graduation. Though younger than he was now, Madison recognized the lopsided grin. The other one she knew to be John, but Terry was the one she paid attention to. She focused on him, on the friendly eyes that smiled at her through the glass.
Terry Davis. This was his apartment. Last night, he had brought her here after the doctor’s visit and dinner with the Johanneses. He had sat on the coffee table and watched her sink beneath the comforter on the sofa. He had asked if she had food.

This was Terry's apartment. The thought calmed her until she breathed without trying.

The question from the night before made her smile inwardly. Did she have food? Of course she had food. He had stocked that kitchen so well, she could feed herself for the next two weeks without having to even think of running out.

Madison moved to her feet with a stiff grimace of pain. The trials of yesterday came flooding in, as did the realization that she still struggled with the same problems as before. There had been no pill to make it all go away, no treatment to make her suddenly normal.

What had the doctor said to take? It wasn't the same stuff Terry kept giving her, but it was on the list as something she could take for the pain. Remembering the bottle on the counter, Madison limped to the kitchen while trying not to pay attention to the need in her body. She cursed the need that the dragon created. It had given it to her with that dream, for after the choking, then came sex and those awful videos. She despised it with every fiber of her being, and yet, the need was there.

For the first real time since her freedom, the need was there. It discouraged her until she felt herself the worst person on the entire planet. Evil rubbed off onto others, didn't it? That made her just as evil as him. No, there was no him, just the Dragon. She swore to forget him so entirely, she called it by a different name. Even him was too close.

The monster, the evil, the Dragon. It all meant the same to Madison, for they all represented him.

She snatched up the bottle of ibuprofen and dumped two pills into her hand. Disgust had her stomach churning. How could she possibly ever hope to become normal? The very idea was laughable.

Despair tugged at her so hard she wobbled to the floor. She popped the pills into her mouth and forced them down. What had she been thinking? Better to go sit in a trash pile and wait for death, than to keep trying for something unreachable.

"Please, God," Madison prayed from Terry's kitchen floor, "I don't think I can do this. Nothing I do will make me be like everyone else. They don't have any dragons to fight, and I do. I can handle physical pain, but I don't think I can outlast the hurt on the inside. Hoping for
something better than what I’ve got, hurts. I didn’t know how much hope could hurt, but it
does. Couldn’t You make the hope go away?"

For several long minutes Madison waited for God to answer. She half expected a shining light to
descend from heaven, along with a glowing angel and a message straight from God. Such a thing
never happened to her before, but who knew if it might?

After ten long minutes of nothing, she got to her feet with a discouraged heart. What was the
use of even trying, when nothing really ever changed? She’d run, hadn’t she? She’d run for as
long as her money had lasted. Now what? A big fat nothing.

Depending on how she looked at it, the only good thing about now, was the fact the rope only
choked her in her dreams. Even Terry’s apartment couldn’t shield her from that. Oh, why hadn’t
God let her die when she had the chance?

Pulling herself into the living room, Madison sank onto the sofa. She stared at the printouts the
doctor had given her. It was no use. Too much was wrong that they couldn’t fix. The doctor
hadn’t said that, but why else had she been given all this paper? And the deeply troubling issue
the doctor had talked about, didn’t do any good either. A mental health professional wasn’t
going to solve anything, and neither was all this paper.

Madison flung them aside.

What did God want from her? She’d waited for an answer, and got nothing.

She crawled back into her comforter cocoon. Hell could freeze over, a monster earthquake
could open up and swallow every living person, and she would not care.

Well, every living person but Terry. She owed him something. Closing her eyes, Madison
pictured an earthquake with the hopeless mess of humanity being tossed into the trash but
Terry. He alone survived. Hell froze over and Terry stayed safe in Heaven with the angels. Now
that she thought about it, Terry wouldn’t be happy without his family, so John and Izzy and the
three girls popped through the clouds and greeted him. He stood there in a long white robe
with a harp and a halo, smiling that silly lopsided grin. Madison’s thoughts grew heavy, blurring
the edges of consciousness. How could Terry be in Heaven if he survived the earthquake?

The next thing she knew, someone was shaking her shoulder.

"Madison? Hey, come on, wake up."
When she opened her eyes, Terry came into focus. She blinked hard, trying to clear the sleep from her mind. "I thought you went home."

He smiled. "I did, but I came back. I believe you dropped these," he said, placing a small stack of printouts on her blanket.

She scooted upright, eyed him as he sat on the coffee table like he had last night. Without harp or halo, Terry didn't look as blissfully happy as he had in her dream.

"Do you know what time it is?" Terry nodded at the clock in the television cabinet. "Almost noon, and here you lay fast asleep. I let myself in when you didn't answer the door." He held up the house keys, and his eyes glanced about the room as though he knew something was wrong. When they came to rest on the sheets of paper, he frowned thoughtfully.

"Did you read them?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I gave my word."

"That's no reason. Men break their word all the time."

"Not me." Terry dropped the keys into the pocket of his navy blue slacks. "I talked myself out of coming any earlier because I didn't want to intrude. Now I'm beginning to think that might have been a mistake."

"Go home. Please, just go."

"Not until you tell me what's wrong."

She glared at him. How could he sit there in that pale blue polo shirt and ask such an obvious question?

"Everything's wrong. Here, look for yourself." She shoved the papers at him and he accepted them readily.

"Are you sure you want me to see this?"
She shrugged, turned her head but watched him out of the corner of her eye. He looked good. Need stirred inside her but she pushed it away. Even if she could, she would never give in to it willingly.

He let out a small breath. "Early stages of osteoarthritis of the hip. That’s what this says-- what most of these papers are about." He flipped to the back, and his brows raised. "Is this what makes it hurt to sit?" He handed her the sheet of paper in question and she hurriedly tucked it under the comforter. She'd forgotten about that.

"Someone really hurt you," Terry said, returning his eyes to the papers in his hand. "I'm just scanning this information, but I'm guessing you suffered an injury that affected your hip. It's why you have osteoarthritis." He looked up, and she nodded "yes." He sighed, looked back at the paper. "Why are you letting me see this?"

"Because it doesn't matter anymore."

"Of course it matters. This is what's hurting you, and it matters a lot."

"It doesn't matter to God."

The papers came down and he looked at her with an expression Madison couldn't name.

"Why do you say that?"

Suddenly quiet, Madison shrugged.

"I take it you've had a difficult morning."

"I guess."

"Bad dreams again?"

She stiffened. "How do you know about my dreams?"

Terry returned his attention to the papers. "You whimper in your sleep, that's how. You made a lot of noises on the couch yesterday-- all of them disturbing-- but the whimpering is what really got to me." He took out his phone, turned it on and began punching things in to it, while constantly referring to the printouts.

"What are you doing?"
"These came from a website. I want the URL."

"Why?"

"Because I want to study this further." He handed her the papers, then put the phone back into his pants pocket. "That other problem... it has nothing to do with your hip?"

"No." Madison squirmed beneath the blanket. Why did he have to see that? Why hadn't she remembered to shred that page into tiny pieces before letting Terry know precisely where it hurt?

"Did the same someone who hurt your hip, also injure--" Terry hesitated. "Did someone hurt you there, as well?"

"Do you have to know everything?" she asked.

"I guess not." He shrugged, but looked as though he needed an answer.

"It's yes, okay? Yes, the same someone hurt me there as well." She turned in the blanket, adjusting herself so she wouldn't have to stare at Terry. "You're very persistent."

"You're very secretive."

"Well, now you know. I suppose you think I asked for it."

"Why would I think that?" His voice grew more serious. He stood, came around the sofa and deliberately moved into her line of view. "Madison? Why would I possibly think that?"

"Because." She felt something hot sting her eyes, and hurried to smudge away the evidence. The words wouldn't come, though she tried very hard to make them.

He leaned forward, laid a hand over hers and gave a gentle pat. "You don't have to explain. I understand."

She jerked her hand away from his. "How could you possibly?"

A deeply pained look crept into Terry's eyes. He looked away, then turned back to her as though it took effort to speak. "I was a counselor at a crisis hotline for a while. I'm afraid I wasn't a very
good one, but I tried to help where I could. You aren’t the only one to have ever gone through this. It’s happened to others.”

She dug her thumbnail into the back of her hand until it drew blood, then relaxed in the calm it gave.

He paused. “This may be more about me than you want to know—”

“Then I’d rather you didn’t tell me.” Madison cut him off before he could finish. “I might not be the only one, but you couldn’t possibly know what I’ve been through.”

“I think I can guess.”

“No you can’t.”

His eyes measured her a moment.

“Have trouble sleeping?”

“Yes.”

“Do you wake up screaming?”

“Sometimes.”

“Does it happen while you’re awake?”

“No.” She shot him a triumphant smile. “You guessed wrong.”

“Those dreams— do you wake up wanting the abuser to finish what he started?”

The question cut her to the quick. Her eyes fell. She tucked her chin against her shoulder and attempted a careless shrug. “So what if I do? I can’t make it stop unless I degrade myself. I’d rather die, before I do that.”

“You could take a long walk to get it out of your system,” Terry said, turning to look at the still closed blinds. “It’s a nice day outside for a walk.”

“No thank you.”
"Come on, Madison. I saw enough of those printouts to know a little exercise would do your hip some good."

"No it won't."

To her everlasting irritation, he smiled. "How do you know, if you don't try?"

"It won't do any good, Terry. That doctor said my hip will eventually have to be replaced. Exercise won't save it."

"It might not," he said, clapping his hands together, "but if the doc says you walk, then you walk. Get up."

"No."

"Madison, this is for your own good."

"You can't make me."

He grinned. "I'm tempted to try."

When she shrank against the sofa, the grin vanished.

"Please try. There's a whole lot more to life than wishing you were dead."

"I don't wish that." She turned away, and Terry moved so she could not easily avoid him.

He crouched beside her, his face leveling with hers. "There's happiness waiting out there, lurking behind some corner, just waiting for Madison Crawford to come along and find it." He gave the comforter a small tug. "What do you say?"

"Go away, Terry. I want to sleep."

"You've been sleeping all morning. It's time to get up, wash your face, put on some of those new clothes and come outside. Have you had breakfast yet? Knowing you, you haven't eaten a bite all day." He gave her a knowing look. "It's almost lunch, and you have yet to eat breakfast. Am I right?"

"Terry, please go."
"Am I right?"

She groaned. "Yes, you're right."

"Then I'll fix lunch." Terry stood, turned toward the kitchen. "Put on your new clothes and try to enjoy what's left of the day."

"I don't want to enjoy anything."

He smiled. "Psalm one hundred and eighteen, verse twenty-four. Look it up."

"I don't have a Bible."

"What? No Bible? We'll have to fix that. But first you go change out of Agatha's clothes and put on some of your own. I'll have lunch ready in fifteen minutes."

"But, Terry--"

"Scoot." He nodded her toward the stairs. "Smile, Madison. It takes practice, so you'd better start now."

Defeated, Madison threw back the comforter as Terry disappeared into the kitchen. She pushed herself off the sofa with a groan. She wasn't going to smile, and if Terry didn't like it, too bad. How dare he barge in here, all butterflies and rainbows when she had her heart set on rain? The thought caught in her mind as she started up the staircase. This apartment belonged to him. If he wanted to barge, who was she to stop him?

Reaching the top of the stairs, Madison paused. How had he gotten her to talk about her injuries, her dreams, even her need? He had not made her feel the biting heat of shame when he spoke. Why? Terry didn't make any sense. Her injuries were the result of something she had not wanted, or asked for. She told him that. Did he really understand what that meant? She had been violated-- raped-- and he accepted it without making her feel she was to blame. Why didn't he question her word? Why didn't he blame her for making the Dragon do what it did?

Worry tightened Madison's stomach. How had he gotten her to say so much? That former crisis counselor was dangerous.

"Madison." Terry's voice carried down the length of the apartment, up the steps to the top stairs landing where she stood worrying. "I hope you're changing clothes up there. Lunch is almost ready."
She leaned over the banister. "You said fifteen minutes!"

"I was wrong. So sue me."

Huffing out a sigh, she pushed into the bathroom where Terry had left her shopping bags. She had insisted on staying out of the bedroom, and even her things were not to go in there. The bedroom was enemy territory.

She checked the bathroom door, made sure it was locked, then went to pick out some clothes from the bags. It felt good to have clothes that belonged to her, and not someone else. It made her feel as though she had an identity all her own. A gloriously independent sensation.

The ungrateful thing she had said about God not caring, bothered her. She had clothes, actual clothes to put on and live in. Her tummy didn't ache from hunger, and for the first time in a very long while, she hadn't been violated while alone with a man. He had every opportunity to take what he had salvaged, and use it however he wanted. But he had not.

No, God cared and it shamed her to remember how much He did care.

Madison pulled the pink T-shirt over her new jeans, choosing to leave it untucked to hide the fact the trousers were too big. In the mirror over the sink, she didn't look too bad. When she backed up to see her bottom half, the clothes didn't look ridiculous. When she stood on her tiptoes to see all of the reflection, they almost looked normal.

Almost, but not quite. Just like the skinny face that paled each time she caught her own expression in the mirror.

She felt haunted. Seeing herself churned up memories of private horror, so she avoided eye contact with herself whenever possible. Whenever she was aware of herself, aware of the Dragon waiting in the basement. She wished she had the broken mirror, the one she carried with her into Three Mile Bay. Small pieces of her-- just the eyes, the mouth, the hair, didn't stir bad memories like seeing all of her did. But the broken mirror had been left in the bag at the campground, and by now, most likely thrown out like so much trash.

Before she left the safety of the bathroom, she bowed her head and apologized to God. The future still baffled her courage, but at least the present seemed endurable. She could occupy the here and now, she could endure today. She could see herself surviving this day.
Taking the stairs one step at a time, she moved into the living room, then into the small dining area at the back of the apartment.

Terry sat at the table, eating from a plate of sandwiches. He made no comment when she sat down to the second plate on the opposite side.

She quietly prayed, then began nibbling at her food. Her plate had a glass of milk beside it, a small carton of yogurt. Terry just had sandwiches. Unnerved that she had more than he did, she slid the yogurt to him. He frowned, and shoved it back.

"Yogurt is good for you," he said.

"It's good for you too."

"I didn't get that for me."

After considering her plate, she pushed the glass of milk at him. He pushed it back.

"That has calcium."

"Do I need calcium?"

"All women need calcium."

In defeated silence, Madison drank her milk, spooned down the yogurt, then started in on her sandwich.

"I don't know everything you've been through," Terry said, "and I'm not going to pretend I know what's best for you. But what happens to you does matter. Your pain matters to God. I hope you know that."

"Yes, I know. I apologized to Him upstairs."

"Upstairs, upstairs? Or UPSTAIRS?"

"You mean Heaven? No, it was just upstairs."

"That's what I thought." Terry gave his typical lopsided smile. "Because if you're regularly going to Heaven and talking to God, you're more special than I thought."
She sighed deeply. "There's nothing special about me." She played with the remaining bite of her sandwich, wishing she was anyone but herself. Something hot stung her eyes, and she quickly brushed it away. "What's going to happen to me, Terry?"

"I don't know. What do you want to happen?"

With a sniff and a shrug, she pushed her plate away. "Whatever happens, I just want it to be normal."

"You know," he said, inclining his head in a confidential manner, "I hear normal is seriously overrated."

She blinked at him, and his smile slipped.

"That was a joke."

"Oh." She shrank back in the chair, and wondered if anyone had ever had as uncertain a future as hers.

* * * *

It took strength to sit at the table and watch Madison nibble at her food, then to see her push the rest of it away uneaten. It took fortitude to not sink beneath her pain each time he glimpsed it in her voice, her eyes. He hadn't been able to make her smile. Just one little curve of the lips would have given him comfort. But he hadn't been able to make her smile.

The short talk about dreams had scratched the surface of what Terry sensed had been a prolonged period of abuse. Madison was too profoundly different for it not to be the case. The more he remained in her presence, the greater his conviction that she had endured a private hell for quite some time. She looked at the world with large tremulous eyes, eyes unused to seeing the normalcy of life. The bad things she knew, even expected, but the good was a complete mystery to her.

She intrigued Terry. One moment she appeared jaded by sexual experience, the next, a trembling child, unsure of herself and those around her. A strong breeze would knock her over, and a harsh word from him would drive her into despair. For all of her hardened bravado, Terry sensed a tender soul lurking behind those long lashes.

When he stepped outside for the walk, it was the child who reluctantly joined him.
"Keep to the sidewalks in this part of town, and stay away from the main road," Terry said as they left the apartment complex behind. "I don't want to see you hitchhiking. If you want to go somewhere, either walk or call me. Can you drive?" He looked over his shoulder, saw her trudging behind in his old heavy coat. The sleeves had been rolled up around her wrists, like a child bundled against the cold.

"No, I can't drive." She sounded dull, a little discouraged and overwhelmed by her situation.

"Then call me when you can't walk, and I'll drive you. Okay?" He slowed until she caught up. "Okay?"

She gave a half-hearted shrug. "I guess, but it doesn't seem very practical."

"I don't care how it sounds, I don't want you hitchhiking again."

"I've never hitchhiked, all right? I took a bus to Three Mile Bay."

He stopped, turned to look at her in those upturned coat sleeves. "I still don't want you to ever get into a stranger's car. Got it?"

She nodded.

"The bus is all right, but the other thing is out of the question. The very thought of you going with some stranger, scares me." Terry started off again, checking both ways before he crossed the street with Madison in tow. He strangely felt like a parent responsible for a child. "We should have thought to get you a coat. And a Bible, you need a Bible." He paused, pulled out his cell phone to make a list, and she paused behind him. Her face was rosy from the cold breeze that swept through the bay, her nose a matching bright pink. "How old are you?" he asked as they began moving again.

Her nose scrunched against the direct glare of sunlight. "Thirty-four."

"You're kidding. I never would have guessed it."

"How old are you?" she asked in a voice that said, "You asked me, now it's your turn."

"I'm forty-seven."

"Really? That's old."
Terry decided not to comment.

"How come you aren't married like your friend, John?"

Terry darted a glance over his shoulder. "Who says everyone has to be married?"

He must have glared, for her chin tucked to her chest and she didn't look up. "I don't know. People just usually are," she mumbled.

"Did I yell at you?"

"No."

"Then why are you acting like I did?"

A shoulder lifted in an uncertain shrug, and she started lagging further behind.

Before Terry thought to slow down again, he recognized a familiar face. An old friend, Brian Donovan, an architect and close fishing buddy of Terry's, started down the sidewalk in their direction, a tiny terrier trotting before him on a thin leash.

Before Terry knew it, Madison had hidden herself behind Terry's back.

"Hey, Terry," Brian greeted with a broad smile. "Nice day for a walk."

"Hey, it sure is."

The dog strained against the leash, impatient to get on with his business.

"I'm supposed to be walking the dog," Brian laughed, "but the dog is walking me."

"Say 'Hi' to Dave for me."

"I'll do that." Brian gave an easy smile, then he saw Madison. The interest in his face was obvious. He looked like he wanted to ask Terry who the woman was, but the dog kept going down the street and Brian followed.

It figures, Terry mused, rounding the curb for the walk back to the apartment. A pretty face attracts attention.
Madison clung behind Terry's shoulder.

"I hate it when men do that."

"Do what?"

"Look at me like they want something."

"He was just being friendly, Madison."

She went silent, then asked, "Who's Dave?"

"Brian's teenage son. Brian's a widower, so it's just him and Dave now. And of course, Macho."

"Who?"

"The dog. I've known them for several years. In fact, they go to our church."

"Who-- the dog?"

"No, Brian and Dave." Terry cut across a filling station, then stepped back onto the sidewalk. "Would you like to attend church next Sunday? You could come with me and the family."

"Why? So I can meet Brian?"

"No, so you can fellowship with other Christians. There's a good church in this area, and since there is, you should come." He crossed the street, moved between two parked cars, then stepped onto the concrete paving near his building. It ran the distance of the complex, branching off to the different apartments and community laundry.

As they neared his door, Madison tugged at his arm. One look at her pale face, and Terry came to a complete stop.

"What is it? Why are you trembling again?"

She sucked in air as though trying to brace herself against passing out. He reached out to steady her, and she moved away.

"What is it, Madison?"
"Promise you're not taking me to church so I'll meet Brian. Promise you're not trying to marry me off so I won't bother you anymore."

The desperation in the request made Terry wish he had never said anything about Brian being a widower. He saw fear brimming in those gray eyes and realized he had put it there by his careless remark.

"In all honesty, I'm not trying to get rid of you. You're welcome to stay here for as long as you need."

"But I'm costing you money. I heard the receptionist at the medical center say what I cost you."

The thought popped into Terry's mind that she was costing him a whole lot more than a mere hundred dollars for a visit to the doctor. He already guessed they had x-rayed her hip, and who knew what other tests and procedures they had done? He expected additional bills to start coming in any day now.

"I can't pay you back, Terry."

"I know. I don't expect you to."

She stood there in that ridiculous coat, several sizes too large, looking very much lost and all by herself.

"Promise you're not trying to get rid of me? I wouldn't blame you if you were."

"I'm not. I promise."

Madison sniffed, ran the sleeve of his coat over her nose. "I don't have anyone else but you. Even if I was asked, I can't marry to put a roof over my head. I just can't. I'd rather die than have a man touch me like that."

"Calm down, you're not going to die, and no one is going to touch you. I simply thought you should come to church, that's all. As God is my witness, I had no ulterior motive than a simple church service with me and the family. That's it. You don't have to talk to Brian, or to anyone else, if you feel uncomfortable."

Her bottom lip quivered. "I'll be going with you?"

Terry nodded.
"Promise? Promise you won't leave me there?

"Madison, why would I do a thing like that?"

"I don't know why, just promise. Please, promise."

A sigh moved through Terry. "I won't leave you there. I promise."

The palpable relief on Madison's face spoke for her. She tightly hugged herself and continued to tremble.

His emotions already stretched to the limit, Terry felt helplessly weak.

He stepped to the door of his apartment and pulled keys from a pocket of his slacks. "How's your hip doing? Feel any better?"

She leaned forward against the wall, her forehead propped against dry brick and mortar. She gave a limp nod of her head, and when she spoke, emotional fatigue sounded in her voice.

"I don't want to be a burden, Terry. I'll try not to cost you more money."

Terry's heart squeezed until he was forced to look away. He wanted to tell her that what she had survived was likely more harrowing than anything yet to come, that her future was just beginning and to take heart. But Madison didn't need courage. She had enough. What she needed now was a friend.

He sucked in a breath, held it until he could speak without his voice cracking.

"You won't be alone, Madison. God is with you, and so am I."

Her eyes squeezed shut and a tear slid down her cheek.

He wanted to reach out and hug her, but knew it would likely scare Madison senseless. Instead, he bowed his head to her and spoke as softly as he could.

"God didn't expect you to go through this alone. That's why He sent you to Three Mile Bay. So I would find you."

"Do you really believe that?"
Her voice tremored so hard Terry wanted to weep. Knowing his tears were not what she needed, he forced himself to speak.

"I believe I'm supposed to help you. God is counting on me to be your friend, and I'll do my very best to not let Him, or you, down."

"I'm sorry," her words spilled out in a faint whisper.

He leaned in to hear better. "Sorry for what?"

"I was grouchy to you this afternoon. You didn't deserve that."

"You? Grouchy?" Terry feigned surprise, and was rewarded by a slight upturn of her lips. "Don't beat yourself up, Madison. I understand you're going through a tough time." Terry opened the door and waited for her to go inside. He thought of inviting her to dinner at the house, but decided against it.

After getting her settled on the sofa with dinner warming in the microwave, he left the apartment as soon as he could.

Grief welled inside him as he climbed into the jeep. Fearing she might get up and see him from the window, Terry pulled away before he freed the sorrow building in his soul. God, help him. He had to get better at this, for Madison was going to need a lot of help.

* * * *

Propping his feet on the desk, John leaned back in the chair with an open laptop. The Osaka account had closed that morning after a thumbs-up call from their client, and John was flying high. Another fulfilled contract to add to an ever-growing résumé, and another hefty paycheck to keep their business thriving. Thanks to John and Terry's custom software, their client had a solid anti-fraud system to combat against hackers and cyber-crime. Very important for a bank. With online banking fraud on the rise, establishments like the one in Osaka had good reason to worry.

When a bank fails to identify fraud before the transaction of money takes place, many get hurt, including the bank. The innocent man paying his bills online might not understand his computer has a virus to detect the keystrokes of his ID and password, or that the official looking website he just clicked on via an urgent email, wasn't his bank alerting him of an emergency with his account. No emergencies here, just a phishing scheme meant to rob you of your life savings.
When Mr. Innocent Man gets robbed, the bank suffers loss of trust. Since the bank can't rely on the watchfulness of its customers, it's up to the bank to be the guard dog.

And now the Nakamura Bank in Osaka had a guard dog with John and Terry's name on it. Woof.

John never considered himself a crime fighter, but in his own way, that's just what he and Terry had become. Sometimes, they were hired as consultants, or called in somewhere to troubleshoot a glitch laden network with security holes so big he could drive his minivan through without being detected. Kids included.

The custom software they had engineered for Osaka required a great deal of time, and very deep pockets for the amount of work that needed to be done. Money amply rewarded them for their effort, and now that the contract had closed, John was eager for some down time. Their hard-earned reputation was attracting the sharp interest of a substantial client in Singapore, but John knew if he and Terry didn't rest between jobs, they would burn out.

It was high time for some R&R, a little rest and relaxation.

With a tap of the trackpad, John checked his email. He didn't expect much more from Osaka, except the occasional question from an employee maintaining the network. He didn't expect much in his personal email, either. After all, if anyone-- business or personal-- was going to contact him about something vitally important, John expected them to call. They would call, wouldn't they?

Not this time.

Clutching the laptop, John dropped his feet from the desk. "Izumi? Hey, Izumi, get in here!"

After several moments, Izumi walked into the office with a spattered apron tied about her small waist. Three ponytailed girls crowded around her, each licking a spoon of brownie batter. When John had brought the triplets home from preschool that day, Izumi announced they would make brownies to celebrate the men's holiday.

Izumi shook her head in womanly disbelief. "I don't know why you always think I can hear you from the kitchen. You carry on a one sided conversation, then wonder why I don't answer your question. What is it?"

"I wasn't carrying on a conversation. I just wanted you to come."
"Well, I'm here, but you'd better make it quick. I've got two batches of brownies in the oven."

The smudge of chocolate on Izumi's cheek made John get up and plant a kiss on her mouth.

"John, I told you, I'm making brownies."

"Have I told you lately how much"-- John paused, saw Izumi's mouth curve into a playful smile that expected a compliment-- "how much I love brownies?"

The girls giggled and Izumi had no opportunity to pretend insult for John planted another kiss on his wife's lips.

"Guess what I have?" John asked, shielding the laptop screen from Izumi's view. "I'll give you three guesses."

Hands on her hips, Izumi gave him a patient look. "John, I really do have brownies in the oven."

"I know, I can smell them."

"I don't have time for games."

"Just one guess, Little Dove, and I'll tell you my surprise."

Momentarily forgetting the spoon, Ruthie perked up. "It's Christmas again?" she asked, venturing a guess of her own.

"Does this look like December to you?"

"No, but you said to guess, Daddy."

"Give me a realistic guess."

"We're getting a pony?"

"No. No ponies. I said realistic."

"A cat? Cats are realstick."

"That's realistic, and no, no cat. No fur-bearing animals in this house. Mommy has an allergy--you know that."
"John, I really must get back to the kitchen."

"Just one guess, Izumi. Come on, where's your playful spirit?"

"In the oven, getting ruined with the girls' brownies."

"I thought you said those were for Terry and me?"

"John."

"Okay, okay." He grinned, turned the laptop screen to Izumi. "Guess who's coming back to Three Mile Bay?"

* * * *

After parking his jeep in the garage, Terry headed for the house in an unhurried stride. A check in the rear view mirror had given him the confidence he needed. His eyes weren't too red. Unless someone looked closely, no one would know he spent the last fifteen minutes crying. Weeping made him feel ridiculous, but it also released the pent up emotion building inside him all afternoon. Tears mixed with prayer had done their quieting work, now only the shame of having broken down remained.

At least she had smiled. Before he left, that slight smile had given him comfort. She had decent food, a warm dry place to sleep, and she had smiled.

Terry decided not to let it go to his head. One weak smile in the midst of all that trembling shouldn't seem like a victory. But it was. No matter what she had gone through, that smile proved she still possessed the ability to hope. She was still trying, still hanging on with everything she had.

Instead of going into the house and facing John and Izumi, Terry shifted his way to the picnic table by the beach. He needed a few minutes of quiet. He sat down, pulled out his mobile phone and began punching in the few things he knew about Madison. She wasn't married, and had no children. She'd been sexually abused, most likely by one person-- a man. She had trouble sleeping, and sometimes woke up screaming. She had no one, and no one was looking for her. Not even the man. She hadn't hitchhiked, but arrived on a bus. And, he remembered, she had said Three Mile Bay was as far as her money would take her-- intimating that she had gotten on the bus of her own free will. There were other things Terry was certain he'd missed, but those were the highlights.
Just looking at the list made him weak. He slipped the phone back into his pocket, turned his eyes to the broad expanse of water lapping at the beach. Whoever did this to Madison ought to be hauled into the street and shot. Terry felt no pity for the animal who had reduced her to a trembling shadow. If there was any justice in the world, that pond-scum would know how it felt to be violated, himself.

A soft breeze ruffled Terry's hair, cooled his face and soothed his anger. A verse came to him, the words unclenching his fisted hands. "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." [Galatians 6:7] The words calmed Terry. Nothing got past God. Whoever had done this to Madison, would surely suffer. There was no such thing as evading God's justice, and whatever the man's punishment was, it would come, as surely as God was just.

It did make Terry wonder though. Who was this man? Was he hurting someone else, now that he no longer had Madison to abuse? Why wasn't he looking for her? Madison seemed sure of that fact. Terry thought it over. If he had abused someone over a long period, and that someone was walking around unafraid of retaliation, it had to mean either of two things. One, that the abuser felt the person he had hurt wouldn't say anything, or two, that the abuser was dead. Of course, it might also mean the creep was in prison and couldn't come after her. The possibilities pounded at Terry until he was forced to make it stop. He had to. He couldn't take it.

He had to keep going until God told him to give up. Madison needed someone. She was what mattered.

"Think about her," he breathed into the wind blowing from off the bay. "Just think about her."

"So you've spent the entire afternoon with Madison."

Terry turned to see John standing a few feet from the picnic table, his hands stuffed into the pockets of a dark green coat.

"I was hoping after you dropped by to check on Madison, that maybe you were visiting a fishing buddy and that's why you didn't come back for lunch. I should have known." John sauntered to the bench, dropped down beside Terry. "So. How's she doing?"

"Fine, I guess. I don't really know how to answer that question."

"Okay, how's this one? How are you doing?"

"John, what if Madison's abuser is walking around and hurting someone else?"
John hesitated. "Do you have a name?"

"No," Terry shook his head, "I just know that a man hurt her. I don't have names or places. I'm doing good that she's even talking to me."

"Then you don't have that responsibility, Terry. Not until you have enough information to go to the police with."

In frustration, Terry punched the air. "It makes me want to beat that man within an inch of his life. How can someone do that to another human being? How?"

"I guess," John said, "when you don't care about anyone but yourself, it makes you capable of just about anything, if you let it. Selfishness is like that."

"But how could he hurt Madison? She's such a sweet person, how could anyone do that to someone like her?"

"Is she sweet, Terry?"

Terry looked at John, and John gave a half shrug.

"Hey, Terry, I just met her. I haven't been around her as much as you. If you say she's sweet, I'll take your word for it. I just hope you're being careful."

"I am."

"Okay, just checking. She's sweet and you think she's pretty."

"I never said that."

"You did, Terry. We were watching the triplets fish, and you said you weren't helping Madison because she's pretty."

"Well, I'm not."

"I know. But my point is" -- John pulled his hands out of the pockets and leaned against the table-- "you think Madison is pretty."

"She is... I guess." Terry shrugged. "I try not to notice."
"But you think she's sweet?"

Terry sighed. "You're point is?"

"Don't fall in love with her, Terry. You're an honorable man-- I don't doubt that for a second, but she's--"

"Damaged?" Terry finished.

John nodded. "That's the word I was looking for. I'm not trying to run your life. I just want you to be--"

"I know, I know. Be careful." Terry puffed out a sigh. "Everyone wants me to be careful, but what about Madison?"

John looked out at the bay. "Are you in love with her?"

"No. I don't think I am." Terry considered the rough table top, the loose sand beneath his shoe. "When you're in love, do you know it? Or is it something that happens without you're being aware of it?"

John turned, gave Terry a half smile. "It can definitely sneak up on a guy. Which is why I'm warning you to be so careful."

"I'm not in love." Terry shook his head with an adamant sigh. "I'd know it if I were. Besides, she told me today that she'd rather die then let a man touch her in passion. I feel sorry for her, but nothing more."

For a long while, John didn't say anything. Even through the silence, Terry could hear the wheels turning in his friend's mind. John believed him-- Terry knew he did-- but the silence meant John was busily wondering if Terry really knew his own heart. Terry thought of arguing the point further, but felt too tired to make the effort. In the quiet of the fading evening, Terry thought about something Madison had said. It had struck a deep nerve, and hurt even now.

In thoughtful silence, Terry and John watched the sun slip beneath the horizon. No one spoke of dinner, each man lost in his own thoughts.

Then Terry broke the silence with a sigh. John looked at him, and Terry allowed himself to speak freely.
"Sometimes, I wish I could love someone the way you love Izzy. To know what that feels like for just a few minutes before I die. I'd like to know that feeling, to live it instead of watching everyone around me getting married and having children."

The look in John's face sobered even more. "You've never said that before. Why now?"

"I don't know." Terry pushed out a breath. "Yes, I do know. Madison asked me today why I'm not married like you."

"And what did you say?"

"What could I say? John, why aren't I? What's wrong with me?"

"Hey, hey now." John clasped Terry's shoulder. "There is nothing wrong with you. You're just shy, that's all."

"Yeah, I guess."

"How long have you felt this way?"

"I don't know. For a while I suppose. I'm getting older, and my chances keep getting slimmer."

"Then why don't you talk to Izumi? I'm sure she'd be glad to invite some of her unmarried friends over to the house for dinner. And then there's the singles group at church."

Terry shook his head. "Forget I ever mentioned it. I must be tired. Really, really tired to even talk like this."

John didn't move. "Do you want me to ask Izumi?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"No."

"Then I'll ask her."
Terry hesitated. He wanted desperately to turn down the offer, but couldn't. What if this was his last chance? On the other hand, what if he never had a chance to begin with?

John nodded without Terry's answer. "I'll ask her." He got up, started for the house and Terry called him back.

"Do me a favor?"

"Name it."

"Don't tell anyone that Izzy's doing this because I asked. It'd look like I couldn't speak for myself."

"I won't say a word of this conversation to anyone but Izumi."

"Okay." Terry sucked in several deep breaths. "Okay."

"If God wants you to get married," John said, as the moon glided over their heads, "then it'll happen, chronic shyness or not. If that's what you want, then God must have put that desire in you for a reason."

Terry stood up, nodded to his friend. "Thanks for not laughing at me."

"Would I laugh at a time like this?"

"Yes, that's why I'm thanking you."

"Then you're welcome."

The men stepped onto the walk leading to the house.

The sound of waves lapping at the shore underscored John's ironic chuckle. "You know, I came out here to find you so I could spill the beans about some big news I received this afternoon."

"Oh? What is it?" Terry looked to John and saw the white grin spread across John's face.

"AJ is coming home."
"Let the righteous be glad; let them rejoice before God: yea, let them exceedingly rejoice... [for] God setteth the solitary in families: He bringeth out those which [were] bound with chains..."
~ Psalm 68:3, 6 ~
Chapter Eight
Looking Ahead

"But I will hope continually, and will yet praise Thee more and more."
~ Psalm 71:14 ~

If Jake had been the one to spill the good news, he would have been thoughtful enough to call. But not Abby. She shot off an email and dumped the good news into their lap without any ability to remark or ask questions. That was Abby.

That night, Three Mile Bay called San Diego for more of the details that Abby had left out. Such as when they were arriving, and what had finally made up their mind to come. With everyone on an extension in separate rooms of the house in New York State, Abby fielded their questions from her living room in San Diego while Jake put Ricky to bed.

"We've given it a lot of thought, Dad. College has overall been a good experience for Jake, and I'm delighted he graduated with honors. I really am. I'm proud of him. His professors say he has real potential, but I have to admit it's been rough at times. Almost everyone here has been incredibly kind and supportive, so I don't have any right to complain."

"But something is wrong," Izumi spoke up. "I can hear it in your voice."

"It's not so much wrong, as it was never really great to begin with. He struggles through friendship with the others students, never really able to just relax and be himself. The others don't know how to treat him because everyone here knows he's on an advisory board for a state penitentiary. Even worse, they know why."

"How could they possibly know that, unless someone told them?"

"Mom, remember that newspaper clipping I emailed you after we got here? The piece from the local newspaper? It's made Jake a minor celebrity. Everyone is super polite and kind in the extreme-- you saw that when you were all down here for the graduation."

"Yes, the college president gave us an extensive tour of the campus. It was very impressive."

"See what I mean?" Abby groaned. "The college president-- who doesn't give out tours-- gave one to my family. It was because of Jake."

"But isn't that a good thing, Abby?"
"Mom, they won't let him fit in. They are kind, and I believe genuinely glad they can point to their student body and say such a person as this was able to graduate with honors. Jake makes them look good. I hate to put it so bluntly, but it's true. As for the more genuine friends, they often aren't able to cope with the trauma of knowing what happened to Jake. They feel awkward around him, like they just can't forget."

"Then why did you have to give so much information in the article?" John asked.

"They didn't get that from us, Dad. Remember the commission? They got a transcript of the entire thing, Jake's testimony included. They had more than enough to do their column. Like I said, I'm not complaining. The reporter was well-meaning, but I wish the story had never been run. Now that he's graduated, I think it's time we came home."

"What does Jake have to say about all this?" Terry asked.

"He won't admit to me that people treat him differently. In short, he pretends all day long that he's fine, that it doesn't matter, that he can take it with a grin and keep his mouth shut. I can't. Hold on a minute. Jake's coming. Pick up the extension in the living room, Baby."

"Dad, Mom-- Uncle Terry? Hey, did you get Abby's email?"

"We sure did." Terry summoned a happy tone, maintained it carefully for Jake's benefit. "It's fantastic news. When are you coming? We can have the little yellow house fixed up and ready for you by the time you arrive. There's the gas, electricity, water to turn on, and there's probably a foot of dust on the floor by now."

"Don't go to any trouble."

"It's no trouble, Jake. You're bringing our Abby home. We're more than happy to do it."

"Thanks, Uncle Terry."

Abby spoke up. "We have some things to take care of here, but we should be able to leave sometime this month. I don't know yet when we'll arrive. Dennis said I can keep the pay increase I received when coming to California-- that I'd earned it, and not to think that just because I'll be working from home again, that I'll be any less indispensable to him. It was kind of him to say."
"There's no shame in working from home," Terry said. "We saw 'Bassin' the Weeds with Dennis,' last week. You looked good, Abby. I keep telling people that our Abby is on television and they won't believe me until they see the show for themselves."

"Yeah, well." Abby hesitated. "I won't be making guest appearances anymore. I'll continue to write for the magazine and the website, keep my name in front of everyone. It'll be good."

Terry winced at the strained silence that followed. He heard a deep sigh, Jake's voice in the background.

"It won't hurt my career, Jake. We talked about it and we agreed."

"But you don't want to leave."

"Yes, I do. I want you to be happy. What's not good for you, is not good for me. Now say something so they won't worry."

"Dad, she doesn't want to leave."

"I don't know what to tell you, Jake. I'd love to have you guys back here-- you both know that."

"Jake, this is Mom. How do you feel about the move? Do you want to come home?"

"When you put it that way, Mom--"

"Please be honest with us, Jake. What do you want?"

The phone went silent.

"Tell her," Abby said in the background. "Mom, he wants to come, I know he does. He hasn't been happy here, and he wants to come home. I don't blame him for that."

"But you want to stay."

"Jake--"

"Abby, please. Don't do this because of me. You love it here, you know you do."
"That's enough, Jake. I've already given Dennis notice. We're going. Dad, Uncle Terry? If you could have the house ready for us, I'd really appreciate it. I'll let you know as soon as we have a better idea of when we should get there."

"But, Abby--"

"Jake, please. Not now. We'll talk about it later."

The conflicted joy in John's voice made Terry wince inwardly. He knew how John felt. "I know you'll both do what's best, Sweetheart. Take care of my grandson, give him a big hug and a kiss from all of us."

"And call us before you leave," Izumi said.

Terry wanted to add, "And tell us if you change your mind," but didn't. From what Abby had said, they needed to come home. He hated to think of her career slowing down, her leaving the successful show that had garnered so much acclaim and attention, but he had to credit Abby for putting Jake before herself.

The phones hung up, the three gathered in the living room to look at each other with thoughtful faces.

"Well." Izumi sat down on the couch with a sigh. "Sounds like they're coming."

"I pray God gives them wisdom, but I think you're right." John turned to Terry. "Tomorrow, bright and early, we need to get their house ready. When was the last time we checked their roof? It's the rainy season, and I don't want Ricky getting wet over a few leaks that could've been easily patched over."

"I don't remember the last time we checked," Terry answered, "but it's a good idea. At least they're coming back to a home that has no mortgage. They don't have any student loans to pay off, very little credit card debt, and they're healthy. I don't know what this might mean to Abby's career, but they're not in bad shape. In fact, I'd say it's a better than average start."

With an assenting nod, John gave Terry a light punch in the shoulder. "Leave it to you, to see the good in the bad."

"I'm only saying," Terry sat in the armchair while John settled on the couch beside Izumi, "they're not in bad shape. Abby still has her job with Dennis, and Jake can start pursuing his career from Three Mile Bay instead of California. They get to put down roots here, instead of somewhere
else. We should be grateful." Terry leaned over, pulled off his shoes and absently dumped sand onto the carpet. "We should be grateful-- and I am-- but I wish things had gone better for Jake."

"When we're supposed to do something, or be somewhere," John said as he dropped an arm around Izumi's shoulders, "then God will make a way for it to happen. I think this only proves God didn't intend for them to stay in San Diego indefinitely."

"Look who's seeing the good in the bad," Terry grinned.

An easy smile parted John's mouth. It faded into quiet thought, then a quick jerk of light. "Little Dove, Terry and I have a favor to ask."

"Oh no. Not that-- not now."

"Why not? Terry, I'm going to ask her before you turn chicken."

"I'm not turning chicken."

"Then pipe down so I can ask her." John tugged at a lock of Izumi's black hair. "Terry would like you to go through your mental list of single ladies from church, and maybe ask one of them to come to dinner some evening. You know, to get to know Terry better."

Doom crouched hidden behind the recliner. Terry could feel it waiting to pounce. "It's no big deal, Izzy. I was only thinking you might know of someone who wouldn't mind having dinner with us... with me."

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"You have never, in all the years I've known you, ever asked or even expressed a wish to find a wife. That's what this is about, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"You're serious?"

"Have I ever asked this before?"
The incredulity left Izumi’s face, though she still looked stunned. "I suppose I could look around. I could start with the singles’ group at church. Then there’s the women who aren’t group joiners."

"Make sure they’re young enough to have kids," John chuckled. "Of course, if he goes for an older woman, there’s always adoption."

"John, stop teasing. He’s turning red."

"Is he?" John turned to look at Terry. "Well, now, would you look at that."

"Okay, time to turn in," Terry moved to his feet, picked up his shoes and saw the jovial grin on his best friend’s face. "Did I make fun of you, when you were dating?"

The question met with a laughing shrug. "I never dated anyone but Izumi. And even then, it was only once. One lunch, and I was hooked."

If only, Terry thought, he could be as blessed as that. True, John had never dated anyone but Izumi. Also true they married soon after that first date. How could someone not even be looking for a wife, and then find her so quickly? So easily and without effort, fall in love and decide to get married? As Terry moved to his bedroom down the hall, he thought it over. God had pulled some strings, and Izzy had appeared for John. Maybe God would pull some strings and give him a wife, as well. Maybe it would be that easy.

* * * *

Even in the hurry to get the triplets to preschool on time, Terry didn’t forget. All through the kitchen morning cleanup, making his bed, brushing his teeth—spending quiet time with the Lord— he remembered. Not for a single moment did it slip his mind.

Before starting work on the little yellow house, he needed to visit Madison. Just a few minutes to check her, and he would be back.

While Izumi took the girls to preschool, and John shaved in the master bathroom with a Christian radio station blaring from the bathroom clock, Terry grabbed the jeep keys and headed for the front door. Now would be perfect.

He drove down the main road, turned into the complex, parked the jeep. All in a short amount of time. Just five minutes in the apartment, ten at most. Then back home to help John and Izzy get ready for AJ’s return.
The moment Terry stepped into the apartment, however, he knew something was wrong. The sofa sat empty, not even a pillow or blanket to show she had slept there.

"Madison?" He opened the living room blinds, looked about. "Madison, where are you?"

He checked the kitchen, found yesterday's dinner still sitting in the microwave.

Everything looked as he had left it.

He rounded into the dining area, into the living room. The television set was on, playing reruns of some cop show. He clicked it off. The half bath downstairs was empty.

His heart slammed against his ribs as he mounted the stairs. No one was in the second bathroom, and no way on God's green earth would she set foot in the bedroom. That left the storage room.

A twist on the handle proved what he already knew. Locked.

"Madison, I know you're in there. Open up."

As hard as Terry tried, he heard nothing. He fumbled for his key ring, glad he had the foresight to add the storage room to his set of keys for just such an occasion. He didn't trust the pain that had sent her in here the first time, and knew it might happen again.

His heart in his throat, he pushed open the door. Even before he saw her, he knew where to look.

Behind the boxes, wedged between file cabinets and old suitcases, he found Madison. She had dragged her bedding here, and made a nest for herself among old business records and fishing gear. He didn't see her, only the blonde wisp of hair and a sight hand with thin fingers showing from the edge of the comforter. From the look of it, she had jammed herself in there, crowded into an area too small for her and so much bedding.

He tugged at the corner of the comforter. Her hand didn't move. He crouched, lifted the edge and peered under. Two unseeing eyes stared up, but not at him. He shoved the blanket from off her head.

"Madison, look at me." He cupped her face between his hands, turned her toward him. "Look at me. Madison, I want you to look at me."
The eyes blinked. A moment more, and she saw him.

"You gave me quite a scare, Madison. What are you doing in here?"

She blinked.

"Stand up, if you can. I don't like the way you've stuffed yourself in there. Madison, do you hear me?" Not willing to wait for her to stand on her own, Terry hauled her into his arms. She gave a whimper of pain, but said nothing. Hair plastered to her face, sweat dampened her shirt, and Terry realized she had been under stress of some kind. He carried her to the bathroom, set her on the edge of the bathtub.

"Madison, I'd be grateful if you said something." He raised her chin. He recognized frenzied pain in those gray eyes, along with a hint of relief. "Say something, anything, just let me know you're all right." He stepped back, wondering if she would slide into the bathtub without him to hold her up. She stayed. Twisting on the sink faucet, Terry grabbed a hand towel, plunged it into water, then wrung it with a quick squeeze. "I wish you'd say something." She made no movement as he knelt on the tile. Using the wet towel, he patted her face, brushed the hair from her eyes. "Please, Madison. Speak to me."

She bowed her head, leaned into him until he had her gathered onto his lap. Her face hid against his shirt. He hugged her.

"What's wrong? What happened to trigger this?" His insistence made her tremble. "Calm down, calm down." He eased a hand over her head, smoothed back her hair and spoke in a quiet hush. "It's all right. I'm not angry."

Her breath shuddered, her hands fist at her sides.

"Madison. Are you having a flashback?"

No answer.

"Madison, you need to fight it. Can you hear me?" He moved her to the bathroom floor, snatched up the wet towel and patted her face. She fell back against the bathtub, slid onto her side and pulled herself into a tight fetal position. Her eyes remained wide open. Terry rubbed her shoulder as hard as he dared without leaving a bruise.
"Your name is Madison Crawford. You're thirty-four years old. You have blond hair and grey eyes. You like yogurt. Come on, Maddie, look at me. You are in my apartment. I'm Terry Davis, and you are in my apartment. There is no one here but me and you. Do you hear me?" Terry raised her chin so he could see her eyes. They blinked at him, though her jaw remained clenched.

"You're safe. No one is hurting you. It's okay to let yourself relax. Come on, give yourself permission to breathe. Maddie. Do you hear me? Breathe."

The command forced more air into her lungs. She sucked in a large breath, then gulped in more until the color started returning to her face.

"Thank God." Terry sat her up against the bathtub and continued to towel her cheeks. "Does this happen very often?"

She made no reply.

"Madison, I know you can hear me. Now answer the question."

Her voice sounded in a mumble. "I don't know."

"Why didn't you eat your dinner? I had it warming in the microwave. Remember? I told you when it beeped, to go into the kitchen and get your dinner. Why didn't you?"

"I don't know."

"Stop saying that. You do know."

"No, I don't."

"What triggered this? Did you have a bad dream?"

"I-- I don't know. Please, Terry, I don't know."

He dabbed the towel behind her neck. "The TV was on. I didn't turn it on, so you must have. Why didn't you get your dinner? What were you watching that made you forget?"

Her eyes focused on his shoulder. "I don't remember. Honest, I don't."

"Has this happened before?"
"I don't think so. Don't leave me. Please, don't leave me."

"Easy, there. I'm only going over to wet the towel in the sink. Okay?"

She nodded.

"I'm going to ask you a question, " Terry stood, moved to the sink, "and I'd appreciate an answer. How long have you been away from your abuser?"

"I don't know."

He came back to her, crouched, pressed the towel to her forehead. "Has it been weeks, months? Years?"

"Months. I think it's been months. Maybe even weeks-- I don't know."

The response gave Terry a grim idea of what she faced. The abuse had only just stopped for her-- making this part of the adjustment period where PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) could easily show itself. In fact, it probably just did. The trauma she endured was finding its teeth. Everyone handles traumatic situations differently, but for those who endured prolonged abuse, the damage is often more extensive, more profound. Terry knew this, understood it implicitly, for he had been there himself, in that dark soulful pit of misery someone had once dug for him. A return to normal was what Madison needed. But how could she be expected to return to a normal life, when she might very well have never had one in the first place?

She had to move on, there was no other choice. In the absence of fresh pain, there would only be memories; in the absence of creating new memories, there would only be the reliving of the past.

Terry took a deep breath. "Do you remember how old you were when it started?"

"No."

"Were you a child, or a grown woman?"

"I don't know."

"Think, Madison. When was the first time you were violated?"

"I don't know. " The agitation in her face became more obvious. She jerked away from the towel. "Stop it. I don't want you touching me."
Terry eased back, regained his feet and tried not to look directly into her eyes. It only made her mistrust worse, as though he were challenging her through brute force and not gentle persuasion. He turned his eyes on the bathroom tile. "How old, Madison? How old were you?"

"Seven. Maybe eight or nine, I don't know."

"Was it someone you knew? A friend of the family?"

"Don't do this, Terry. Don't. Just back off."

He took the warning literally and backed away. "You need help. The flashbacks and night terrors might go away for awhile, and then again, they might not. With childhood abuse survivors, they often come back."

She gave a weak mocking laugh. "Are you trying to encourage me? It's not working."

The jaded woman sat before him now, not the timid child. The child who needed a hug was nowhere to be seen.

"I'd like to take you to a friend of mine. He's a psychiatrist."

"I won't go."

"He helped someone very close to me, and I think he might be able to help you." Terry crouched, hoping to coax her to look at him. "You need to face what happened. It'll help the hurt go away."

"What are you-- a psychiatrist or something?"

"No, I'm not even a something. I'm trying to help you by giving the very best advice I can. Think about it."

He wanted to tell her about his own experience but held back. She had enough pain to deal with, and she had already said she didn't want to know.

Terry hung the towel to dry. "I'm not leaving you alone. Wash up, change into clean clothes and meet me downstairs."

"Where are you taking me? Not to that psychiatrist."
"No, I’m taking you home for the day."

* * * *

It might not be the brightest thing to do, to take Madison with him because he feared leaving her by herself. Staying in the apartment, however, was not an option he wanted to consider. As far as Terry understood, the flashback he witnessed that morning had been the first real one with her eyes wide open. It scared him. First the nightmares, now reliving a past trauma in the full light of day. She was going down a path he knew all too well.

He turned the jeep onto the main road, flicked a glance at the passenger riding silently beside him. The navy blue T-shirt and dark coat contrasted against her peaches and cream. It made her gray eyes a stormy blue, or at least it seemed that way to Terry.

A thumbnail dug against the back of her wrist.

"John and Izzy's girl is coming home." Terry snatched at the closest thought, held on and pushed it in front of her. "It's been four years since they lived in their house, so we're going to get it ready. They have a little boy-- Ricky. He's four. Has these enormous brown eyes. Get's them from his father." Terry cast a quick glance. The thumbnail kept working into her skin. "Our Abby's an expert fly caster. She's even become somewhat famous by being on her bosses' show. Ever hear of Dennis Beckman? He's a two-time MRD champion and son of the very well-known Archibald Beckman, who is also renowned for his skill with a fly rod. Please don't do that. You're hurting yourself."

"It's my wrist."

Terry slowed, turned off the road. He came to a stop in front of the house.

"I'll give you two choices. You can watch television, or help us clean Abby and Jake's house. What's it going to be?"

"I'm not ever watching TV again."

"Why? Because something on the screen triggered a bad memory?"

"I'm not watching TV anymore."

"Fine. Then you'll help us clean house." Terry unsnapped his seat belt, got out of the jeep while Madison did the same.
A car backfired on the main road. She jumped, pushed her way past Terry and ran to the front door. She stood there, huddled against the door and not even trying the handle.

"You can go in. It's not locked."

She went inside with him following, then hugged herself as she stood in the middle of the living room.

"Are you cold?" He knew better than to ask, when she still wore his heavy coat, but the impulse to wrap a blanket around her was strong. "The kids are at preschool, so it's just us grownups this morning. Go ahead and sit down. I'll be back in a moment." Terry started down the hall, then realized Madison was right behind him.

The backfire had frightened her.

He held up a hand to stop her from following any further. "I'm going into my bedroom. Stay in the hall, okay?"

She nodded, hugged herself and looked about with cautious wide eyes. The child had come back.

Breathing out a sigh, Terry went into his room and left the door open. He pulled off his coat, hung it in the closet, then stooped to fish some gloves from a pile of shoes.

"Hey, Terry?" John came striding into the bedroom. "We'll need the ladder in the garage. Would you haul it to AJ's house? I've got to run to the hardware store for some roofing cement."

"Sure."

Terry leaned back, watched John leave the bedroom and politely move past Madison in the hall. Terry winced when she scrambled to get out of John's way.

Terry hurried on the gloves, and tugged on a baseball cap.

"Oh, hi, Madison. I didn't know you were going to be with us today." Izumi's surprised voice came from the living room. Terry hustled into the hall. "If you get hot in that coat, you can take it off. The house is on the warm side."

When he stepped into the room, Madison was in the process of retreating into the kitchen.
He decided to ignore that.

"Izzy, I'm going outside for the ladder."

"All right. Oh. I guess she's coming with you."

Her chin down, and still hugging herself in a tight embrace, Madison stood behind him like a child waiting for direction.

He decided to ignore that, too.

Sunlight glinted off the bay, though from the threatening clouds scudding against the horizon, Terry knew the sunshine was for a limited time only. The forecast called for rain, so the roof was priority number one.

As he opened the wide door, light flooded into the garage. He skimmed the large hooks on the walls, the piles of storage boxes stacked alongside tool cabinets and a table saw.

"Let's see... ah, there it is." He lifted the ladder, then shouldered it to negotiate around Madison and get it outside.

A friendly toot sounded as a car pulled to a stop in front of the house. The driver got out, gave Terry a wave.

"Hey, Dick! What brings you here? How's Sara?"

"Good, she's good. Jake called me this morning with the good news. I thought I'd drop by to see if I could help you guys get their house ready. Well, who do you have here? Another helper?"

"Dick, I'd like you to meet Madison Crawford. She's using my apartment for awhile. Madison, this is Richard Doyle, a good friend of ours. So Jake called you?" Terry grinned. "It'll be good to have them back, won't it? Those short visits with Jake each time he flies in for those advisory board meetings just aren't enough. We barely get to say 'hi,' when he has to run to catch the flight back to California. We appreciate the way you've been paying for his traveling expenses."

"Don't mention it, please." Dick ran a hand over his balding head, adjusted his sunglasses. "After talking Jake into joining the board, it's the least I could do. I don't remember Jake ever mentioning your friend before."
"That's probably because we haven't told them about Madison yet. I'm in no hurry. They'll meet her soon enough when they get here. Madison, say 'hi' to Dick."

"Hi."

Dick gave her a polite nod. "I don't recall any Crawfords in the area. Does your family live nearby?"

Panicked silence overtook Madison. She looked to Terry for help.

"She's new to the area."

"I see. Well, I hope you enjoy Three Mile Bay. What do you do for a living?"

Another silent panicked look had Terry groaning inwardly. "She doesn't have a job yet, but we're going to solve that as soon as she regains her strength. And before you ask-- no, she's not from the hotline."

"You get that a lot, huh?" Dick chuckled. "You've got a big heart, Terry. I admire you for it, though I sometimes think you'd be better off like the rest of us. Sympathetic and bewildered."

"You're one to talk," Terry grinned. "If memory serves me right, I've seen your big heart in action a time or two. No bewilderment then. Testifying before that commission took guts." Terry nodded to Madison. "Dick's the former warden of the Watertown State Penitentiary, and a staunch advocate against prisoner abuse. Don't let his affable manner fool you. This is one tough man."

Dick laughed. "I wish I was, Terry. I wish I was. Let me give you a hand with that ladder."

The men carried the ladder the short distance to the little yellow house. Both homes had an enviable view of the bay, as did the other houses along the shore. On one side of the Johannes property was public land, on the other, the private property of neighbors. Most lived here on a seasonal basis, though some stayed all year round.

A year-round elderly neighbor waved to Terry, and Terry waved back. Terry placed the ladder against the yellow house.

Dick looked about the barren plant bed, and shook his head. "If it wasn't so late in the year, I'd buy some greenery to go right here. I remember flowers. Yellow, weren't they?"
"Yellow and white tulips," Terry nodded. "But it's not too late to plant tulip bulbs. In fact, this is the right time for it. Plant 'em now, watch 'em bloom in the Spring."

"Then Sara and I volunteer to buy the bulbs and get them planted. We'd like to do that for Jake and Abby."

Terry smiled. "I'll make sure they know who to thank when flowers start coming up next Spring."

"By any chance"-- Dick pulled off his sunglasses, and Terry saw worry in his eyes-- "did Jake say why he and Abby are moving back? Don't get me wrong, I'm delighted they're coming. But Jake said very little about why, and I'm worried something's wrong. Is their marriage all right? Ever since Jake asked if he could stay at my house because he and Abby were having problems of some sort, I've always been sensitive to the fact that Jake's past would add stress to any marriage. Let alone a young couple like them. I realize that happened a few years ago, but I can't help worrying. I hope you don't think I'm prying. He's like a son to me, and I just want to be sure everything's all right."

"I understand, Dick. You don't have to make any apologies. As far as I know, Abby and Jake are doing very well together. From what Abby told me, they're coming back because Jake has been having difficulty maintaining a low profile. After that article ran in the paper, people know he stood up to the system by testifying at the commission and admitting that he'd been raped in prison. That took courage, and in some peoples' eyes that makes him a hero."

"That's what'd I'd call him. A hero." Dick rubbed his forehead. "So he's having trouble with the notoriety. It's not good, but it's better than marriage trouble. I see him when he flies in for the meetings and I try to keep an eye on things, make sure he's doing all right. Sometimes, though, I have a feeling he doesn't want to burden me and keeps things to himself. Glad to hear the marriage is doing well." He gave a satisfied nod. "Very glad."

"Jake may be coming back," Terry said as John's car pulled up, "but he isn't coming home with his tail tucked between his legs. Jake accomplished what he set out to do-- he obtained a college education, and then exceeded our expectations by graduating with honors. We're very proud of him."

"So am I." Dick grinned like a proud father. "Sara and I were thinking-- that is, if you and the Johanneses don't object-- to throwing a welcome home party at our place when they get back. Of course, you may have other plans and I certainly wouldn't want to step on anyone's toes."
Terry gave him a pat on the shoulder. "You're a good friend, Dick. You haven't stepped on any toes. I'll talk it over with John and Izzy, but I'm sure they'll agree that Jake would appreciate a party at your place. He thinks a lot of you. Always have, and always will."

His eyes misting, Dick gave a grateful nod and put the sunglasses back on.

John came over and greeted Dick, then the men talked and debated about roof shingles, roofing nails, and whether or not it would rain that day. Through it all, Madison kept quiet, and remained as close to Terry as she could without getting too much in the way. Terry watched her step aside so others could pass, then retake her position behind or beside him, whichever was more convenient at the time. Terry couldn't decide whether her fright last night and this morning had anything to do with this current display of needy behavior, but he did sense that when among others, she felt safer with him, than without him. In this wide world of strangers and pain, Terry was her one earthly refuge.

She didn't need to say that, for him to feel it. The responsibility of it burdened him, but at the same time, he thanked God for the opportunity to really help someone, to hopefully make a lasting difference in someone's life. His other attempts hadn't gone very well, but Terry pinned his hopes on Madison. This one would be different. This one would be his first success story, something he could show Jesus and say, "See? You didn't put so much effort into me for nothing. This is all for You."

While John and Dick climbed about on the roof, patching shingles with roofing cement, Terry moved inside where Izumi was already hard at work.

"Need any help cleaning the fridge?" he asked, seeing her on her hands and knees and busily scrubbing its white interior.

A head with a red bandanna popped up to look at him. "Is the electricity on yet?" she asked.

Terry grinned. "I'll do that right now. Madison, why don't you grab that broom and start working on this floor?"

She looked at him, the broom, then back to him.

"It's a broom. You know how it works." Terry turned, left by the front door whistling a jingle from a TV commercial. One of those dumb tunes that some Madison Avenue ad exec probably stayed awake several days straight to dream up, in the hopes of inducing him to run out and buy hot dogs. Whatever. Terry didn't feel disposed to waste energy on the manipulations of advertising. AJ was coming home, his family was happy and healthy, and Madison was sweeping
the floor. Maybe she wasn't quite happy or very healthy, but a start's a start and he grasped at all the optimism he could.

He rounded the house, came to where the utilities connected to the building. He had to have faith that no matter what, God would be there. Tribulation works patience into people, and patience gives experience. With experience comes hope, and when God's love is shed into every corner of a trusting heart, that hope will not be ashamed.

Terry looked skyward.

Sunlight poured from between the clouds overhead, painting Three Mile Bay in glorious bright God rays. It felt as though Heaven itself was smiling down on them. Sure, there were problems. It was life, so there would always be problems, but today, Terry felt more buoyed by hope than usual.

The water and electricity turned on, Terry rapped at the window until Izumi's face appeared. "It's on," he shouted. She nodded, her face oddly grave as she waved him back into the house.

In that moment, Terry tensed. One thought raced through his mind as he jogged past the men on the ladder, through the enclosed porch, past the swing, through the front door and into the living room-- Madison.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Izumi met him, pointed to a corner of the room. There sat Madison, her knees raised and hugged close to her chest.

"Is she all right, Terry?" Worry sounded in Izumi's voice. "She swept the kitchen like you asked, then put down the broom and went to go sit in the corner."

"Is that all?" Terry smiled when Izumi looked at him with baffled surprise. Izumi could hardly know he was relieved Madison hadn't screamed, or done something more obvious to indicate she was reliving a past trauma. He nodded to Izumi. "She's had a difficult time, but she's going to be okay."

He left a concerned Izumi, crossed the room to where Madison sat crouched in the corner. A prayer thumped in his chest, a quick plea to Heaven that he hadn't been wrong about her not having a flashback. Her forehead rested against her knees, so he couldn't see her face.
"Hey, how about cleaning some windows?" When Madison didn't respond, he knelt, touched her shoulder. "Come on. It's not healthy to sit and stew by yourself. We could use your help washing those windows."

She shrugged his hand off.

"Do you want me to leave you alone?"

Her head nodded "yes."

"Okay. I'll leave you alone, but only for a few minutes." He started to straighten, stopped when her hand reached for his. He clasped her fingers, held them and forced himself to breathe.

"We're finished on the roof--" John strode inside, his voice cutting out the moment he saw Madison. Half a second later, Dick appeared at John's side. Dick pulled off the sunglasses and stared, though Terry was only vaguely aware of their presence.

The slender hand kept trembling, kept gripping his. He stroked the fingers and did his best to remind her that she wasn't alone. She had a friend.

She whispered his name. "Terry."

"I'm right here. Try to relax, Maddie. I'm right here."

"Don't leave."

"I won't." He bowed his head, began to pray in a low voice so she could hear. "Dear Heavenly Father, we need some help today. Sometimes our hearts become overwhelmed, and that's when we cry to You. From the end of the earth, we will cry unto You when our hearts are overwhelmed. Lead us to the high rock, so the waters will not overtake us. We trust in Your mercy. Give us a way to escape that we may be able to bear this. And comfort Madison. Please, God, give her comfort. In Jesus' name, amen."

Her head came up as the prayer ended, and Terry saw the dust smudges on her cheek. He pulled out a handkerchief, wiped them away and gave her a smile.

"Were you remembering?" he asked.

She shook her head "no." "I feel so sad."
"Sad about what?"

Her eyes looked about the room, took in Izumi, John, Dick, then himself. "Abby and Jake are so blessed to have all this. They have a home, family and friends who worry about them. I didn't know."

He squeezed her hand, coaxed her to continue.

"I didn't know I was missing out on so much."

The words punched Terry in the chest. He couldn't speak. All he could do was hold her hand, offer his encouragement and stay with her while she rode out the sadness. He couldn't tell her that the past few days she had spent in Three Mile Bay were nothing, compared to the blessings that went on all year round. The everyday joy of watching children grow up, the laughter and tears invested in those small little lives. And the love, oh what love surrounded them as they grew.

As he knelt there, holding Madison's hand, he thought of his own childhood. Since there was a very real danger of reliving the past attached to those memories, he rarely let himself think back. The fears of a boy returned to him, the pain smeared with deep shame. The stain on his memory that would never go away. It clutched him, and he forced his thoughts to focus on Madison.

How could he tell her that he knew exactly what she felt? That even now, he sometimes felt as though the normal ones were passing him by and only he was left alone to watch the parade. Belonging to someone else's family had to be enough for him. Until God gave him more, he must wait and hope and pray.

Would there ever be more than the hoping? What if this was all there ever would be?

A stroke on the back of his hand woke Terry from the pain. He looked up to see stormy gray eyes, pink lips tipped into a concerned smile.

"I made you sad. I didn't mean to." She meant those words. Terry could feel the realness of them in her voice, in the hand tightly clasping his. And suddenly he was the one being comforted. "If you still want me to, I'll wash the windows."

He smiled, felt the sadness lift from him bit by bit until a soft pleasing quiet settled into his soul.

He helped her up, led her to the cabinet beneath the kitchen sink where the cleaning supplies were stored. Fearing the job of cleaning every window in the house would be too much for her,
Terry assigned her the inside glass, and he took the outside. The job could be finished before lunch, if they worked together.

* * * *

The moment Terry left with Madison to find the window cleaner, John turned to Izumi with a hurried whisper. "He's getting too close to her. Make a list of possibles, then start inviting them to dinner until Terry finds the right one."

"Something's definitely going on between those two," Dick added helpfully.

"That's why we need to find someone soon." John gave a firm nod. "Before Terry gets hurt."

Izumi sighed. Men were sometimes a little dense. Just make a list. Simple. A list of possibles. As if they were going to kick tires and check mileage at some car lot. Invite them one by one to dinner. Oh, John. Izumi found no words to voice her bemused horror.

To keep herself from speaking her mind before she had an idea of what to do, she returned to the kitchen to repaper the cupboards. The task of finding Terry a helpmate would not be simple. There were not an unlimited number of single women at church to pick from. Still, there were enough to start giving it some careful thought. To be good enough for their Terry, she had to be someone special. Someone who didn't have Madison's nightmarish past, someone to comfort Terry in those quiet moments when he walked alone. Someone gentle, caring, appreciative of their sweet, big-hearted Terry's special qualities.

It pleased Izumi to wonder if one of the women she knew at church was destined to become Terry's wife. The more she thought about it, the more hopeful she became.

If Heaven intended someone from their congregation for Terry, Izumi would find her.

"As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I [God] comfort you..."  
~ Isaiah 66:13 ~

"Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God."
~ 2 Corinthians 1:4 ~
Chapter Nine
Reaching for Hope

"Pleasant words are as an honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones."
~ Proverbs 16:24 ~

Having not eaten since yesterday’s lunch, Madison had little energy to offer the cleaning effort. First she faded into silence, then began to droop so much Terry made her sit down until he realized her problem. It took effort to calm down and head back to the Johanneses’ house to make an early lunch for her. He reproached himself for letting her go so long without eating, for not being more careful when it came to food and Madison. His thoughts came as rapidly as his stride, and it wasn’t until he reached the Johanneses’ front door that he thought to look back.

His heart twisted when he saw Madison limping to catch up.

Tuna sandwiches. He would make lunch and focus on something else besides the wounded puppy.

Slapping together generous slices of bread, tuna, and mayo, he made enough to satisfy his own hunger, as well as hers. He settled at the kitchen table while Madison stared at her meal. He hoped getting her to eat was not going to become a daily habit.

A sturdy look on his part, and she picked up her sandwich and began nibbling like a rabbit in someone else’s garden. No wonder she looked so thin. She seemed unused to the concept of regular meals, and he suspicioned she was accustomed to starvation of some sort.

It made him think. Her first memory of abuse was somewhere between the ages of seven and nine, and she had suffered acutely up until a few weeks or months ago. The evidence pointed heavily to a family member being the abuser.

Though it grieved Terry to even think such a thing, he could not change facts or what he saw with his own eyes. No friend of the family could have such continual access for so long a time, without it being a close relative. Horror and disgust churned in Terry’s stomach until even the taste of his tuna sandwich turned bitter. He forced himself to eat. Little good would come from lingering too long over the past, especially when it picked the scabs of his own traumatic childhood. Better to not think too much, than to let the pain ooze out and overtake him again.

He shoved away from the table, and did it with such force, Madison jumped at least an inch off her chair. Doing his best to ignore it, Terry grabbed his hat from off the table.
"You can finish the inside windows after you're done eating. Okay?"

She nodded hurriedly.

"I'll be outside if you need me. And stop looking so frightened-- all I did was get up." He put on the work gloves while trying to force back the visceral sensation of his step-father pushing him down, the heavy breathing that never failed to sear Terry with deep-rooted shame. "You wanted this," sounded sharply in his brain, until the echoes of it reached his heart. His knees buckled, and for a moment, he had to brace himself against the kitchen chair.

Not again, Lord. Please, don't let him win again.

The sound of someone choking made Terry look up. Madison was stuffing the sandwich down her throat so she could leave with him.

"Hey," he let go of the chair, "slow down." He moved to her, picked up a glass of water and pushed it into trembling hands. "I won't leave until you're done, so slow down."

Water spilled from around her mouth, dribbled down her chin and onto her shirt. She placed the cup on the table, jerked the coat on as though he might leave without her.

"You've got crumbs." Terry touched his cheek, and nodded when she swiped her mouth with the sleeve of his old coat. "Good enough. Let's get out of here."

Moments away from leaving, John, Izumi, and Dick came inside. Dick was laughing over something John had said, and John sounded deep in discussion as they pulled off gloves and hats, relating some incident of Abby as a little girl.

Then John saw Terry, and John's face turned sober.

For the life of Terry, he could never figure out how his friend managed to tell when he was having a rough time. Did he talk different, look different? Maybe he wore an invisible sign that only John could see. Whatever it was, his friend's perception always baffled him.

"There's not much left to do in the house, if that's where you're going. Dick and I finished the windows, and I even cleaned the bathroom-- didn't I, Izumi?"

Izumi arched an eyebrow. "You scrubbed the toilet bowl."
"So? That counts." John cleared his throat, pressed on as Izumi went into the kitchen to start lunch. "The gas company will be out here sometime tomorrow, so the house is almost ready for Abby and Jake."

Dick grinned hugely. "Sara and I will come by this weekend and plant those tulips. After seeing their old appliances, I'm planning to get them a new washer and dryer. There's bound to be a lot of laundry with a four-year-old running about."

Eyes fixed on John, Terry almost missed the generosity of Dick's offer. "That's kind of you. I'm sure they'll appreciate it."

"Anything to help out," Dick said, as he took a seat on the couch. "Looks like it's about to rain. At least it held off long enough to get the roof patched."

John nodded to Terry. "Still going out?"

"I was thinking I would. Do you want me to pick up the triplets from preschool?"

"No, I'll do it right after lunch."

Terry pulled off his gloves, determined to get out of the house and do something to keep his mind off the pain and the puppy sadness hanging about him. "If you don't need me, I'll run some errands before it starts raining."

A knowing flicker of grief touched John's mouth. His eyes spoke clearly, "I think you're running."

"By the looks of those clouds, it'll start raining any minute now," Dick said with a laugh. "Better take an umbrella, or you'll get caught in a downpour."

"I'd also suggest you take a coat," John added. "It gets colder when you're wet."

"I won't get wet."

"Then take an umbrella."

"I won't need one."

"What about her? Won't she get wet?"
At the reminder, Terry turned to Madison. The automatic assumption that she was going with him, caused Terry a wincing pang of chagrin. Behavior similar to this had been the teasing reason he had christened Abby and Jake, “AJ.” The last thing he wanted was an abbreviation of himself. Unfair? Perhaps. Embarrassing to a grown man nearing fifty? Absolutely.

Even so, John and Terry both knew Madison was coming with him.

"I'll get an umbrella." Feeling deflated, Terry motioned for her to stay put. As he moved down the hall, into his room, John followed in concerned silence. Terry knew better than to think his friend’s concern lay in coats and umbrellas. He bit back a smile, tugged a coat from his closet while John stewed in unaccustomed restlessness.

"We'll wait dinner for you."

"There's no need." Terry zipped up his coat. "If I think I'll be late, I'll call ahead of time."

John folded his arms. "Your important errands came up all of a sudden."

"I never said they were important."

"You never said they weren't."

The men stared at each other.

"I'm fine, John."

"If you say so." After a moment, John cracked a smile. "Okay, I'll back off."

"Hey, I'm not complaining." Terry bent to retie his shoelace. "I appreciate the concern."

John only grinned and shook his head. "Are you sure you don't want us to wait dinner for you?"

"Nah. I should be home long before then."

"Got your umbrella?"

"Ah, knew I forgot something." Terry returned to the closet while John chuckled in the background.
Both men moved into the living room, but the moment Terry saw Madison crowded into a far corner, pity stabbed his already wincing heart. On the couch, Dick talked away, as though nothing and no one--especially in that room--had a problem in the world. To Dick’s credit, his conversation didn’t seem to require any response from the woman huddled in the corner.

The relief in Dick’s face when Terry joined them, was unmistakable. No, the former prison warden hadn’t missed those telltale signs--the inability to look someone in the eye, the aversion to close contact, even the trembling. Unlike Jake, however, this one trembled like a chihuahua on caffeine. Terry coaxed Madison from the corner, then called goodbye over his shoulder as he took her outside.

Before he had the umbrella out, a wet splash landed on Terry’s chin. He tugged her to the garage where his jeep was parked.

"Here, hold this." He placed the closed umbrella into her hand, then pulled out his keys to unlock the garage. The drops came more frequent, pelting the side of the building as Terry raised the garage door.

Eyes closed, head tilted back, Madison opened her mouth and let a raindrop land on her tongue. Her lips curved into a smile. She caught another, and something very much like a giggle bubbled up from somewhere deep inside her. Rain splattered her face, dripped from her eyelashes like ornaments hanging from a Christmas tree. Terry’s breath caught. When she smiled--really smiled--she lit up like a Christmas tree, all sparkly lights and animation. Her hand raised to catch the rain, her face full of wonder at such a simple and ordinary moment.

Her natural joy marveled Terry.

"Isn’t it pretty?" she asked, braving the dark skies with her upturned face. "Oh, Terry, isn’t it pretty?"

"After what happened at the campground, I’d think you’d be frightened of the rain."

Her eyes moved to his. They held for a moment before darting away. "Now is different. The rain is different when you’re safe." When he gave no immediate reply, her eyes flicked to him before retreating behind generous lashes.

"Are you safe, Madison? Do you feel safe with me?"

"Yes, Terry."
"I'm glad then." He sucked in the breath he'd been holding, released it and let in the joy that
Madison had found and then shared with him. Like someone reaching for hope, he followed her
example and held out a hand to the falling raindrops. Some splashed between his fingers, but
others he caught in his palm. They joined up with other drops until they ran down his wrist and
soaked into his shirtsleeve.

"It's coming down heavy now." Terry moved Madison into the jeep before she caught cold and
his happy feeling disappeared.

With Madison buckled into the passenger seat, Terry pulled away from the garage. He got out,
lowered the door, locked the garage, then jumped back into the vehicle as rain poured into the
bay like someone emptying water from a boot. It pelted the roof, splashed down the windshield
in small rivers as the wipers swished back and forth.

Terry switched on the heater. "If you get cold, let me know."

She blinked at him, then turned timid eyes to the downpour beating against the window as he
pulled onto the main road. With a hard rain like this one, not even Madison could stand against
the onslaught and declare how pretty it was to catch a few drops on her tongue.

* * * *

It quietly stunned her to see the weather turn so harsh and without warning. To Terry, it seemed
to come as no great surprise, though she wondered where was he going. Why didn't he tell her?

Madison forced herself to sit back in the seat and breathe. Did it really matter where they went,
as long as he took her with him? The thought of sitting in the apartment by herself, quieted
further anxious thoughts about their destination. This unknown was to be preferred to the
other, to the ghosts that seemed to hunt her whenever she was by herself. The thought of last
night gave her chills. Whatever had happened, it made her frightened to be alone.

God, please help me. I don't think I'm going to make it.

She zipped her coat, pulled the collar up around her chin and tried to ignore the heat behind
her eyes. Rain covered the road now, turning the pavement into a thinly veiled mirror of the sky.
Terry turned up the heater. He said nothing as he drove, and though Madison was grateful for
the warmth, she would have preferred his talk to his silence.

When they pulled into the broad parking lot for MegaMart, she unfastened her seat belt and
waited as Terry found a parking space close to the entrance. People braved the rain as best they
could, most hurrying along beneath the shelter of an umbrella. Terry got out, rounded the hood with his black umbrella, and Madison gladly took shelter with him. Despite the wild torrent, the rain seemed to take on a friendly glow as long as she was with Terry.

Inside the store, she struggled to remember the friendly feeling and hold on to it. People were everywhere, getting out of the rain and doing their shopping at the same time. Madison could hear them, watch their feet as they moved past the grocery basket Terry pushed. Did Terry notice one of the wheels squeaked? She concentrated on the squeak, then felt someone take her hand. It was Terry.

"Hold onto the basket so I don't lose you, all right?"

She nodded.

Terry seemed to know where he was going. She followed the squeaky wheel, doing her best to keep up with the cart and stay out of the way of people who jostled past her.

"I've been reading that website your doctor referred you to." It was Terry's voice that spoke, and in the midst of the hurry bustle, it came as a welcome comfort."Your doctor's first pick of pain reliever was not ibuprofen, but acetaminophen. I didn't have any at the apartment, so we'll pick some up while we're here. Your limp is getting worse. Are you tired?"

She shook her head "no."

"Tell me when you are, and I'll find a bench so you can rest." The cart moved down an aisle, and Terry paused to put something in the basket. A package of brightly colored construction paper. Next came non-toxic glue sticks, bright crayons, a child friendly marker set, a large box of assorted stickers with princess themes, more with flowers and hearts. To this was added a box of multi colored pipe cleaners. None of it made any sense to Madison, although the stickers had caught her attention.

The cart pushed past a display of notebooks, and she lingered long enough to yearn for a thick, spiral-bound notebook with pastel flowers on the cover.

She bit her lip when Terry added it to the basket. He tossed in a pack of ballpoint pens, then moved the cart into the next aisle. For the next several minutes, all she could think about was the notebook. Why had he picked it up? Who was it for? Men didn't like flowers decorating their things, but maybe Terry was different. After all, he had picked up those stickers.
A bottle of acetaminophen found its way into the basket, and Madison didn’t have to ask who it was for. But that notebook... how she longed to have someplace of her own where she could spill her thoughts into written words. Terry wouldn’t like flowers. He’d grow tired of it, and then maybe she could ask for it and he wouldn’t care. It had a stiff back for writing purposes-- she’d seen it when Terry put it into the cart and it had held perfectly flat. So perfect.

A pink toothbrush tossed into the basket, followed by toothpaste and a bottle of mouthwash. A compact gray purse with a long shoulder strap and matching wallet, even though she had nothing to put into it. Terry assured her that given enough time, she would need these things, so into the cart they went. And oh, that notebook. If only...

"Madison?"

At the sound of her name, she looked up from the basket with the squeaky wheel and prayed Terry would give her the notebook if she asked now.

"Which of these brands--" Terry gestured to the shelving on the store wall-- "do you usually use?"

She moved closer, and saw they were sanitary pads. "It’s okay." She moved back to the cart, "I don’t use any, Terry."

"You don’t? You use tampons, instead?"

Her face heating with embarrassment, she shook her head, "no."

"Well then, you must use pads. Pick your usual brand and let’s get out of this aisle."

Madison looked at the floor-to-ceiling shelves, all crowded together with bright tags and numbers with dollar signs. She looked back to Terry, and saw the understanding turn on in his mind.

"You don’t use any of this stuff. At all."

She shook her head."

"Then what do you do when your period comes?"

Shame heated her face. She lifted a shoulder in a half shrug and prayed he would forget his question.
"Dear God." Terry blew out a stiff breath. "Your abuser wouldn't let you have these things."

It wasn't a question, so Madison didn't answer. Her past must be terribly obvious, for him to make a guess and be so absolutely correct.

"Okay, this will be a first for you. You have the general idea of what these things do, right?" He moved the cart so a customer could reach the shelf beside Madison. He waited a moment for the woman to leave, then repeated the question.

Madison nodded. She saw the commercials on TV. She knew what they were for, and also knew she couldn't have them.

Terry nudged her with the cart. "Pick one. This isn't your old life, so decide what you need and put it into the cart."

Why couldn't Terry forget and just move on? She wouldn't ask for the notebook. He could keep it, pretty flowers and all.

"Madison? Go on."

Her eyes glossed over the shelves again, then flicked back to him.

"Can't you decide?" he asked.

She shook her head vigorously, "no."

"Well, they can't all be that different from each other." Terry picked up a soft white plastic bag, turned it over and looked at the picture with some text beside it. "You don't need this one." He placed it back, gave a quick smile. "Your bladder control's fine. Right?"

She shrank back a step, and he grasped her hand and placed it back on the cart.

"Okay, I'm calling home." Terry pulled out his cell phone, punched the screen then held the device to his ear as he waited. "Hey, Izzy? We need some advice. Which brand of sanitary pads do you use?"

Biting her lip, Madison watched as Terry tried to tactfully explain the problem. If only she'd just picked one, like Terry wanted. Now even Izzy would know. Let them shake their heads all they wanted, but Madison would never tell them she had to use wads of toilet paper to make up for what other women took for granted.
"What do you mean the one with some pink on the front?" Terry looked helplessly at the rows of small boxes and bags lined up before him. "They all have some pink on the front." A woman reached around Terry, pulled something from the shelf and gave him an odd look as he tried to get Izumi to describe, EXACTLY, what the box looked like. He rummaged, read labels out loud until breathing a sigh of relief and tossing a white plastic bundle into the basket. He thanked Izumi, then returned the phone to his pocket. "We'll get you several, so this won't come up again for a very long time." After nearly emptying the display, Terry pushed on.

"Did she laugh?" Madison asked.

"Of course not. She understood." Terry checked the list on his cell phone. "The rest of this I'll buy over the Internet. Come on, we're ready for the checkout."

They passed one aisle after another, before Terry pulled to a stop. He stepped away from the cart, returned and dropped a hairbrush and an oval hand mirror into the basket. "Now we're ready."

As she stood in the checkout line with Terry, her eye wandered back to the notebook.

"When we get home," Terry said, advancing the cart a few feet, "I want you to take some of this acetaminophen. Your limp is worse, and I'm guessing it's because you're tired. Did I make you walk too far? Maddie, are you listening?"

She looked up at him, nodded her head "yes."

"Get the umbrella out of the cart." Terry started placing things onto the checkout conveyor, then reached into his pocket and pulled out a wallet. "You're having dinner at our place. Okay?"

She nodded, kept her eye on the notebook as it moved past the cashier and into a shopping bag. Terry placed the bags into the grocery cart, then accepted a receipt from the cashier. The squeaky wheel moved to the large glass entrance doors. Terry opened the umbrella, placed it into her hand with the admonition to stay close, then pushed off into the rain.

She held the umbrella over Terry, not paying attention to the wet sliding down her neck as she tried to keep it centered over him. When he unlocked the jeep, she refused to get in and kept the umbrella perched over his head as he loaded the vehicle.

"Get in," he said, taking the umbrella from her, and shielding her as she climbed into the passenger side of the jeep. He shut the door, shutting out the rain and the gusts of wind that drove the rain even deeper beneath her collar.
Terry jumped into the jeep, folded away the umbrella, and shut the door with a laughing chuckle. "It's really coming down, isn't it? Hey, you got your feet wet. You're supposed to walk *around* the puddles, not through them." He started the engine. "When we get home, I'll ask Izzy to lend you some dry socks."

The windshield wipers swooshed back and forth, and all she could think about was the notebook. It had flowers. Terry wouldn't like it.

"How's your hip?"

Madison didn't hear the question, and when she didn't answer, Terry slipped into silence. On the drive home, the only sounds to be heard were the swish of the wipers, the beat of the rain, and the cascading spray of passing cars.

* * * *

Even before Izumi heard the familiar voice in the living room, she knew who it was. She could hardly be kept in doubt, for the triplets giggled and laughed as they only did for Terry. Setting aside her Bible, Izumi climbed off the bed while rain continued to pound the roof with such unrelenting force, it made her glad Terry was home. John appeared from the office, met her as she moved down the hall.

"Sounds like he's bought the girls some goodies," John smiled.

It hardly surprised Izumi that when they reached the living room, three little girls were hovering over wet grocery bags deposited on the carpet. They tugged at looped handles, trying to get a better look at what was inside, but polite enough to contain their curiosity until given permission from Terry. From the eager glances passing between the girls, Izumi knew that they knew the contents were meant for them.

Terry burst into the house, dropped more bags onto the floor, then jogged back to the jeep parked in front of the house. As John went to help, Izumi noticed Madison, shy, wet, and shrugged against the wall beside the door.

"You poor dear." Izumi went to her, coaxed her past the crowd of girls, and down the hall to the master bedroom. Before Izumi had managed to get a step further, Madison began to struggle against the urge to come inside and dry off in the bathroom. The woman shook her head and panicked so noticeably, Izumi let her stand in the hall while she went inside to locate a dry pair of socks and a hairdryer.
Izumi took her into the kitchen, plugged the hairdryer in beside the coffee maker, and started drying Madison's hair like she was one of her daughters. The only difference being Madison had to sit in a chair so Izumi could reach all that wet hair.

"Put on your socks, like a good girl. That's it. Why didn't Terry take better care of you than this? Here, take the hairdryer and warm the legs of your jeans. They're soaked from your knees down." Izumi moved into the living room and shook her head when Terry came jogging back with the last of the bags. The girls crowded around him, and he grinned his lopsided grin and told them to go ahead and look at what he'd brought.

Those few words of permission set off a small frenzy. Squeals of delight erupted as the arts and crafts bounty spilled onto the carpet. Izumi had to admit Terry had outdone himself. The girls loved to cut and paste and make all sorts of paper creations, and on this rainy late afternoon, it came as a welcome treat.

When they saw the princess stickers, even Terry had to back away as the girls eagerly ripped open the slim package and began to divide them three ways. "Play fair" had always been Izumi's maxim, and the girls had learned it well. As they made three piles of princesses and castles and princes and dragons, John came back from putting the jeep in the garage.

"Oh, an arts and crafts party, huh?" he grinned at Terry, and Terry grinned back. "That ought to keep them busy. But look at all that stuff, Terry. It looks like a mini version of Christmas."

Grinning ear to ear, Terry pulled off his wet coat. "Where's Madison?"

"In the kitchen, drying off," Izumi folded her arms. "She wouldn't set foot in the master bedroom, so I took her into the kitchen."

A hint of familiar sadness pulled at Terry's grin, and she saw it slip.

"When she's dry, get her to come out here, would you? Since we're home to supervise, I was hoping the girls could play with her. There's enough art supplies here for four... although it looks like the stickers have already been divvied up. It's just as well. She's probably too old for that sort of thing, anyway."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" John asked.

"You could take out the trash."
John smiled at Izumi. "I was speaking to Terry. Besides, it's raining."

"The trash still needs to be taken out."

Izumi went into the kitchen to start dinner and check on you-know-who with the hairdryer. It whirred in Madison's thin hand like some unfamiliar piece of equipment she didn't quite know what to do with.

"Why don't you go into the living room?" Izumi asked. "Terry has a surprise for you."

"What is it?"

"Go in there and see for yourself." Izumi unplugged the hairdryer, and gave Madison a few moments to gather her courage. Running on pure mothering instincts, Izumi offered an encouraging smile as Madison timidly crept out of the kitchen.

Since pity wouldn't fix dinner or get John to take out the trash, Izumi struggled to push aside excess sympathy. Right now, she had to get to work and figure out what was for dinner before someone asked. And they would ask.

Her menu settled, she filled a large pan with water, then placed it on a stove burner with the fire turned up. She began to go through the people she knew at church. After seeing how hard Terry was trying to make Madison happy, Izumi felt pressure to act as soon as reasonably possible. She asked God for wisdom, then decided to pick up the phone and arrange to meet Emily McCall for lunch, tomorrow. Emily was pretty, had a gentle way about her, and had been a faithful member of their congregation for the past six years.

More to the point, Izumi happened to know Emily was praying for a godly husband.

* * * *

Hope had spurted up in Madison at the mention of a surprise. She hoped it would be the notebook, and at the same time, told herself not to wish for it too hard; when her wish didn't happen, it would make the disappointment all that harder to bear.

After all, it was just a dumb notebook. It wasn't hers, and that was that. One day though, when she made her own paycheck, she would get all the paper she wanted and write for as long as her hands would hold out. Until then, she had to be content with watching others get what she so desperately wanted.
Spotting her, Terry waved her to the other side of the room, near the couch.

"Did you get dry socks?"

She nodded.

"Good. Sit down. The floor won't hurt you, will it?"

Up until a little while ago, she had been sleeping on the floor, so she ignored the over-concern and sat down several feet away from Terry. He smiled good-naturedly.

"Hey, munchkins." Terry whistled to get their attention, and all three girls looked up from their projects. One was already cutting some construction paper and gluing pieces together. "Wow, Debbie. You already have something going? Good, good. Madison is new to this sort of thing, so do any of you have an idea for her? Something easy for her to make?"

"She could do origami." This came from a girl wearing a shirt that said "Lizzie" on the front.

"That's certainly an idea." Terry grinned with good humor. "I was thinking of something a little easier than that, though."

"Paper dolls?" offered a girl with "Debbie" on the front.

"Oh, she should make masks, like me." A pigtailed girl with "Ruthie" stood up and carried her things over to Madison. "I can show you how. It's not hard."

Madison gulped apprehensively as the child sat down at her side, easy and natural in her innocence, and completely genuine in her helpfulness. "You have to make the eyes and mouth first, so you can put stuff around them. Like this." Munchkin Ruthie showed her a scrapbook bulging with sticker collections and craft projects, and then pulled out a template that her mommy had made. It had dotted lines cut out for eyes, mouth, and even an optional nose. Using the cut outs for a guide, Ruthie traced a pencil onto a vibrant orange sheet of construction paper.

"The fun part comes next," said Munchkin Debbie, abandoning her project to come be a part of this one. "When you decide what you want to be, you get to cut out eyebrows and whiskers, and things."

Ruthie gave her look-alike, Lizzie, a frown. "I'll show her."
"I want to make masks, too."

"Then make your own. Madison and me are busy." Ruthie began tracing out something on a black sheet, then handed it over to Madison. "Here, cut this out. I'll draw and you cut."

"But I want to play, too," whimpered Lizzie.

"I'll play with you, after I play with Madison," Ruthie said in a very patient, grown up voice that had Terry smiling.

With a sigh, Lizzie handed Madison some chubby, bright colored scissors. Moving to a cross legged position, Madison accepted the scissors and picked up the paper with Ruthie's pencil tracing. She had only cut a little way, trying very hard to stay within the lines, when Ruthie dropped another sheet into her lap.

As Debbie came over to give instructions on how to make the mask "the right way," Terry moved away until Madison sat by herself with three small girls eager to show her what to do. Only after Madison had proved herself by cutting out a mustache and bushy eyebrows, did they seem to relax and accept her into their group.

Lizzie began a kitty cat mask, and Debbie was going to be an astronaut, though she didn't know yet how to make the glass part of a helmet. They traded scissors, glue, scraps of paper like they had been doing this all their lives. Sometimes, they didn't even have to speak for them to work in seamless harmony. They chatted about preschool that day, then commented that it smelled like mommy was making hot dogs. At this, Madison began to secretly hope they were right. She loved hot dogs. She had eaten one once, and it had been an experience she never forgot.

Ruthie scooted next to Madison, their knees touching, and began to color in parts of the mask with crayon. It was such a simple gesture, one showing complete trust, that it struck Madison as something amazing. Did these little girls have no fear? But then again, why should they? They had two parents-- three if you counted Terry-- a nice house with nice things, food every day, and no one to beat them or teach them what had been beaten into Madison from a very young age. To trust so openly, was to make yourself vulnerable, and Madison had never trusted anyone unless there had been absolutely no choice.

These three four-year-olds-- who were quick to inform her they would turn five in a few months-- knew no such fear. They looked at life with expectations of kindness and of their love being returned without question.
As she sat there, cross-legged on the carpet with construction paper and art things scattered all around her, Madison envied them. It wasn't a green envy, but a sad sort of wistfulness that made her ache inside.

From a nearby recliner, John sat watching them from over a newspaper. He kept glancing over at them, then returned to his paper until he stopped checking. Madison assumed that meant she wasn't doing anything wrong to make their daddy uneasy. The knowledge of it made her relax a bit, but only a bit.

Then Terry came down the hall, and immediately, all three held up their projects with, "See this, Uncle Terry?"

"That's looking good," he said, and moved to the couch with a laptop. "Smells like your mommy's cooking hot dogs."

Oh, how Madison hoped so. She worked the scissors until her fingers pinched in the small handles. Lizzie handed her another sheet, and soon Madison found herself cutting out the pieces for three different masks.

"Daddy?"

"What?" John looked up from his newspaper, smiled at Munchkin Debbie.

"Did God make the rain?"

"He sure did."

"Did He make the clouds?"

"Yup."

"Did He make all the water for Noah's ark to float on?"

"Yes."

"If it rained a lot, would you make us an ark?"

"If the situation called for it, sure."
The answer seemed to satisfy the child, and she went back to her mask. John smiled, and returned to his paper, and Terry kept tapping away at his laptop.

In all the mess on the floor, Madison didn't find the notebook. Though she tucked the disappointment deep within her, she still felt its sting.

Still, as Madison cut the last of the pieces she'd been given, she knew she had a lot to be thankful for. She quietly thanked God, and after a quick glance at the laptop, an idea came to her. Gathering brightly colored scraps of paper, some glue and scissors, she moved to a small area by herself to start her own project.

* * * *

From over his laptop, Terry saw Madison working alone. He wished the others would pull her back into their circle. It wasn't good for her to be on her own so much of the time. If he could, he would have sat down on the carpet and joined their projects, all the while working to include Madison in everything. Since he'd always been clumsy when it came to creative things, he kept out of the way and watched.

He'd been proud of his girls, the way they helped her and showed patience when she didn't understand their way of doing things. The triplets were close, not only as sisters, but also as best friends. Their communication was often silent, their bond, inseparable. To be an adult, and included in their circle was always an honor. Terry had prayed arts and crafts would bring the girls together, and in a way, he figured he had succeeded. Even so, it pained him to see Madison alone.

When Izumi called everyone to dinner, the girls were the first to dash off and wash their sticky hands in their bathroom. Terry set aside his laptop, and John put down the newspaper. The men went into the kitchen to help Izumi set the table, even though by now, both knew their offer would be too late.

It never hurt to show your willingness.

The rain pounded hard as everyone gathered at the kitchen table for hot dogs, cream of corn, and baked tortilla chips with fresh salsa. It took some coaxing to get the girls to take off their masks, and even more coaxing to get Madison at the table.

"Come on, we're waiting for you," Terry called from the kitchen.

"I'm not hungry," came the return call from the next room.
John sighed, and gave a patient look to Izumi that Terry didn't miss.

Pushing away from the table, Terry got up and went into the living room. Madison sat on the floor, still working on something.

"Madison."

At the sound of her name, she jumped.

"Please put down whatever it is you're doing, and come sit at the table with the family."

"Do I have to?"

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Aren't you hungry? We're having hot dogs, not some exotic dish no one can stomach. Everyone likes hot dogs."

"Couldn't I eat in here?"

"Not if you want dinner. Izzy set a place at the table for you. Your only option is to accept gracefully."

The scissors came to a stop. She looked thoughtful.

"Come on, get up. Dinner is getting cold, and I'm not leaving here without you. Your place at the table is wedged between two of the triplets, so you'll be perfectly safe."

This prompted Madison to her feet. She winced, and Terry suddenly remembered the acetaminophen. While she limped into the kitchen, Terry hurried to fill a glass of water and tap out two pills.

"For pity's sake, Maddie. Why didn't you remind me?" He heaved a sigh, dropped the pills into her hand before she sat at the table. "Sometimes, I think you'd starve yourself to death, rather than ask for something to eat." He pulled out her chair, gently pushed it beneath her as she sat down. "I wish you'd learn to speak up. I really do."

Moving around the table, Terry resumed his seat. He flashed an apologetic look to John, then everyone bowed their heads while John prayed over the meal.
When the food started passing around the table, Terry caught the hunger in Madison's face. Her eyes didn't leave the plate of hot dogs, and when it came to her, she took four. John's eyes popped wide, as did Izumi's, and even the girls giggled, but Terry forced himself to remain placid. If he had to go without his usual helping tonight, he would do so gladly, if only to see her eating a large meal.

"Listen to that rain come down," John commented as he held the bowl of corn while Debbie ladled some onto her plate. "I hope the road doesn't flood. I'd hate to have to go anywhere tonight." He glanced at Terry, and Terry understood the meaning.

"The couch?" he asked, and John nodded.

Terry glanced at Madison, and sighed with relief to see her biting into a fully loaded hot dog with all the works. Her eyes closed half-mast, and her mouth tipped into a smile.

"Good?" he asked.

"M-humm." She swallowed, took another bite until Terry feared she might choke. One by one, all four hot dogs reached the same fate. Her face turned a little green, and though he feared she might lose her supper, she sat back and refused dessert like a sensible woman.

While everyone enjoyed a dish of ice cream, Madison stole back to the living room, no doubt to work on her project. At least, Terry thought with some satisfaction, she ate all her dinner.

Half an hour or so later, Terry returned to the couch. On the floor, Madison flipped through Ruthie's scrapbook. As he sat down and lifted the laptop, he couldn't help feeling he was watched. Then he saw it, a square of bright blue paper with stars cut out and pasted all over with glue. In large yellow letters, he read its message.

THANK YOU, TERY

Even though his name was misspelled, he knew instantly who it was from. He looked over to Madison and caught her watching. He opened the card.

I THINK YOUR A VERY NICE PERSON. THANK YOU.

The words were simple, but they made him smile.

"You're welcome, Madison. You're very welcome." He closed the card, looked again at the front. "Thank you for this. It was a thoughtful gesture." He turned to Madison and saw a faint smile
around her mouth. How anyone could smile and yet look so sad, was beyond him, and yet Madison managed to do it very easily.

"It's still raining." He tucked the card away for safekeeping, continued his thought out loud as the girls returned to start tidying up before bed. "I'd like you to stay here tonight, if that's okay with you. You can sleep on this couch, and I'll make sure you have enough pillows and blankets to be comfortable."

"All right, Terry."

The words sounded tired, making him grateful she wouldn't have to brave a storm-tossed drive back into Chaumont.

He cleared off the couch, helped the girls clean up their mess, then went to collect some sheets and blankets. Stepping into his room, he gathered a pillow, the thick warm comforter off his bed, two sheets, and a clean pillowcase from the linen closet in the hall. An excited shout that she had first dibs on the bathtub, was proceeded by Debbie, and then Lizzie. They sped past him, their combined voices at once serious and carefree. Not as anxious for a bath as her sisters, Ruthie came last, her arms full from the remnants of their party.

"Thanks for helping Madison," he told the pint-sized girl. She beamed a sweet smile at Terry, and he planted a kiss on her forehead. How he loved his munchkins.

A boom of thunder rattled window panes. The lights flickered, then came back on.

"Better have your flashlight handy," Terry told the girl. Excited chatter came from the girls' bedroom, and Ruthie dashed off to tell her sisters how neat it would be if the power went all the way out.

Terry stepped into the living room, quietly noting Madison was still on the floor beside the sofa. Thin arms hugged her legs, and her forehead rested against her knees.

"I hope you're not afraid of a little thunder and lightening." Terry put down his bundle, pulled off a sheet and flapped it open. "You told me earlier the rain is different when you're safe." He glanced at the bowed head, shook open the pillow case and stuffed the pillow inside.

Slippers padded through the living room as John passed through from the kitchen with an emergency flashlight.

"Good night, Terry. Madison."
"'Night," Terry smiled, and watched as John disappeared into the master bedroom. Izumi came out a moment later, and headed for the girls' room, no doubt to make sure they were making progress and getting ready for bed.

"If you need the bathroom," Terry continued, "use the one adjoining the office. No one should bother you there." He opened the heavy comforter, draped it over the bed as another boom of thunder rattled the house. "Just listen to that."

Madison's head came up. She looked toward the roof, apprehension glinting in her gray eyes.

"You're safe," he reminded her. "Pray about it, give it to the Lord, then move on. Come on, climb into bed so I can turn out the lights."

"Could you leave one on?" she asked timidly, moving onto the couch and taking refuge beneath the covers.

"Do you want a night-light?" Terry didn't wait for an answer, but went into the kitchen to dig up the spare light hidden somewhere in the junk drawer. He found it, pugged it in beside the couch, and clicked it on.

"Thanks, Terry."

"It's no problem," he smiled, first turning off the overhead light, then the lighthouse lamp he had given Izzy for Christmas several years back. Madison burrowed beneath the comforter, facing the side of the sofa where a small arc of light glowed against the wall. "Before you go to sleep, wait a moment. I'll be right back."

He snagged the grocery bag in his room, came back and placed it on the floor beside Madison's couch. "I forgot to give this to you earlier, but you can open it in the morning. Do you need anything else? Are you comfortable?"

"I'm fine." She sat up a little, looked over the edge of the cushion.

"Try to get some rest, Maddie." He moved away from the couch, saw her reach for the grocery bag. It crinkled as she pulled out the notebook. She gasped, hugged it to her chest like someone clinging to a great treasure.

He knew she wanted it, but hadn't realized how much until now. Smiling, he went to his room, and closed the door.
Rain slammed against the house, but inside, everyone was safe and dry and snuggled beneath warm blankets. As Terry lay awake in bed, he thanked God that Madison wasn't struggling to survive somewhere in all that wet and cold. She was in the living room, cuddling a spiral-bound notebook and enjoying the safe comfort provided by a simple night-light. More than once, he tiptoed to the end of the hall and looked across the room to the couch. Only when he heard the rhythmic sounds of her slumber, did he go back to bed and allow himself to truly rest.

Come what may, he determined to be a faithful friend to her. His last prayer before slipping beneath the pleasant waves of slumber, was to ask God for more strength.

More and more, Terry was realizing it would be no easy task to help Madison find her place in the world.

"And I [Terry] thank Christ Jesus our Lord, Who hath enabled me, for that He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry [of helping Madison]..."
~ 1 Timothy 1:12 ~
Chapter Ten

Lifeline

"The LORD is good, a strong hold in the day of trouble; and He knoweth them that trust in Him."
~ Nahum 1:7 ~

Dreams tumbled past Terry in a grotesque way of making the nonsensical seem utterly real. Images of adolescence blurred with the present, and he stood as a child on the shore of Three Mile Bay, the wind full in his face and the sun warming his back.

Without warning, the air turned frigid. Darkness slicked over the heavens like an overturned can of black paint. Cold settled into his body, chilling him from the inside out.

"Terry."

Someone spoke behind him. A shockwave of dread exploded within his chest, and his feet froze in place. He jammed fingers in his ears, shouted the words to "Jesus Loves Me" until the force of the voice shoved him to his hands and knees. Pain seared him from behind, and he slammed face down into the sand. The taste of dirt filled his mouth, gritted between his teeth as the pain bore down. It felt as though the universe had fallen from the sky to crush him.

Far worse than the pain, was the pleasure.

"You're no different than me. Oh, you wanted this."

Shame seared him with an unquenchable heat. He heard the crackle of flames, forced open his eyes and saw hell yawning before him in livid color.

"You wanted this, so you're just as bad as me. Give me your hand."

Terry's hand yanked up until it felt the owner of the voice. Touch filled him with curious dread, and the smell of sweat filled his nostrils to the point of choking.

"Jesus loves me, this I know." A child sang in the distance, and he recognized it as himself.

He struggled to breathe, to force air into his lungs and cough out sand.

"For the Bible tells me so."
That voice. The cool hope of it made the heat sizzle and hiss, like water coming into contact with flame.

"Little ones to Him belong, they are weak, but He is strong."

Pain coursed through him, then cruelly intense pleasure. Dirt forced its way down his throat and he screamed to make it stop. He cried out to God, and even in his torment, he knew God had not forgotten him.

"Terry." A voice blurred over the panic, both familiar and welcome. It called, and yet the pain continued to knife through him without mercy. "Terry, wake up."

Some part of him knew it was a dream, and yet, he couldn't wake up. Not on his own.

"Water. Izumi, a glass of water-- hurry."

The urgency of the voice sent fresh panic into Terry. What was wrong? Why was John so frightened? He strained to find John, but continued to be pulled under by the flames, the scalding heat.

Someone shook him and he struck out in self-defense. Then cold splashed across his face.

"Hey, wake up. Come on, Buddy, don't make me fight you." The one who shook him was John, and the realization of it stopped Terry's flailing.

Safety no longer seemed out of reach, and it encouraged him to fight against the pull of sleep. Now he was certain it was a dream. Darkness, then light, blinked before him. He forced his eyes wide open.

His friend was above him. No phantom to trick him into relief, but actual flesh and blood.

"Take a moment to calm down. Terry, calm down."

It took a moment for Terry to realize he was gasping for breath. His chest was tight, his pajamas soaked with sweat, his hands clenched in white-knuckled fists.

But he was alive.

Terry didn't dare close his eyes, feeling the force of the nightmare still fresh on his consciousness.
"Take it easy." John squeezed his shoulder. "You're awake now-- that's what matters."

The overhead light shone into his eyes, a reassuring sign he wasn't still trapped in the nightmare. He palmed the sweat from his eyes, sucked in each precious breath of air like it was a gift from God.

"That was a bad one." Terry let his body relax from the strain of nightmarish sleep. "Thank God they're not all as bad as that."

The bare walls of his room, the scent of his mouthwash-- even the moth that flicked around the light fixture-- all confirmed reality. Terry dropped his gaze to the man in dark blue pajamas on the edge of the bed.

The relief in John's face spoke volumes. "Your night terrors are starting up again, and you know what that means-- you're taking too much on."

Tension edged back into Terry's shoulders. He understood John's meaning, and it sickened him to think that maybe John was right.

"Daddy?" A child called from the hall, and when Terry turned his head, he realized Izumi stood in the doorway to keep the girls out. "Is Uncle Terry hurt?"

"No, I'm all right, munchkin." Terry offered them a smile, and noted the relief in Izumi's face.

He turned to John. "Did I yell?"

"You did."

"Very loud?"

"Enough to wake everyone in the house." John moved to his feet as a little girl wiggled her way past Izumi. "And where do you think you're going?"

"Let her see him, John." Izumi allowed the other two inside. "They need to see he's all right."

Determined to not frighten his family anymore than he already had, Terry sat up and smiled as three eager cherubs climbed onto his bed.
"It’s all right," Lizzie said, crawling over to give him as big a hug as two small arms could manage. "We won’t let anything happen to you, Uncle Terry."

Wet moistened his eyes as Debbie, then Ruthie, crowded him with hugs and kisses.

"I’m fine, girls. I’m fine." Not trusting his voice any further, he showered them with smiles and returned each hug. Thank God he hadn’t woke up crying. Every time he did that, John did his best to shield the children from the worst, but they always knew their uncle was weeping. No matter how hard Terry tried to keep his grief quiet, they almost always knew.

Ruthie snuggled into his right arm, and patted his hand. "Do you feel better?"

"Yes. Much." He kissed the top of her head and tested himself by closing his eyes for a moment. Nothing, not even the slightest threat of hell or flames. He was safe. Oh, he breathed the air and thanked God for His faithfulness. It had only been a bad dream. A visceral experience, but only a bad dream.

"Say good night to your uncle," John said, glancing at the clock as he spoke. "It’s late, and you three need to get back to bed."

"Can’t we stay with Uncle Terry?"

"Please, Daddy?"

"Yes, please?"

Somewhat amused by the request, John looked to Terry for permission.

"I don’t mind. Maybe they’ll keep the bad dreams away."

John shrugged. "It’s your call. Just don’t let them keep you awake. Hear that, girls? I expect you to go to sleep."

"We will." Debbie pulled back the covers on the single bed, and Terry scooted off the mattress to use the bathroom and change out of his damp pajamas.

"No, he’s all right," Izumi told someone in the hall.

"Izzy? Who is that?" Terry put the bathroom on hold and came around to the doorway. "Madison?"
His house guest stood on the far side of the hall, hugging herself tightly. She was trembling.

"Did I wake you?" An unnecessary question, for he could see the fright on her face. "I had a bad
dream, but everything's all right now. It's okay to go back to bed."

She looked into the living room, then up at the ceiling as rain pounded the roof. Her eyes
skidded back to him, and she hugged herself tighter.

Terry sighed inwardly. He knew just how she felt.

"Give me a minute to use the bathroom, and I'll come see what I can do. Maybe the TV could
keep you company--" Terry stopped, remembering what happened the last time she watched
television. "Just give me a moment."

John sighed, shook his head and returned to the master bedroom with Izumi.

It made Terry wonder. Was he pushing himself too hard? He probably was, for the night terrors
were back with a vengeance. John hadn't needed to wrestle him awake since... uh-oh.

Victor.

Wincing, Terry moved to the bathroom adjoining his bedroom. He wasn't ready to admit
Madison had been the cause of his nightmare. Yes, being around her bruises this close reminded
him of things he tried to forget, but so what? He could handle it. He wasn't fresh from his abuse
like she was. He had experience in these matters, and would deal with the pain in a professional
manner.

He locked the bathroom door, cranked the shower up to block out sound, and burst into tears.

God, help me. Don't let me shatter again.

* * * *

She couldn't go into the living room by herself, not when the rain made her want to curl up and
disappear. And then that scream. It sent shivers down her goose bumps just thinking about it.

That had been Terry?

It must have been some bad dream.
Propping herself against the wall, she heard the triplets in Terry's bedroom. She wanted to peek inside and see the girls, probably looking cute and cozy snuggled up on the bed. A giggle came from the room, and Madison couldn't help herself. She had to see.

She peeked around the door, and sure enough, the three girls were tucked beneath Terry's blanket, on their sides to fit in the narrow bed and exchanging whispers as though in some secret club-- a girl's club, comprised of fraternal sisters.

Then the bathroom door opened, and Terry stepped out in a fresh pair of pajamas. The sight sent a chill of dread through Madison. A grown man with little girls in his bed. A sharp memory streaked past her, and she forced herself to ease away from the doorway without being noticed.

She hugged the wall, jumped when Terry came out and found her. Thunder boomed across the roof, pushing at her already strained courage until she slid onto the carpet to take refuge.

"Hey, what's wrong?" He crouched, reached out his hand but she shrunk back. A heavy sigh blew past his lips. "Neither one of us are having a very good night, are we? What a mess." To her dismay, Terry sat down on the carpet, leaned against the opposite wall and propped his arms on raised knees.

"Uncle Terry?"

"I'll be there in a few minutes," he called. "Until then, go to sleep like your daddy wanted." When the direct order was met with giggles, Terry smiled. It was such an easy smile, no malice or mischief hiding in his expression. He leaned his head back, closed his eyes and inhaled deeply like one who had just run a great race and was exhausted.

Overhead, rain continued to beat the rooftop without mercy. For an odd reason, it didn't matter as much anymore, for Terry was there. Even the living room looked safer than it did before her sleep had been jolted awake by Terry's scream.

Out of the corner of her eye, she looked at him, not trusting what she saw. For the umpteenth time she asked herself, "Who is he?" Red had rimmed his eyes, and his nose looked pink from crying. The more she observed, the more certain she was of her guess.

"They're not real, you know."

His eyes popped open. "Excuse me?"
"The dreams-- they're not real. Even though they feel like it, they're only figments of our imaginations."

"Who told you that?"

"I saw it on TV. Some guy who wrote a book, said so. It's true, isn't it? Bad dreams aren't anything to be afraid of."

"That depends on the dream." Terry gave a resigned sigh that filled his face with sadness. "It's times like these when I cling to my battle cry the hardest."

Though she had no idea what he meant, she let him keep talking.

"I won't go into any details or stories about my life, because I don't think you want to hear them. Suffice it to say, I had a rougher than average childhood. Sometimes, when I'm under an unusual amount of pressure, or I let myself rundown physically, my defenses lower and I put myself at risk for a mental breakdown. It's why I work out as much as I do."

"Are you under an unusual amount of pressure right now?"

A tired smile flitted across his mouth. "We'll see."

It seemed like an odd answer, but since he didn't explain further, she contained her curiosity in silence.

"When I feel like this, I need to shout my battle cry the loudest. I know from experience, the most heartfelt ones come while on your knees."

Now he really wasn't making any sense. "A battle cry?"

"It's something to rally the troops with when it looks like the bad guys are winning. For me, it's Psalm sixty-one, verse two: 'From the end of the earth will I cry unto Thee, when my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the rock that is higher than I.' Each time my heart is overwhelmed by what's happening, I remember that verse and take courage. It's like a soldier on the front lines of a battlefield. He takes a hit, but keeps on fighting until he either gets killed or wins. Until God takes me, I keep fighting."

"Did you take a hit tonight?" she asked.
He gave a wan smile. "You could call it that. Unfortunately, my heart overwhelms a little too easily these days."

"Terry?"

"Hmmm?"

"What was that verse you said?"

He repeated it, and she knew she would never be able to remember it long enough to write it into her notebook. She stood up without disturbing his closed eyes, moved into the living room and located her treasure beneath the covers. She pulled one of the ball point pens from the grocery bag, returned to the hallway and reclaimed her place on the carpet.

"Terry?"

This time, he didn't answer.

She bit her lip, uncapped the pen and wrote on the first page of her notebook:

*MADISON CRAWFORD, early Friday morning, somewhere in September-- i wish i wasn't so different. being free isn't what i thought it would be, and i have to remind myself that i'm where i'm supposed to be. God put me here for a reason, and He kept me alive all this time. i have to believe it's for a purpose. does God make peeples who don't have any reason to be alive? i hope not, because i would be first on God's list as someone who was just taking up space for someone else who is more important. i have to believe i'm not worthless.*

Terry's arm dropped from his knee and Madison stopped writing. She waited, hoping he would open his eyes so she could get the battle cry.

His breathing came with a soft snore, and she went back to writing.

*i think i have a friend. i hope i do. he doesn't get angry at me, at least not very easily, and he's always trying to help peeples, even me. he seems nice, and i try to forget he's a man because its not his fault God made him one. i wish God didn't have to make men. i think the world would be better off without them, but i'm not God and i suppose He knows best. by the way, his name is Terry.*

The sound of someone yawning made Madison's pen stop. She looked up, saw him blinking awake and looking surprised that he had fallen asleep.
"I'm hitting the sack," he said, moving to his feet until he towered above her. "Are you going to be all right by yourself?"

She nodded.

"Good night then."

"Terry?"

"Yeah?" he paused with one foot in the bedroom.

"What was that verse you said-- the one that's your battle cry?"

"Oh, you mean Psalm sixty-one, verse two? What about it?"

"Could you please say the words again? I want to write them down."

"It's no big deal," he said with another yawn. "Just go look it up in your Bible." When she didn't respond, he winced. "That's right. I forgot. You don't have one." A noise from the bedroom made him step inside to check the munchkins, then a moment later he came back out and quietly shut the door. "Are you ready?"

She nodded.

"From the end of the earth will I cry unto Thee--"

"Not so fast, please." Her pen dug into the paper, furiously working to form the cumbersome words. She paused, and he continued, this time at a slower pace until the entire verse was safely in her notebook.

"Try and get some sleep," Terry said in full yawn, "and I'll do my best not to wake anyone up again."

She nodded, and watched him move into the bedroom and leave the door open. After putting the cap on her pen, she crawled to the doorway and peered inside. Terry had managed to lay down on the narrow sliver of bed left him, and all without waking the now sleeping children. The girls slept in a row of yellow nightgowns, looking very much like a package of fluffy yellow Peeps, soft and marshmallowy and ridiculously cute. One girl had an arm snuggled around another, while the third slept with her head pillowed against her sister's shoulder.
They looked perfectly safe, though Madison still struggled with her dreaded certainty that something bad would happen because they shared the bed with a man. The dread came as second-nature to her, and it was no small task to ignore the fear that screamed even louder than Terry had in his nightmare.

Her stomach clenched into a tight fist, and she crawled away from the bedroom as fast as her hands and knees could carry her. At the end of the hall, she scrambled up and ran to the couch, only pausing to throw back the blankets before diving in. Her heart pounded in her ears, and whispers of past terror made her tremble in the semi-darkness of the night-light glowing against the wall.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she tried to remember the words of Terry's battle cry. When they wouldn't come, she derived comfort by clutching the notebook where they had been written down.

* * * *

A small knee jabbed into his ribcage, followed by another. He moaned. Four more knees followed in rapid succession, and when Terry pushed open his eyes he wasn't surprised to find the bed empty. The smell of a hot breakfast had probably been the reason for the mini stampede, and Terry crawled from bed feeling trampled upon but marginally rested.

Still bleary-eyed from a night of children tossing and kicking him in his sleep, Terry shuffled into the hall, letting the smell of breakfast lead him to where the good stuff was at. Coffee. He needed some java to kick start his brain. Some of the cogs were sticking, making him think the nightmare and subsequent wrestling match with John had all been one continuous dream. Then he saw Madison on the sofa, and remembered it had really happened.

Caffeine, preferably of the French Roast variety. Hold the cream.

"Morning," he said, nodding to Madison as he passed through to the kitchen. "Izzy, where's my--oh, thanks." He accepted his smiley mug from Izumi, dragged himself to the kitchen table and collapsed into his usual chair. The herd of baby animals that had stampeded him minutes before, beamed at him with milk mustaches and innocent faces. "Every time you munchkins sleep in my bed, I get run over in the morning. Quite a coincidence, isn't it?"

Giggles came from their side of the table, and Terry drowned his smile in the mug.

"Thank God the rain stopped." John's house-shoes slapped against the kitchen laminate as he came to the table with his laptop. "Looks like I'm off the hook for building that ark."
Debbie grinned.

On the stove, pancake batter sizzled along with strips of turkey bacon and another skillet with scrambled eggs.

John raised his brows. "What's the occasion? Our breakfast isn't usually such a production."

"Should I take that as a complaint?" Izumi asked, picking up the slotted spatula and going to the eggs. "If you don't want any of these pancakes, I can always give them to someone else."

"Oh no, don't give them away." John flashed her a teasing grin. "I only wondered why all the trouble for breakfast, when we usually have toast and cereal."

Izumi nodded toward the living room, and John blinked. The man was absolutely clueless.

"It's for Madison," Terry said with a degree of certainty that made him grateful for such good friends. "I appreciate it."

"If you want to thank me, make sure she eats. She's an unhealthy thin, and I don't think she's been eating regularly, even at your place. Make sure she eats."

"I know, I'm trying to."

Sighing, Izumi turned to stir the eggs. "She's not taking care of herself. That means it's up to someone else to help her learn how."

"I agree. If you have any ideas, I'm open to suggestions." Terry sipped his java, winced at the hot temperature and set aside the mug.

"The first thing I'd suggest"-- Izumi slid pancakes onto John's plate, then went back to pour more batter-- "is to get her a smaller place. Your apartment is too big. She needs something small that won't wear her out every time it needs cleaning."

"That's a thought." Terry bit into a bite of pancake slathered with maple syrup and butter. And sighed in pure contentment. No one made pancakes like Izzy. "I have a vacant apartment that fits the description. Single bedroom, bathroom, a cramped kitchen that would make Snow White think she was still keeping house for the seven dwarfs. The place is a cracker box, but the linoleum's new and the rent is low."
"Then loan it to Madison." Izumi scraped more pancake onto Lizzie's plate. "Give her the key and tell her she's responsible for keeping it clean."

Terry considered the proposal, then nodded. "That sounds reasonable."

"Next thing, she should get a job."

"Now that will be a little harder to do." He reached for the mug, saw the empty chair between Ruthie and Debbie and frowned. "Maddie?" he called to the next room.

"What?"

"It's breakfast time."

"I'm not hungry."

"I didn't ask if you were hungry. I said it's breakfast." When nothing but silence came from the living room, Terry remained seated. "Madison, get in here and eat."

"No, I won't."

The outright refusal caught Terry by surprise. She usually did as she was told.

"Terry, she has to eat."

"I know, Izzy, but tell that to her. On second thought, I'll do it myself." Terry pushed back from the table while three little girls tracked him with interested faces. "Just watch, I'll have her in here before you munchkins can ask for seconds."

The giggles behind his back only served to deepen Terry's determination. Izzy was right. Madison needed to learn to take care of herself, and the first place to start would be eating on time.

He rounded into the living room, came to a stop when he noticed a large trembling lump on the couch, covered over with blankets.

"Madison?" He moved to the couch, tugged at a blanket but found she held it fast. "Do you mind if I ask an obvious question?" He waited a beat. "Why are you under those covers?"

Silence.
"It's time for breakfast. I want to see you out of that bed and at that table in the next five minutes, or I'll..." he hesitated, wondering what he would do if she stayed put. He rubbed his neck, then noticed an odd smell coming from the couch. "Hey, are you all right under there?"

When she didn't answer, Terry yanked the covers back. Even before he saw it, his nose had already told him what had happened. A large wet spot soaked her jeans, and the odor that accompanied it told Terry it wasn't just urine.

Her face paled. She stared at the carpet, not daring to meet his eyes.

"What happened?" he asked, then bit his tongue at the stupid way it sounded. "Why didn't you use the bathroom? I told you where it was, didn't I? The half bath adjoining the office?"

A slight shrug lifted a shoulder. She said nothing.

"When did your accident happen? Was it just now? Did we frighten you with our talk?"

"No," she mumbled. "I woke up this way."

"You did?" Terry kicked himself for strolling through the living room and not noticing her distress. "Does this happen very often?"

She shook her head, "no."

"Terry, is she all right?" Izumi came into the living room, stopped when she saw Madison.

Terry blew out a sigh. "I'm going to need your help cleaning her up."

"Didn't she know where the bathroom was?"

"Yes, but she did this in her sleep."

"Well then." Izumi went to Madison, coaxed her onto her feet the way a mother would a child. "Accidents will happen. Let's get you into the shower and make this mess go away."

As Izumi led Madison to the hall, Terry tossed back the bottommost blanket and saw the wet mark on the leather couch. The flip-flop of house-shoes sounded behind him.

Both men stared at the spot.
John punched Terry on the shoulder. "It'll come off. If this thing can survive toddlers, it'll survive this."

A deep sigh moved through Terry as John went off in search of the cleaner. He had very good friends.

As Terry pulled off the blankets, shouting erupted from down the hall. Terry dropped everything, came running and nearly collided with John as John dashed from the kitchen. They moved into the hall, only to see Izumi tugging on Madison's arm to get her into the master bedroom. Madison shouted, her hands grasping the doorjamb for dear life. The door nearly caught her fingers when it accidentally bumped closed.

Seeing the near miss, Izumi let go, panted for breath as Madison tried to fight her way past Terry and John.

"Hey, hey." Terry tried not to hurt Madison. He twisted her around gently, pushed her against the wall while John went to Izumi.

"I'm all right," Izumi insisted. "I tried to coax her into the bedroom, but she became wild-eyed and nearly decked me when she grabbed the doorjamb. I shouldn't have tried to pull her inside."

"Maddie, hold still." Terry squeezed her shoulders until the writhing stopped. "No one is going to hurt you. Izzy was taking you into the bathroom so you could shower."

"I already told her that," Izumi said, giving a wide berth around Madison as Izumi went with John into the living room.

The struggling started again, and Terry was forced to restrain her against the wall with his chest.

"Maddie," he breathed into her ear, "you've got to calm down. Now relax. You'll only hurt yourself by fighting. I'm going to back away, and you're going to stop fighting. Okay?" He tested her by letting up. When she remained plastered to the wall, he took a few steps back. "Did I hurt you?"

She didn't answer.

"Maddie, did I hurt you?"

"No."
"Thank God for that." Terry breathed in relief, knowing he would've had a hard time looking himself in the mirror if he had. He glanced down the hall, saw Izumi was fine and breathed another thankful prayer.

Madison remained against the wall, her face turned away from everyone.

"All the showers in this house are through a bedroom," Terry said matter-of-factly. "I know you don't like it, but unless you want me to drive you back to the apartment as you are, there's no way to get around it."

"Drive me back."

"Maddie," Terry stepped closer and lowered his voice, "if any of my neighbors see you like this, someone's going to call the police. I can lend you a pair of pants, but I really think you need to overcome your fear of bedrooms long enough to get into the bathroom."

"Please don't make me, Terry. Please don't make me."

"I won't make you do anything, but I think this is for the best." Terry turned so his back was to John and Izumi. "Think of this as your first step toward becoming self-sufficient. Today, you run through a bedroom, and tomorrow-- who knows? You might find it wasn't so bad and start sleeping on a bed."

"No, please, no."

"What if you close your eyes? Just shut your eyes and I'll lead you safely through to the bathroom."

Her head shook in a decided "no."

"Is there any way I can get you to trust me on this?" Terry stepped around her, moved into her view. "I give you my solemn promise-- before God-- you'll reach the bathroom safely."

"Terry, I can't."

"Well, how do you know, unless you try?"

She worried her lip, looked at him out of the corner of her eye like a mouse trying to work up courage to trust a cat.
He held out his hand, but both her fists remained clenched against the wall.

"I know what-- I'll give you my cell phone. If anything bad happens, you can punish me by destroying the phone."

A smile crept to her mouth.

"You trusted me once before, didn't you?"

She nodded, "yes."

"I'm asking you to trust me again." Terry kept his hand outstretched, praying she would take it. After that scuffle, he wouldn't blame her if she was too shaken up to take the risk.

The fist moved to her side. She opened it, stared at his hand like it was something out of a horror movie, then took hold of his elbow instead.

"Close enough," he smiled. "Now close your eyes."

She squeezed her eyes shut, and he started her into the bedroom. It seemed wise to not go anywhere near the large king sized bed, so Terry gave it as wide a berth as he could. He opened the bathroom door, placed her inside, then closed the door with, "It's all right to look now."

Having watched their progress, Izumi came into the bedroom with John. Izumi looked impressed. "I didn't think you'd be able to do it, Terry. That took trust on her part."

"Yeah, well," Terry shrugged, "it wasn't much, so I won't let it go to my head."

John smiled, and Izumi moved to the bathroom door. "If you want to be useful," she said to Terry, "Madison could use another change of clothes."

"I'll get them."

With a hesitant look, Izumi lowered her voice. "After all that struggling in the hall, make sure nothing fell out of her pants." Then Izumi went into the bathroom, and promptly shut the door.

The sound of muffled voices, and Izumi's gentle coaxing, was enough to ease Terry away from the bathroom. Maddie would be all right-- he had to trust God for that. A small hand took his, and he smiled down at Ruthie in her favorite bright yellow kiddie nightgown.
"We didn't frighten you, did we?" he asked.

Ruthie smiled, and Terry lifted her up for a hug. Inside the bathroom, he heard Izumi promising not to look, and Terry decided it was time to get those clothes from his apartment in Chaumont.

Moments after he had finished cleaning the hall, but before he had time to change out of last night's pajamas, the front doorbell sounded.

"I'll get it," John called.

A familiar voice greeted John, and Terry stepped into the living room to the sound of Dick laughing at seeing John-- and Terry-- in pajamas.

"It's nearly ten o'clock," Dick laughed, as his wife, Sara, joined them inside. "If I'd known you guys got such a late start on the day, I would've come later."

"Oh no," John smiled, "we don't often sleep in so late, and are usually dressed by now. Aren't we, Terry?"

"Oh yeah," Terry grinned as a little girl in a nightgown scampered past him on her way to the kitchen, "this is nowhere near a normal morning."

"If we're intruding," Dick peeled off his sunglasses, "we can come back another time to do the planting. I know we agreed on the weekend, but it turned out we're supposed to visit Sara's mom Saturday, so I was hoping we could do it today-- but only if it's not too inconvenient for you."

John squinted in thought. "Pardon?"

"We're here to plant tulips," Dick smiled in his usual way of putting people at ease. "Sara went out and bought a large bunch of them at the nursery, and the guy promised her they'd come up yellow and white. I suppose we won't know for sure though, until next Spring."

A muffled cry came from down the hall, and Terry winced. Not now. Please, God, not in front of the Doyles.

"Who was that?" Dick asked.
"Who? Oh, you mean that noise just now? It's probably nothing." Terry flicked a glance to John, and saw his friend already heading down the hall. Terry would never forgive himself if Madison hurt Izzy. Izzy was a small little thing compared to Madison's tall frame.

A nervous smile fixed on Sara's mouth. "Are you sure no one's hurt?"

"No, I'm sure-- at least, I'm almost sure. Maybe ninety-nine-percent sure." Terry tried hard to smile. "Izzy is helping Madison take a shower, and for obvious reasons, I'm not allowed inside." He glimpsed the soiled couch behind the Doyle's and prayed for mercy. At least a chance to cover up the wet spot so Madison wouldn't have to endure more embarrassment.

Looking somewhat disturbed, John came back down the hall. "I tried to talk to Izumi through the door, but she couldn't hear me. I think everything's fine."

"Would you like me to go check?" Sara took off her coat, revealing a crisp pair of blue jeans and a wool sweater that looked inappropriately elegant for digging about in a garden. "Maybe Izumi could use the help of another woman."

"Thank you, that's very kind"-- Terry almost lurched forward when Sara turned to deposit her coat on the couch-- "I'll take that for you. They're in the master bath, just down the hall and through the bedroom. That's right, the last door at the end."

Calmly sucking a lollipop, Debbie went to go sit on the blankets, neatly avoiding the wet spot.

Another girl, this time Lizzie, went to go join her sister, and she also sucked a bright colored lollipop. As Terry wondered where the girls were getting all this candy, he saw Dick passing an orange one to Ruthie. Wonderful. All John and Izzy needed were well-meaning cavities from a friend.

Using the momentary distraction, Terry edged around to the couch, quickly tossed a blanket over what he now hoped wouldn't prove to be a stain.

"Terry," John said in a polite but subtly urgent tone, "don't you think you should be moving along? They'll be needing those things we discussed earlier."

Dick blinked, looked from one man to the other, his mouth in one long continuous smile. "That sounds like code for something, so I won't ask what."
"It's just something from his apartment," John said, casting a quick eye to the blankets and breathing a noticeable sigh of relief. "Madison slept on the couch last night, and needs a change of clothes."

"Oh." Dick looked to the couch where three little girls sat with their candy, every single one of them avoiding what they knew was hidden beneath the blankets. "I don't remember Victor ever having that privilege."

"That's because Victor wasn't Madison." John showed Dick into the kitchen for some hot coffee. "We trust her more than we did the others."

The vote of confidence in Madison's favor, made Terry smile, even though the reference to "the others" caused him some painful regret. Unlike John, Terry had trusted the others, though Victor stood out more than the rest. At one time during their "friendship," Victor had made Terry think "this is the one-- surely, I can make a difference with him." It hurt to think how much that trust had been betrayed. In a cruel act of revenge for Terry's unwillingness to buy Victor a new car, Victor had trashed Terry's apartment with a baseball bat, then poured fetid garbage over the carpets for the express purpose of letting the stench leach into the floors. The cost of renovation didn't hurt Terry as much as knowing that someone he had once called friend, had done that.

Shoving aside past failure, Terry jogged to his room to quickly change.

The morning had its bumps, to be sure, but there also had been some positive moments. Madison's unexpected trust had been a bright spot... unlike the one she had left on the couch. As he went out to the garage, Terry wondered if Izzy might somehow manage to keep the soiled clothes from Sara's notice. For Madison's benefit, as well as his own. All he needed was for Dick to give him another patient sigh, and privately think he had fallen for yet another sob story.

* * * *

The water felt good, although Madison had trouble enjoying the clean feeling. Izzy stood just outside the frosted glass wall of the shower, her red robe showing through in a vague haze. The woman called Sara, stood with her, the blue and the red chatting with each other while Madison cleaned herself.

At least Izzy hadn't seen anything. Madison tried to console herself with the fact, though she had nearly been discovered when Izzy almost turned before Madison was safely behind the shower door. Madison had screamed, and Izzy said she'd nearly had a heart attack at being so
startled. No harm had been done, but the scream had attracted attention, and now there were two of them.

The water still ran hot, leaving Madison’s arms and hands a bright red glow. She lathered the body soap and prayed Terry would come soon with her clothes. Until he did, she would be stuck in the shower, for there was not enough coaxing in the world that would make her come out naked. The doctor who examined her had expressed concern upon seeing the scars, and Madison was certain Izzy would too. Whatever Izzy saw, she would surely tell Terry, and then questions would follow.

She had to avoid the questions. It was her problem, and Madison refused to let it become theirs. She’d managed to keep her secret this long, and nothing short of outright discovery would make her speak when silence could avoid the entire issue.

Oh, where was Terry? The hot water couldn’t last forever, and then she’d have to endure a cold drenching or risk shutting it off. If Izzy couldn’t hear the water running, she might think the shower was over and open the door.

Something Izzy said made Sara laugh, and Madison wished she had paid more attention to their conversation. Had Sara seen the pants? Why hadn’t she awakened in time to use the bathroom? She didn’t recall any bad dreams, nothing to create such a messy accident. Yet it had happened. She guessed her dread of leaving the couch in the middle of the night, in a strange house, had made her hold it in until she could hold it no longer. She felt so stupid for not waking up in time, though even then, she knew she would have tried to hold it until morning, rather than venture into the office in the dark.

Cool air nipped her bare skin, and she stepped back into the spray only to find the water had turned lukewarm.

Oh, Terry, please come.

"Madison?" Izzy had stopped talking to Sara, and now stood beside the door. "Are you finished yet?"

"No. No, I’m not."

"I don’t know how much longer the water will stay hot. You’ll soon empty the water heater, so you’d better hurry.”
"Okay." Madison clamped her jaw shut, intent on not letting her shivers register out loud. The water had turned cold, though she couldn't bring herself to shut it off. She shrank into the far corner, trying not to touch the hard tile walls that only made her shivering worse.

"My niece, Jennifer, stays in the shower so much, her parents joke she's trying to grow gills." That didn't sound like Izzy, Madison concluded, so it had to be the blue blur speaking. Izzy responded, but Madison didn't pay any attention. It was obvious people were beginning to wonder about her staying in the shower so long, but she couldn't help it.

Oh, Terry. Please don't forget me. I'll clean the couch, I promise I will, but please don't forget me.

A knock sounded on the bathroom door. It opened, and Madison heard Terry's voice-- familiar and friendly and extremely welcome. The door closed, and Izzy came back to the blurry glass.

"Terry just brought your clothes. I'm going to leave them beside the sink. Do you need anything more before I leave?"

"No thank you."

The bathroom door opened, then shut, and the room sounded amazingly empty.

Venturing to the frosted glass door, Madison slid it open an inch and peered out. They were gone. Thank the Lord, they were gone. In her joy of escaping the shower, Madison didn't forget to silently thank Terry.

He hadn't forgotten her.

She dressed in a pair of oversized jeans and a gray T-shirt with a generic butterfly on the front. The clean socks felt comforting after the icy tiles of the shower, and she curled her toes in quiet delight. Then she remembered her soiled clothes. What had Izzy done with them? They weren't anywhere to be seen, and Madison guessed Izzy had taken them with her.

Which had to mean the blue blur knew why she was in the shower.

All Madison knew of being normal had come from what she'd seen on the television. This wasn't normal. Not even close. Making a mess on the couch, hiding from anyone seeing her scars-- it all added up to something ugly, something Madison had feared for a very long time but never admitted to herself outright. If others didn't behave the way she did, then she had to be crazy. A
lunatic who couldn't wake up to use the bathroom, a hugely stupid idiot who couldn't come out of the shower when she was freezing.

Hot stung her eyes. She smeared it away and put on the running shoes Terry had given her when they bought all the clothes.

He hadn't forgotten her. That was a bigger comfort than even having clean clothing and privacy from those women. The warm knowledge of it made her feel cared for, part of something else besides herself. She had a friend.

Feeling more settled, she plugged in the hairdryer and switched it on. The hot blast felt wonderful, and she turned it on her arms every so often for warmth. She ran Izzy's hairbrush through straight locks, until they swept against her shoulders in thick golden falls. A touch of hairspray and she was done. At least she looked normal, or as normal as she was ever going to get outside of a personality transplant and skin grafts.

Sucking in a deep breath to face the world, she went to the door.

And stopped in her tracks.

How was she going to leave, if she had to pass through the bedroom? She couldn't, which meant she had escaped the shower only to be trapped in the bathroom.

In a quick handful of seconds, her heart plummeted lower than her toes. She might shout and hope Terry could hear, but then she really would look like an idiot in front of his guests. Who's that shouting, you ask? Only the pitiful woman I found in the wild. Can't do anything right, and dumb as dirt.

Indignation filled her chest, and she slumped against the bathroom door in defeat. Nothing was working out like she'd imagined. How was she ever going to make it? Her old dreams of being ordinary and normal seemed laughable now, only she couldn't laugh. Hugging her knees to her chest, she made herself small and hid from the worthlessness staring her in the face.

Someone knocked on the door.

"Uh, Maddie? I don't suppose you got out of there on your own? You are still in there, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm here." She scrambled to her feet at the sound of Terry's voice, and stood there waiting.
"May I open the door?" he asked.

"Yes, please."

"Okay, but maybe you should close your eyes first."

"They're closed." She squeezed them shut, felt Terry's arm and let him guide her through the room of terrors and into the hall.

"You can look," he whispered.

In the living room, John talked with the man called Dick. John had changed out of his pajamas, and after a few more exchanges, John called to Izzy that he and the Doyles were going out to plant tulips. Izzy's reply came from the kitchen, and three little girls dressed in pants and sweaters ran to the door with coats in hand, ready to help with the digging.

Madison tugged Terry's arm. "Where are my clothes?"

"Izzy put them in the wash. Don't worry, Sara and Dick don't know. As soon as they leave, I'll clean the couch."

"I'm sorry, Terry."

"Forget it. Unless you tell me you did it on purpose, I refuse to accept any apologies."

"I didn't do it on purpose."

"I know. I'll take you to the kitchen so you'll eat your breakfast. And don't try to wiggle out of it like you did last time," he added with a hint of good humor.

It was pointless to argue, for she knew her own hunger. She tagged behind Terry as he moved into the kitchen just as the blue blur ended a conversation with Izzy.

"Well, hi there." The blue blur gave Madison a bright smile, laughed as Izzy introduced her as Sara Doyle. "I have to be running along, but I hope to get to know you better. Any friend of Terry's is a friend of mine. See you later, Izumi, and thanks so much for the coffee. Are you sure I can't help with lunch?"
"Thanks, but I've got it covered." Still wearing her robe, Izumi stood up from the table. "Send one of the girls a few minutes before everyone comes in. That'll give me time to get everything on the table."

"I'll do that." Sara moved around Madison, flashed another pearl white smile and went to where the girls were being zipped up in their coats. Sara looked to be in her early sixties, had dark brown hair that probably came from a bottle, and dressed in tidy clothes that gave her a slightly formal but casual appearance. Since she was a total stranger to Madison, none of this really mattered.

What did matter, came on the plate Izzy placed on the table. It turned out Izzy had kept breakfast warm, so Madison sat down, prayed, then started eating large helpings of pancakes, eggs, and crispy slices of bacon.

After the group went out to plant flowers, Terry pulled cleaner from a kitchen cupboard and moved into the living room to clean the couch. Izzy tidied the kitchen, then went to go change for the day. Though most of breakfast found its way into Madison, the sheer number of pancakes couldn't all fit in her stomach. Looking satisfied, Terry declared it a good attempt, and went to go get their coats because he wanted to drive her into Chaumont to show her something.

By now, Madison felt so compliant she didn't even bother to ask questions. The stain on the couch had been removed, her stomach was full, and no one had yelled at her. Amazingly, she had survived the morning.

Zipped up in a warm coat, she felt her spirits lift once more. Hope came easier when she was with Terry. She followed him outside, waited for him to talk with Dick and John, then watched Terry back the jeep from the garage. From behind the wheel, Terry leaned forward, opened the door, and she climbed in.

"I'll close the garage later. Right now, I have something to show you." Terry pulled onto the main road, and she soon recognized the way back to Chaumont. "Izzy had an idea this morning, and I think it's inspired. You remember I own the apartment complex, right?"

She nodded.

"Izzy thinks I should give you a small place-- nothing big that would wear you out to keep clean, but someplace all your own. A place for a new start."

"Terry, I can't pay rent until I get a job."
"I'm not expecting rent, and when you do find work, I promise it'll be within your budget."

Not knowing what to say, she kept silent. It seemed too good to be true, and yet so much about Terry fit into that category. He seemed larger than life in an ordinary way that only served to underscore his kindness.

The jeep pulled up to the complex, parked in its usual spot without a trace of formality. It was almost as if the vehicle knew right where to go out of habit. Terry got out, rounded the hood to open her door. She expected him to show her the new apartment, but instead, he pointed to his.

"I have a two story unit, but the one right next to it was built wider, so I divided the floors into single bedroom apartments. The one on top is currently rented out, but the bottom one's all yours. Wait here a moment. I have to get the key from Lauren."

It took a moment for Madison to remember Lauren. Oh yes, the nosy woman who insisted on inviting her to dinner sometime soon, the woman Terry had said was the building superintendent. A hefty title for someone Madison so desperately wanted to avoid.

To her dismay but not to her surprise, Lauren returned with Terry.

"I confess, this is unexpected," Lauren said, as Terry unlocked the vacant apartment. "I thought Madison would go on living at your place. It's so convenient for you two."

"I've told you before, she isn't that kind of a friend." Terry tossed Madison an apologetic look. "Come inside, and see your new home."

Those words felt foreign to her ears, and she struggled to make herself believe Terry had actually said them to her and not someone else.

The place was dark until Terry opened a window and let in some of the outside sunshine. "There's no furniture, but we can take care of that easily enough."

The living room felt like an empty box with four walls, but no bugs crawled on the clean carpet and no water stains scarred the ceiling. She moved through the doorway off the living room, and found herself in a narrow kitchen that was one person deep. Cupboards lined above and below the counter, while the opposite wall stood blank. Good thing, for anything thicker than a poster would get in the way of movement. Framed at the end of the walkway, she saw a window with a view of slender ornamental trees.
"The refrigerator is fairly new," Terry pointed out from behind her, "as are the oven and microwave. There's a food pantry on your right, but no dishwasher."

"I don't mind, Terry."

He smiled, and looked encouraged. "The bedroom is back through the living room. Do you want to see it?"

"No, thank you."

"It's empty, Maddie. You don't have to put a bed in there, but you could get a soft couch and shove it against the wall. It doesn't have to look like a bedroom, if you don't want it to."

Intrigued, Lauren moved closer to listen.

"There's a double window on the East facing wall of the bedroom, a closet, and a single bathroom with a combination bath and shower to save space. The navy blue pile carpet is the same throughout the unit, except for the sandstone tile in the kitchen and bathroom. If you decide to stay here, you'll be responsible for its upkeep, just like any other tenant. I don't allow pets, and make no exceptions so the same rule goes for everyone."

Numb, Maddie nodded without thinking too hard about what he said. Terry sounded as though he'd given the spiel about pets before, and she let him run through his routine without interruption.

When he came to a pause, she realized he was waiting for a response.

"So what do you think? I can give you a reasonable rate for as long as you stay, and until you find work, it's rent-free."

As good an offer as it was, Madison didn't readily accept. Living in his mostly unused apartment was one thing, depriving him of potential income, another. "Won't you lose money by not renting it out to someone else?"

"He will," Lauren interrupted without apology, "but then Terry would give you the shirt off his back, if he thought you needed it." The wording must have suggested something to Lauren, for the woman kept observing Terry and then Madison as though trying to picture something in her mind.
A sick wave of nausea rolled through Madison at what the woman must be thinking. It was hard to ignore the curious looks from Lauren, but Madison took her lead from Terry and paid her little attention.

The apartment was perfect. She couldn't ask for a better fit, and when he pressed her again for an answer, she agreed to the arrangement. If she had money, she would have given it to him in a heartbeat, but she had nothing and was hardly in a position to turn down such a generous offer.

After Lauren had given Terry an update concerning the plumber he had hired to fix some leaky pipes, Terry took Madison back to Three Mile Bay. He said he didn't want to leave her by herself just yet, and she accepted the comment without protest. She didn't feel prepared to be alone again, but knew the time would come for her to live by herself in that perfect apartment next to Terry's.

Even though she knew he hardly lived there, it comforted her to know his place sat right next to hers.

Her place. Her very own place. Her apartment had elbow room, and room for little else, but Madison liked it that way. No one could live there but her, and no one could be expected to live there but a single person. That that person would be her, shot tiny thrills of excitement into her anticipation for the future. She kept silently repeating, "Thank You, Jesus."

Once again, God was making her to hope. So much depended on the character of who God was, His constancy and faithfulness to those who had no strength of their own, that she felt compelled to simply have faith. The only other alternative was to curl up and die.

And there was Terry, always Terry. His steadfast friendship continued to stun her. How long his willingness to help would last, she had no way of knowing.

She only knew God had thrown her a lifeline, and his name was Terry Davis.

"Blessed be God, which hath not turned away my prayer, nor His mercy from me."
~ Psalm 66:20 ~
Chapter Eleven
Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

"Teach me thy way, O LORD, and lead me in a plain path..."
~ Psalm 27:11 ~

"Are you sure you can handle lunch without me?" Izumi came through the kitchen doorway as she slid a purse strap over her shoulder. "I could push my appointment back if you need me here."

"Nope, I've got everything under control." Terry folded his arms, leaned against the counter in his usual easygoing manner. "You already fixed lunch. All I have to do is put it on the table."

"Thanks, Terry. When the Doyles arrived this morning, I thought I'd have to change my plans."

"By all means, keep your lunch date," Terry said as Madison took a seat at the table. "We can handle a hungry crew, can't we, Maddie?"

When his question met with only timid agreement, Izumi made no comment. It didn't seem humanly possible for Terry to ever find someone more damaged than Victor, yet he had done just that. This damaged soul with the quiet beauty of a folded rose, had sharp thorns that could easily draw blood. Madison wouldn't inflict pain on purpose, but the pain would come, just as surely as Terry's nightmares were becoming more violent.

"Stop worrying about lunch, Izzy. Go have a good time and don't give it a second thought. We've got you covered."

A good time wasn't what Izumi had in mind, but she thanked them both and left without having to say who she was meeting for lunch. It was too soon to say anything. In the unlikely event the dinner invitation was turned down, Izumi would rather Terry not know.

* * * *

The Bayfront Restaurant at Three Mile Bay Marina jostled with activity. An overworked waitress hefted a tray above Izumi's head as Izumi maneuvered to find her friend.

"Over here." Emily McCall waved, gave a pleasant smile as Izumi edged between two crowded tables to reach her. "It's a madhouse, isn't it? Serves me right for suggesting we come during the noon rush."
"I'm just grateful you came, Emily," Izumi returned the smile, took a good look at her friend. Emily's blue-brown eyes were framed by straight brown hair cut just above her shoulders, and parted down the middle for a smart look that held a hint of playful spunkiness that reflected its thirty-four-year-old owner.

Intelligent and thoroughly approachable, Emily had that admirable balance of brains and good looks that didn't get in the way of common sense. She didn't take herself seriously, though there was a professional confidence in the way she carried herself that announced she wasn't a pushover for flattery. Competent and sweet. That described Emily to a T.

Added to all this, was Emily's strong sense of loyalty. She had taken a short vacation from her job as a store manager in New York City, to come to Three Mile Bay and care for her ailing mother. When her mom passed away, her father became ill and needed constant care. As an only child, this responsibility fell solely to her. She gave up her job, and six years later, Emily was still in Three Mile Bay, caring for her dad's frail health. They had a comfortable house not far from the Johanneses, and lived on her father's social security and her earnings as a home-based call center operator-- a job suggested to her by John. She handled everything from customer complaints, to billing, order processing, and technical support for a nationwide internet service provider. She had her own home office, and waited for calls as they were routed to the various operators in the call center network. The job took advantage of her college education and solid work ethic, though it couldn't compare to her earnings or prestige as a store manager. But no one could call Emily a quitter.

Their church helped out whenever they could with house repairs, and volunteers took turns watching her father whenever Emily needed to leave and a nurse or aide wasn't available.

Taken as a whole, Izumi knew it wasn't easy for her to get away on such short notice.

Emily's blue-brown eyes flashed with curiosity. "When you called yesterday, Dad told me something was up. As far as I know, nothing's wrong with the girls, AJ is still likely to come back, and your marriage is rock-solid. So what's up?"

"Well, you're right-- this isn't about John or the kids."

Emily smiled. "Which leaves Terry."

"Yes, Terry." Izumi paused as the waitress placed glasses of water on the table, then took their orders. When the waitress left, Izumi noticed the pained smile on Emily's face.
"This has something to do with the woman Terry's helping, doesn't it?"

"You could say that." Izumi paused. "How much have you heard?"

"Not much, save for what's floating around town. Her name's Madison, she's homeless, likely has an unpleasant past, and pretty much hides behind Terry. Oh, yes, and she's very beautiful."

"My, my." Izumi sighed deeply. "I hadn't realized how much had already gotten around."

"Izumi, it's a small town."

"So I've noticed." Izumi waited as the waitress set their plates before them. When they were alone, Izumi leaned forward. "What else have you heard?"

"Aside from ridiculous gossip, that's it."

"What gossip?"

"That he's having an affair with that woman. I don't believe it for a moment, and neither does anyone else who really knows Terry. But you are concerned about him-- I can see it in your face. What's wrong? Is he having another breakdown?"

"Not yet, but I believe he's close to one. Oh, Emily, it's like watching a train wreck in slow motion."

"What can I do to help? Maybe we could organize another prayer group in Terry's behalf, like the one we had when Victor was around."

"That's definitely an idea, but not the reason I asked you to meet me. I was wondering if you'd like to have dinner at our house tomorrow evening."

"Oh." Emily shrugged. "Sure. I guess."

"The thing is," Izumi sucked in a deep breath, "it wouldn't be just dinner with John and me. It would also be with Terry."

"Uh-huh. With Terry." Emily narrowed her eyes. "What exactly are you trying to ask?"
"What I'm asking is this: Are you interested enough in Terry, to find someone to watch your father so you can come to our house for dinner? No commitments, no obligations other than to show up and see how you and Terry like the idea of getting a little friendlier."

Emily raised her brows. "You mean, as in a date?"

"You could call it that, though it's really just dinner at our house. It's not too far-fetched, is it? You already know Terry, and he knows you. So why not come and see what happens?"

"Did Terry ask you to ask me?"

Izumi hesitated before answering. "He doesn't know I'm asking you, but he knows I'm playing matchmaker, and I have his blessing. He's looking for a wife, Emily. The first person I thought of was you."

"Then I'll come." It breathed through Emily's lips like someone accepting a dare. "Like you said, we'll just see what happens. I've always admired and respected Terry, although for some reason, I've always thought he was uninterested in settling down like John. But Terry's a good person."

"Yes, he is."

"Of course," Emily added, her head tilting to one side, "the fact he's also painfully handsome doesn't hurt, either."

Quiet hope threaded into Izumi's thoughts. She had picked the right woman.

"What time do you want me?"

"I was thinking tomorrow, around six thirty."

A frown worried Emily's bottom lip. "I know it's asking a lot--"

"Go ahead and ask."

"Tomorrow is Saturday, and it's nearly impossible to find anyone to watch Dad on a Saturday night. Would it be too much to ask the dinner be moved up a day? Or perhaps forward to Sunday evening?"

Izumi thought it over. "Tonight would work. I need to run to the store after I leave you, but I can have everything ready by six thirty."
"Thanks, Izumi. Are you sure... do you think Terry will mind my coming? He knows the purpose of the dinner?"

"Yes, he'll know. And if I thought he'd mind your coming, I wouldn't have asked you."

She nodded, her face pensive and hopeful. "How should I dress?"

"Dress like you always do. For pity's sake, this is only lasagna at our place, not oysters at a five star restaurant. Come as you are."

"Oh no, I at least need to put on makeup. He already knows what I look like without it, but this will be different." Emily fumbled for her purse, added to the tip Izumi had already left on the table for the waiter.

This woman was not clumsy, and seeing vibrating nerves under the surface of a normally calm exterior, made Izumi realize Emily was taking the dinner seriously.

One of the most eligible bachelors in their congregation was looking for a wife. Izumi couldn't help comparing it to a fairytale Prince Charming searching for a Princess to fit the glass slipper. No man was half so handsome or charming as her own John, but Izumi considered Terry a very sweet person with a huge heart ready to be given to some fortunate woman.

She could only hope that woman would be Emily.

* * * *

It was supposed to be simple. After all, how hard could it be to get the right size? They came in small, medium, and large. Terry peered around the laptop, tried to guess which one fit Madison. Small was out, or did tall and slender count? How about petite? No, that was Izzy. Definitely not Madison.

"Ladies, I hate to interrupt your important transactions" -- Terry paused while the girls traded stickers on the living room carpet, noted the front of Madison's notebook now sported Cinderella twirling in a fancy gown-- "I could really use Maddie's input right now." He turned the laptop, pointed to the screen. "What do you think?"

Ruthie wrinkled her nose. "It's not pink."
"Is your name Maddie? Like I was saying," Terry slanted the laptop to get another look at the product image, "it has twelve reviews, and a five star rating. There's three thousand search results, and they're all starting to look the same. You'd better speak up if you don't like it."

"Can't I keep wearing yours, Terry?"

He sighed. After all the work he'd done to find the right one, she was content with worn hand-me-downs. "Do you want to go around the rest of your life wearing my old coat?"

"I don't mind."

"Well, you should." Terry turned the laptop back, tracked the cursor to the sizing information. "When you start going to job interviews, you need to look like you know what you're doing."

The wording had Ruthie snickering.

"I meant, you need to look more professional. More on purpose." He saw Madison peel off another sticker and examine her notebook for just the right place to put Cinderella's castle. "About the coat? Do you like it?"

Madison shrugged. "Whatever you pick will be fine with me."

"Okay, then we'll go with this one. I just have to figure out the size chart. Hey, John?"

The man in the recliner looked up from his laptop.

"Is my tape measure still in the rollaway tool cabinet in the garage?"

"It should be. Why?"

Terry shook his head. "They want bust, waist, and hip measurements."

"Who does?"

"This website. Makes me feel like I'm trying to buy carpet, or something." Terry tapped his fingers on the laptop. "What size do you think Maddie is?"

"How should I know?"

"Okay, then what size is Izzy?"
John's expression blanked, like a page with no writing. "I haven't a clue. She always buys her own clothes."

"I'm getting that tape measure." Terry set aside the laptop, got up from the couch to go open the rollaway tool cabinet in the garage. Men were easier to shop for. You wanted a coat, you Googled it, found something that looked about right, then bought it in large. Hard to go wrong with that logic.

Minutes later, he returned to the living room with his trusty twenty-five-footer. "Okay, Maddie, stand up."

Madison eyed the tape measure as he fed out some tape, then let it snap back.

"It's not going to hurt. I just need a few numbers, then you can go back to whatever it is you're doing." He glimpsed more stickers decorating the inside pages of Madison's notebook, and tossed Ruthie a question. "I thought you girls took all the princess stickers."

"We did, but we gave her some of ours, and she's been trading some of them for kitty cats and puppy dogs."

"Oh. Okay. As long as you four are happy-- come on, Maddie, don't look at me like that. It's just a tape measure."

"Do I have to, Terry?"

"Yes, you have to. Now get up and let's get this over with."

"Can I have a coat, too, Uncle Terry?"

"You already have one."

"Not one I had to get measured for."

"That's because your mommy knows what she's doing. Come on, Maddie."

With all the reluctance of someone about to swallow a live goldfish, Madison put aside the notebook, then struggled to her feet. Pain flickered in her eyes as she straightened, but she kept any groans to herself. If Terry hadn't been watching her face, he would have missed it.
"Have you taken any painkiller today?"

She nodded.

"What time?" he pressed.

"I don't know."

"Maddie, you need to keep track of these things. You have to be careful not to overdose, but you
don't want to be in pain if you can help it, right?"

Her eyes tracked the tape measure, almost as though it might scroll out and bite her.

"Okay, arms out. Let's get this over with." Terry fed out some tape while John raised an
objection.

"Careful not to pinch that tape measure, or it'll be ruined."

"Please, Terry," Madison backed away, "I'll just wear your old coat. I don't mind, really I don't."

Terry snapped his fingers. "Twine. There's some in the kitchen. Measure out a length, then use
that instead of this tape. All I need is an approximate."

"Is she going to have a pink coat, Uncle Terry?" Ruthie got to her feet while Debbie and Lizzie
played with dolls beside John's recliner. "If she gets one, can I have one, too?"

"Yeah, twine will work," John nodded.

The sound of a car door slamming shot Lizzie to her feet. She ran to the window. "Mommy!
Mommy's home!"

While Terry went to the kitchen to find some twine, he heard the front door open, then the
excited chatter of triplets as they scrambled to tell her what they'd been doing in the two hours
she'd been gone.

"Are the Doyles still here?" he heard Izumi ask.

John answered, "No, they left after lunch. The flower bed has been duly planted, and by all
rights, we should have tulips coming out of our ears next Spring. Hey, what're the shopping bags
for?"
Plastic crinkled as John and Izumi came into the kitchen with groceries.

"Mommy, did you get me a surprise?" One little girl after another asked, until all three looked expectant.

John gave Izumi a laughing look. "How about me? Do I get a surprise?"

"Girls, settle down. You too, John." Izumi reached into the first bag and began taking things out. "I have a lot of cooking to get done before tonight, and no, I'm afraid there aren't any surprises. Although I do have one for Terry."

At the sound of his name, Terry paused his search of the junk drawer. Still no twine.

A cryptic smile sat on Izumi's mouth. "Guess who's coming to dinner?"

With those five words, Izumi had captured his full attention. They'd talked about it, he'd prayed about it, and someone was actually coming. Izumi had talked to an actual woman, and that woman was coming to dinner because of him.

It had definite shock value, a tangibility that mere talk did not.

He cleared his throat, tried hard to feign some sort of calm. "I give up. Who?"

The measured smile on Izumi's face had him wondering like mad. It was hard to imagine a woman being interested in him.

"I invited Emily McCall."

"Really?" Terry swallowed hard. She was too pretty to be even remotely possible. "And she said yes?"

"To come to dinner-- yes, she did. If you want to ask her anything else, you're on your own."

"So you talked to Emily. The one we see in church every Sunday."

"That's the one."
Blood pounded in his ears and Terry felt dizzy, like he’d just been told he won a million dollars, or that his jeep had just been totaled. It was too early yet to say which. "Izzy, when you talked to her-- did she say anything. To you. About me?"

"Half-sentences." John raised his brows. "He's interested, Izumi. I guess you picked a good one."

"Did she?" Terry couldn't help but ask. "What was her reaction when you asked her to come?"

"She seemed open to the idea," Izumi said as Madison peered through the kitchen doorway. "I don't know what to tell you, Terry, except that she's taking the invitation seriously. In hindsight, I wish I'd asked your permission first."

"Why? Did she laugh?"

"Of course not, Emily would never do that." Izumi waded between two girls to put deli cheese into the fridge. "It's just that Emily is taking this seriously. She doesn't consider this a joke, and believed me when I said I had your blessing to play matchmaker."

"Well, you do." Terry fought to keep his thoughts in hand. A woman-- a pretty woman who he'd never dreamed in a million years would ever think of him in that way, was actually coming because of him. It was terrifying.

"You like Emily, don't you?" Izumi placed lettuce into the fridge. "Of all the single women we know at church, she's the sweetest."

"Sure, what's not to like?" Terry desperately tried not to notice John's grin. "So she's coming to dinner."

Izumi moved around John, grabbed a produce bag of multi colored bell peppers. "I'd appreciate some help getting the house ready. She's coming tonight."

"Tonight?" Terry saw the bright lights of an oncoming train, and he was smack in the middle of the tracks.

"I realize it's short notice, but it's hard to find someone to watch her father on a Saturday night."

"Yeah, okay." The train was so close, he could feel the shrieking whistle blasting in his face. Was this what it felt like to date, or was this just how he felt? Terry had absolutely no idea, but he came to a rapid conclusion.
Dating was brutal, and he’d only just started.

* * * *

The talk had attracted her to the kitchen doorway, though she tried hard not to intrude. Izzy had said she was playing matchmaker for Terry, and Terry didn’t seem to mind even though the color had drained from his face. Madison had never been on a date in her life, but she wasn’t stupid. She understood what was being discussed.

Though the conversation had been light, and at times amusing, Madison’s thoughts turned several shades darker. And it sickened her.

Terry wanted a wife, someone to do over, someone to handle however he wanted. A wife was even worse than having to endure it without marriage, for once you got married, you were saying you would go on doing it for the rest of your life. The thought nauseated Madison, and a spark of anger kindled against Terry. He was no different than the Dragon, only Terry wanted to trap a woman with her own words. The Dragon was smarter than that-- he took what he wanted, when he wanted, because he could and no one could stop him. Especially not Madison. Terry was stupid to think any woman in her right mind would actually consent. At least the Dragon had spared her the torment of having a choice.

This woman was coming for dinner?

Madison wanted to laugh and vomit at the same time. Any woman who gave her word to a man, had it coming. She wouldn’t feel sorry for her. To exchange your dignity for a roof over your head was the absolute lowest anyone could go. It shamed Madison to be a woman. What a bunch of hypocritical idiots.

The wash of anger and resentment stirred her to her very core. Terry-- her Terry-- was acting like a man. The realization crushed her, and she went back to her notebook.

Hot stung her eyes, but she ignored it, and resumed her hunt for the best place to put the castle. They were still talking. And Terry had forgotten about her coat. She hadn’t wanted it, but he’d forgotten and it stung more than she cared to admit.

All because of that woman.

She hadn’t given any thought to why Terry had never married, other than that he was different. He was a man, but had risen above what other men do.
Her anger focused on the woman. The intruder was turning Terry into a man, and it both frightened and angered her.

Who did that woman think she was, to do something so cruel to Terry? Of course, Terry didn't seem to be fighting it. Why should he? Once he got married, he was going to have fun. All the fun he ever wanted.

A pang of sympathy went toward the woman, then reversed when Madison remembered the woman had a choice.

They all had choices, and they were all acting stupidly.

Exhausted, Madison rolled onto her side, tucked her knees against her chest and shut her eyes. The world was becoming more than she could handle. Things jumbled around inside her, until she felt so confused she couldn't have given her own name.

Her tummy hurt.

Make it go away, God. Please make it go away.

Footsteps sounded nearby, but she didn't have the heart to open her eyes.

"Uncle Terry! You better come."

"What is it, Deb--" the voice cut short. She heard quick footfalls, then the touch of a hand on her shoulder.

She jerked it away.

"Are you having a flashback? Come on, Maddie, answer me."

"No, I'm fine. Go away."

A sigh of relief said what he did not. "Is it your hip? Do you want me to get you something for the pain?"

She shook her head, "no."

"Okay, not that either. That doesn't leave much else, Maddie."
"Please go away."

"Not until you tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing's wrong. Just leave me alone."

He breathed a heavy sigh. She heard him move back, then heard nothing but silence. Fine. Let him go. She didn't care. Something wet stung her eyes. She blinked it away, then saw Terry sitting on the couch near her feet.

He gave a lopsided grin. "I'm leaving you alone, just as you so politely requested."

An edge of guilt glided across her heart, but didn't draw blood. She stared at him, trying to figure out if he were more human than man.

"A person could freeze to death with that icy glare, Maddie. Be careful how you use it."

"I'm sorry, Terry."

His smile softened. "Okay, that's a start. Care to tell me what this is about? Debbie, Lizzie, Ruthie-- why don't you play somewhere else? I'd like to talk to Maddie." He waited for the sticker books and dolls to be picked up, watched as they moved their play into the hall. "Thanks, girls.

"Okay, Maddie. I saw you listening in at the kitchen door. Don't look so guilty, all right? I don't mind. In a small way, this is even your business, because I can't have Emily over for dinner if you're still here. You understand, don't you?"

Though she really didn't, she nodded "yes." If Terry wanted her to leave, Madison figured she owed him that much, if not a lot more.

"After seeing Lauren's reaction to us this morning, it should come as no surprise that there's talk in town that you and I are having an affair. Emily told Izzy she doesn't believe it, so Emily's giving me the benefit of the doubt; she's treating me like the true friend she's always been." At this, Terry smiled fondly. He shook his head as though he couldn't believe his good fortune. "I have to take you home before she arrives. I hope you understand."

"I do, Terry."
"You do, huh? Then why do I feel like I've kicked you in the teeth?" He rubbed his neck, gave her a long look that showed he didn't understand. "Something you heard a few minutes ago, made you as angry as I've ever seen you. Won't you tell me what it was?"

Even though she wanted to, Madison bit her lip and looked away. How could she talk, when she didn't understand it, herself?

His foot nudged her side. She looked up and he smiled.

"Are we good?" He waited for her response, and she sighed.

"Yes."

"Okay then. If you ever want to talk, you know where to find me. I need to start getting the house cleaned up, so I have to cut this short. Are you sure your hip isn't hurting? It is, isn't it. Wait right there, and I'll get some painkiller."

The hard wash of anger had subsided, and Madison felt more clearheaded. It would have been easier to harbor a grudge if he wasn't so disarmingly kind.

Even though he acted like a man where that Emily was concerned, Madison was grateful he still treated her the same as before. It proved that underneath that male exterior, he was an actual person. Not an animal like the others.

She pushed herself up, tried to straighten her legs as Terry came back with a glass of water and two pills.

"I'm going to give you my cell phone, tonight. Here, take the glass. If you start feeling shaky, call me. I don't want to come for you tomorrow morning, and find you huddled under a blanket on the hard floor, lost in hurtful memories and weak with pain and hunger. I don't think I could take it again, and I'm not sure you could, either. I wish you could watch TV. There's not a lot at the apartment to do by yourself."

"It's okay, Terry. I'll be fine."

"Yeah. Easier for you to say, than for me to believe. Swallow down the pills. The house is a mess, and I have to get started."
She gulped down the water, gave him back the glass. John was already getting out the vacuum cleaner, and food preparation noises came from the kitchen. She hurried to gather her sticker sheets and stuff them into the notebook before the vacuum cleaner carried them away.

Madison scrambled onto the couch, lifted her feet as John vacuumed her side of the room. The vacuum moved to the hall, and she heard laughter as the girls moved yet again to their room.

Terry set aside piles of magazines, a stack of books, pulled off a thick cover, then tugged out the table that had been hidden in the corner of the room like a silent witness to the life going on around it. Matching chairs appeared from under more stacks of books, and were placed at the table with ridiculous dignity for something that had just been used as a bookcase and an ad hoc storage space.

A layer of lemony wood polish was applied, and while Terry rubbed the table to a shining gleam, Madison picked up the feather duster John had left on the couch and started hunting dust. She had no idea why she was helping Terry get ready, only that she felt guilty not trying.

That Emily lady had to be old enough to know what she was getting into, so Madison figured justice would work itself out and the woman would get what she deserved. Terry was a good person, even if he was a man, and wouldn’t hurt the woman on purpose. Of course, it would work out that way, but that wasn’t Madison’s problem. It was that woman’s.

She was almost glad she wouldn’t be here to watch. It calmed her to know Terry wouldn’t get hurt, and that was what mattered.

As for Emily—she was on her own. God help her, for Madison would not, even if she had been able to stay for dinner.

* * * *

It didn’t feel good to leave Madison in that large apartment by herself. It made him uneasy that she’d most likely sit in silence, go to bed early for lack of anything to do. He’d given her his cell phone, made her solemnly promise to eat dinner when it was time, then forced himself to leave before he changed his mind.

She was a grown woman, not a child. He had to remember that, even though she was unable to completely look after herself. Like Izumi had said, Madison needed to learn. The trouble was, Terry didn’t know if he could survive the lessons. That icy stare, the wild flare of anger that made him sense underlying rage— it unnerved him, made him remember the jaded side that kept resurfacing in her personality from time to time.
That rage. Where did it come from?

He could only conclude, from a lifetime of being cruelly used. Beat a dog often enough, hard enough, even the most trusting will turn vicious. Even a puppy.

The morbid turn of thoughts had him feeling depressed. This was no way to head into an important evening.

It still seemed unreal to think Emily McCall was coming. Wow. Things were definitely falling into place, or at least looking hopeful. He'd known Emily ever since she came to care for her mom, then her dad, and had always been impressed by her selflessness. Though he didn't want to place over-importance in outward beauty, Emily had that, and some to spare. She had dated at least two different men from their church, but nothing ever came of it.

Almost as if God were saving her for some guy named Terry.

Interesting thought. Maybe things would be as easy for him, as they had been for John. Only God knew.

* * * *

The house smelled like mouse paradise, a cheesy wonderland of Italian sausage and ricotta smothered over wide noodles, and thickly topped with mozzarella. It was enough to make any self-respecting rodent dare the mousetrap for a taste, then die with a whiskered grin.

Before company arrived, the triplets ate their share of the meal, then ran off to play computer games in their room until dessert. A part of Terry wished he could go with them, and not brave the dating gauntlet before him. If only he could get it over with a few easy steps-- buy the ring, find a dress, exchange I-do's-- and get it over with. He’d be married, and then he could relax. The hard part would be over.

Okay, maybe he was being a tad over-simplistic, but Terry dearly wished Emily would get down on one knee before starting in on the lasagna, and propose. He could either say “yes” or “no,” and that would be that.

"Terry, would you sit down?" Izumi skirted past him on her way to the table, placed a salad bowl next to the ranch dressing. "You're making me nervous."
"That's because he is." John sank onto the couch, reached for a laptop that wasn't there and frowned. "Glad I never had to go through this kind of torture. Terry and I had already started our business and were fresh from college when I met Izumi. We took a look at each other, and decided to get married. Piece of cake."

"Yeah, easy for you to say." Terry went to the recliner and sat down before he got in Izzy's way. "You had it easy. God put everything on a bright shiny platter and served it up with a large bow. All you had to do was have the good sense to accept it."

"True, very true." John moved his feet so Izumi could get past with a crystal bowl centerpiece with floating candles. "Whoa, pulling out all the stops. Are we going to actually light them, or are they just for show?"

Terry sank back in the recliner. "I was fresh from college, too, and it didn't happen for me."

"That's because God's timing is always perfect," Izumi said as she stepped back over her husband's feet. "John, watch what you say to Terry."

"Huh? Why?"

With an exasperated sigh, Izumi went into the kitchen.

A moment later, a car door announced their company had arrived.

"She's here," John called as he went to open the door.

No reason to be nervous, Terry told himself as he stood. I see her every week. This isn't a stranger. It's only Emily. When she stepped into the room, he wiped his hands on his dark brown slacks, and hoped they didn't feel clammy.

"Oh," Emily beamed at the dining table, "this is special. I didn't know I rated this. Am I glad I didn't show up empty-handed." She gave John a bottle of sparkling apple cider. "This is for the hardworking hostess. I hope she didn't go to too much trouble."

John returned Emily's hug. "Nothing's too much trouble for an old friend. Make yourself comfortable on the couch. I'll go give this to Izumi." As he left the room, John tossed a wink to Terry.

No, his best friend didn't have a good appreciation of the stresses of dating. Big surprise.
"Hi, Terry." Emily gave a lovely smile and Terry had difficulty giving her a hug like they usually exchanged. "I don't hear the girls? Are they at a friend's house?"

"No, they're playing Hoppin' Froggies in their room. They've gotten to level seven, while I'm still on four. Can't seem to get past the bog monster-- I get eaten every time." He slipped his hands into the pockets of his slacks, and wondered if what he'd just said sounded dumb or not. It probably did.

"So," Emily smiled and Terry kept track of his pulse to see if it quickened, for he'd heard love was supposed to affect your heart rate, "I hear you have a new pet project."

"New what? Oh, you mean Madison." He nodded, sat down in the recliner while Emily took a seat on the couch. "Izzy told me what they're saying in town. They've got it all wrong, of course, and I was grateful to hear you didn't believe it."

Emily dismissed his thanks. "I don't think many do-- not really. It's just some juicy gossip to chew on until something else comes along. I wouldn't pay too much attention. Give it time, and it'll pass. Most things do."

Laughter bubbled from the girls' room, and they paused to listen.

"Such sweet girls," Emily said as the noise died away. "Do you know how much longer Madison will be in Three Mile Bay?"

Terry shrugged. "Indefinitely, I suppose. She doesn't have any family, no friends except us. I'm giving her one of the smaller units at the complex so she'll have a place of her own. It's unfurnished, but we'll do some shopping and set her up properly."

"That's very nice of you. I don't know many who'd go to so much trouble. But then, you always were a soft touch when it came to those in need."

The compliment lost some of its shine when she didn't smile and instead looked toward the kitchen. She looked ready to start the meal, and Terry wished John would send Izzy out with the mouse bait... with the nicely cooked homemade lasagna.

Things picked up after they sat down to dinner, and the candles flickered their floating flames about the room, and the sound of conversation kept Terry busy. More than once, he was able to make Emily laugh, and the feeling predominated that things were truly falling into place. Then he saw Emily's coat on the couch, reached into his pocket for the cell phone to make a reminding note. And came up empty.
"Would you excuse me a moment?" Terry slid back from the table, tossed another one-liner at Emily that had her eyes watering with laughter, then pushed into the kitchen.

He checked the small rooster clock perched above the fridge. She should have eaten by now, and might have already gone to sleep. He decided to risk it, and call anyway, guessing she was still awake.

"Come on, Maddie, answer. I told you to look at the screen, and when you see this number-- Hello, Maddie? Did I wake you?"

"No," sounded dully in his ear. "I can't sleep."

The heavy feeling returned to his heart, that personal rain cloud that had followed him since meeting Madison. It rumbled and threatened lightning, and Terry had to work hard not to worry. God was in control. He had to believe that.

"Did you eat?" he asked, squeezing his eyes shut and shooting a silent prayer to Heaven. "I told you to nuke one of the frozen dinners, remember?"

Izumi came into the kitchen, gave Terry a curious look to see him on the phone. "Who is it?"

"Yes, I ate." The words sounded flat and hollow, and terribly lonely.

"Good, that's good. That's real progress. If you get bored"-- Terry berated himself silently-- "when you get bored, try listening to the sound system in the cabinet beside the television. But keep the volume down. The other tenants will probably mind the noise."

Izumi cast her eyes skyward. She kept her voice hushed, so neither the woman on the phone, nor the woman in the living room, could hear. "Emily is waiting for you, Terry. She didn't come here to talk to us."

"How's your dinner?" Madison asked.

"It's going great. Hey, I have to get back. I just wanted to check up on you, make sure everything's okay. I'll see you tomorrow morning, all right? Good night, Maddie." He hung up the phone, tried to appease Izumi by hustling back to the living room and offering a lame excuse. Izumi came back with the cider bottle, topped off everyone's glass with yellow-white fizz.
He needed to get that coat. The winter would only get harsher, and the thought of Maddie braving it with only his old town coat, bothered him. He still hadn't found that twine.

"Terry?"

He looked up and realized everyone was waiting for him to respond. To what, he had no idea, only that the pained look on Izzy's face meant he had probably missed something important.

"I'm sorry, my thoughts were elsewhere. What was the question?"

John gave a good-humored laugh. "You were invited on a tour of Ellis Island."

"Oh. Who made the invitation?"

"Who do you think?" John flashed Emily a long-suffering smile. "You'll have to forgive him. He's been preoccupied lately, getting Abby and Jake's house ready, and..."

"And of course his pet project," Emily added with a flourish of her crystal glass. "It's okay. I guess it comes with the territory."

There was a ring of resignation in her voice, and it oddly gave Terry fresh hope. He coaxed her into explaining the invitation.

"My Aunt gave dad and me New York Passes to go see Ellis Island, so we'd stay at her house for a day or two and visit. Aunt Martha is housebound, so she can't visit Dad, and Dad's health won't allow for travel without more help than I can provide alone. There's no way Dad can use his pass, so that leaves me with two passes to New York, and a promise from Aunt Martha to let me invade her hospitality and use her guest rooms whenever I want. I'm hoping you'll help me get Dad to his sister's house in Jersey City, Dad and I will take one of the guest rooms, and you'll take the other. Then while Aunt Martha and Dad visit, we can see the sights. What do you think?"

"Jersey City? What is that-- a two hundred, three hundred mile drive?"

His practicality tossed cold water on Emily's enthusiasm, but she forged on. "It's almost a six hour drive from here, and with Dad, it'll take even longer. We can count on a full day to get there, stay the night, spend a day or two visiting, then start back early in the morning."

"Sounds like you have it all worked out."
"Not exactly. I was going to ask someone from church to volunteer, for Dad hasn't seen his sister in years. But then Izumi invited me to dinner, and it seemed like Providence."

"Hard to argue with that," Terry smiled. "Looks like you have your volunteer. When were you planning all this?"

"There's no fixed date, only whenever would work best for you." Emily's smile beamed like afternoon sunshine. He could tell she considered this a great favor, not only to her dad, but also to herself.

Since Terry figured he needed all the breaks he could get, he didn't give the request more than a moment's thought. If doing a good deed also meant getting more favor with Emily, then so be it. Aunt Martha and Stanley McCall, Emily's dad, would be there to chaperone the entire time they were in the house. Everything was very proper and seemly, and besides the time away from home, Terry could almost look forward to it as a vacation.

Except with a frail old man, and someone's housebound aunt in Jersey City.

Dessert was served, finally tearing the girls from Hoppin' Froggies long enough for fancy ice cream and even fancier cookies. Izumi had really outdone herself. At least the evening wasn't turning into the train wreck he'd been dreading. Overall, things were going fairly well.

Terry promised Emily to get back to her about the timing of the trip, and she left after giving him another hug. This time, it seemed tighter, more grateful maybe. He didn't know. Women often spoke in a language all their own, and it was up to the guys to either figure it out as they went, or drown trying. Maybe this is what dating felt like. And then again, maybe this was what it felt like to be desperate.

As Emily drove away, Izumi gave Terry a hug herself, more out of relief than anything else.

"Does this mean it's official?" Terry asked. "Do I have a girlfriend, or is this still a matter of more wait and see?"

"Hey Buddy"-- John slapped him on the shoulder-- "I wouldn't rush things. You snuck out in the middle of dinner to call another woman, and Emily still wants to see you. That is what you were doing, right? Thought so. Even Emily caught on. Oh well, just take things as they come, and see what God has planned."

"But does this mean I have a girlfriend?"
John shrugged, looked to Izumi for an answer.

"I think that's probably a 'yes,'" Izumi said, "but I'd wait before you announce it to the world. You're just going to have to take things one step at a time."

Terry sucked in a patient breath, held it, then remembered he had something important to do.

Madison needed a coat.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy."
~ Matthew 5:3, 7 ~
Chapter Twelve
Close Friendships

"A friend loveth at all times, and a brother is born for adversity."
~ Proverbs 17:17 ~

His head dipped forward as Dad dozed on the couch with the TV remote still in his hand. Samantha, the volunteer from church, left the house in full tip-toe so she wouldn't disturb him, although Emily knew it was unnecessary. Her dad would want to talk before bedtime.

As she tidied the living room, the elderly man on the couch came to life.

"Have a nice evening, Daddy?"

"Never mind me," he grinned, "how did things go with Terry?"

"All right I guess." Emily took a seat on the couch.

He frowned. "Just 'all right'? Nothing better than that? What's wrong with the young man? Doesn't he know what a rare find you are?"

"Terry is hardly young, Daddy."

"Nonsense." Dad clicked off the television. "When you get to be my age, anyone under seventy is a youngster. So what'd you think of him? And don't give me another 'all right.' I want to hear something different."

Not ready yet to speak her mind, Emily gave what she hoped was an encouraging smile. "I had pretty much the same impression of him as I've always had. But then, we've always liked Terry."

"I'd say that's an accurate statement." Dad folded his hands over his belly. "I haven't always approved of his choices, but then, we can't have everything."

"No, I don't suppose we can." She didn't need to ask her father's meaning. The entire town was talking about the woman Terry had adopted, brought home like she were a stray dog or a wounded animal he'd found on the side of the road. It was that point, in particular, that she didn't feel up to discussing with her father.

"Did you see her?" Dad slanted Emily a look, and she shook her head.
"Not yet."

"From what I hear, she's supposed to be a real looker."

"Yes, I hear the same."

"He sure is making a mess of things." Dad shook his head. "For your sake, Sweetie-pie, I hope he learns his lesson soon. If he doesn't stay out of other people's business, and leave well enough alone, it's going to put you in a hard spot after you're married."

"Daddy, I'm not getting any younger."

"I realize that. I can appreciate your biologic clock ticking, or whatever folks say it's supposed to do after a certain age, but more than anything else, I want you to lead a happy life. Taking in two-footed strays won't do that." Dad sat quiet a moment. "I like Terry, I always have, but he spends too much time trying to help those who'd be better off left alone. If I were John, I wouldn't put up with it."

"Then I suppose Terry should be glad you're not John."

Dad gave a wry laugh. "I'm only saying Terry was begging for trouble when he took in that woman. If he doesn't get rid of her, I hope she leaves before she becomes too much of a problem."

Emily sighed. The same thought had crossed her mind, as well.

* * * *

Music punctuated the stillness, bringing with it a rhythmic wash of soft trumpet and piano. The melody caught, toe-tapped a few beats, then slid into a gentle sway that made the air lighter. She could breathe in, breathe out, and not feel like mud was sucking into her lungs. Earlier, a lucid memory had slashed through her quiet evening staring up at the living room ceiling, and she resorted to Terry's sound system for escape.

She kept the volume turned low, just as Terry had said, and cuddled on the couch beneath a thick comforter. The memory left an ugly bruise on her mind, like someone's hand that refused to let go without a knockdown fight. The music helped.
Wiggling deeper into the blankets, she pulled them up around her chin until she felt safe. Was he having a good time eating dinner with that woman-- with Emily? Madison couldn't help but wonder. He'd sounded just fine on the phone, in fact, he sounded like he was having fun.

Which was good... sort of.

A car door slammed outside the apartment, and she ducked under the covers to hide. People greeted one another, just on the other side of the living room window. A man's sharp laughter followed. The noises faded as the people left, and after several moments in hiding, Madison emerged from the blanket to peek about the room.

Safe again.

A relieved sigh pushed through her chest, and she tried to steady her breathing. Why did men have to be so loud, so vulgar? The mere thought of them made her want to wash her hands. Couldn't God have started out humanity with something else besides a man? Did He have to make them the way He did-- couldn't He have created something different? Something that didn't want every part of you?

Even though it screamed against her personal way of seeing things, she had to believe that God knew best. Yes, God was good, but men had turned themselves into animals. It wasn't God's fault, and it might not even be poor Terry's fault. After all, Terry was only following the example of other men. It made Terry worthy of pity, but certainly not guilt.

Terry was too good for that.

Another car door slammed, jerking Madison deep beneath the comforter. Why did people call them comforters, anyway? Where was the comfort? She sure wasn't feeling any.

She gulped in the stale air beneath the blanket tent, and wished she wasn't such a coward. Just because she was by herself wasn't any reason to be so jumpy. Did other people hide under blankets when life got a little rough? Did they? Of course not. But then, they were normal and she wasn't, so hiding was a very real option.

Silly, she thought, and started to come up for air.

Then the door handle rattled.
Down she went, yanking the cover back over her head. It was Terry, it had to be. He was probably coming over to check on her. She heard a key slide into the lock, waited for the door to open and Terry’s assuring voice to calm her fraying nerves.

The handle jiggled again, and Madison’s heart plummeted to the furthest tips of her toes. It wasn’t Terry. Whoever stood outside that door, trying to get in, wasn’t Terry. If it had been the building superintendent, the door would have opened, for Lauren had spare keys to all the apartments.

Then who was trying to get in?

The phone. Where was the phone? Her hands groped in the darkness for the cell phone Terry had given her. It hadn’t left her side all evening, but now when she needed it-- oh, where was that phone? Her fingers felt the folds of the comforter, became frantic when they touched something hard.

In her mind’s eye, she could picture someone pressing their face to the shuttered window, trying to look inside.

She tugged at the comforter until it released Terry’s phone, then punched his code onto the lit up screen, hit the address book where Terry’s name was listed at the Johanneses’ house.

Forcing herself to breathe, she waited.

After several rings, a man’s sleepy voice answered. "Hello?"

"Terry, someone’s trying to get into the apartment."

* * * *

Maybe the rich cheese lasagna he’d eaten for dinner was to blame, but Terry fell in and out of sleep like someone tumbling down the side of a hill. It vaguely reminded him of an old child’s rhyme, Jack and Jill went up the hill, and it only deepened the absurdity of the dreams. Then the hill shook, and Terry fell all the way awake.

He blinked up at John, and wondered if he’d had another nightmare and just hadn't realized it yet.

The bedroom clock blurred before him, as did John's words. Right up until the moment Terry heard Madison's name.
"What about her?" he asked.

"She's on the phone. Izumi's talking to her on the extension in the bedroom. Someone's trying to break into the apartment."

"What?" Terry reached for pants, noticed John was already half dressed and tugging on a shirt. "Is she all right?"

"I think so, but she sounds scared. Whoever's trying to open the door, it sounds like they're getting angry." John hustled into the hall while Terry threw on some clothes. "She's asking for you, Terry."

"I'm coming." He pulled the sweater over his head, rushed into the master bedroom as Izzy handed him the phone.

"I told her you're coming."

"Thanks." Terry huffed out a breath, put the receiver to his ear. "Maddie, are you there?"

"Terry, oh, Terry, please come!"

"Try to breathe, Maddie. We're on our way."

"Please, God. Someone's trying to force open the door."

"That does it, I'm calling the police."

Izumi spoke up. "John's already done that."

"You hear that, Maddie? Help is on the way. Stay inside and don't open that door until either the police or I tell you it's all right? You got that?"

"Yes."

"Hang tight. I'm coming." He pushed the receiver to Izumi, dashed back to his room to grab a coat and car keys. In the back of his mind, he wondered if an old friend had just resurfaced and prayed he was wrong.

* * * *
A hissing sound came from outside, and still Madison refused to even peep beyond the safety of the blanket. She huddled with Terry's phone, clung to Izzy's calm voice and silently asked God to keep her safe, to not let the bad person in.

A vicious yell cut through the night, then the terrifying shatter of glass. She froze, tried hard not to move, didn't want to give away her hiding place on the couch.

Don't breathe.

The words fluttered through her brain, and she obeyed. Running footsteps sounded, tires screeched. A heartbeat later, doors opened and she could hear people asking each other what had happened. The voices sounded so clear, and the crisp smell of night air began to seep through the blanket.

Still, she didn't move, didn't breathe but for little puffs sucked through her nose. Had the man gone?

"Hey, you okay in there?" A man's surly voice called out, as loud as if he were standing right next to her.

She said nothing, just gripped her hand over the cell phone and tried not to shiver. Her blood had turned to ice, and she imagined the man hulking above her, ready to pounce.

Terry, where are you? she cried in silence.

Red and blue flashed through her blanket in the acknowledgment that the police had arrived. A shiver forced its way up her back. She heard at least two cop radios, the startled conversation of people having been disturbed in the middle of the night.

A man's voice stood out above the others. "Someone's in there. I know, because there's a light on in the living room and the stereo's playing. Don't think it's Terry, though. His jeep isn't here."

"Maybe someone stole it," a woman offered excitedly.

"I'm the superintendent," Lauren said, "and if there's someone in there, it's probably Terry's friend, Madison. The poor thing must be scared to death by now."
Tires screeched to a stop, someone shouted and pounding footsteps grew louder. "That’s my apartment," she heard someone say. It blessedly sounded like Terry. While she tried to force herself to suck in air, Terry identified himself and explained that she was in the apartment.

"Mr. Davis," a man pushed Terry’s voice back until she could no longer hear what they said.

"Izzy," Madison whispered into the phone, even though she didn’t have to keep quiet, "I’m okay. Something came through the window but the police and Terry are here now. Thanks for staying with me." She hung up after Izzy thanked God, then tried to pry her white-knuckled hand from around the phone. It was time to get off the couch, but her legs refused to move.

Terry became frantic to get into the apartment, and John’s voice mixed with others, including Lauren’s.

"Maddie! Maddie, are you all right?" The urgency of Terry’s cries pushed her to her feet.

She fought the blanket off, turned to look at the shattered glass covering the floor, the blinds mangled beneath a bulky canvas bag. Bricks and stone fell from its mouth, scattered onto Terry’s plush gray carpet while police lights glinted off the mean looking glass shards that littered everywhere. The soft layer of piano and trumpet continued on as though nothing had happened.

A breath caught in her throat, and relief smeared into numb shock.

An NYPD officer called through the window, telling her to stay put.

"Are you alone in there?" he asked, his hand resting on the butt of a holstered gun. "Did the intruder get inside?"

"No, I don’t think so."

The cop cast a wary glance behind her. "If you can find your shoes, you'd better put them on."

She reached for the running shoes beside the television cabinet, while the cop in the window shone a light behind her-- flicked it to her right, left, swept to the closed half bath on the main floor.

"Please hurry, ma’am, but take care not to hurt yourself."

She nodded, tied her shoes, ventured over the glass and winced as shards crunched beneath her feet. When she opened the door, a strong hand led her to a white police cruiser, helped her
inside and left the car door open. Then she saw it, the ugly yellow spray-paint scrawled across Terry's apartment. It read simply,

*Thanks a lot.*

"Maddie?" Terry's eyes locked on hers. He stood across the way with John, both listening as an officer spoke to them. When she gave Terry a smile, relief flooded his strong features. He left John, moved through the people and beelined for the cruiser. Lauren started to come with him, but a policewoman held her back and started asking questions about the complex.

"Terry." Madison's hand reached for him and he caught it in his own. "You came."

"Of course I came." Terry stooped to look at her, then took off his coat so she could put it on over her PJs. "Are you all right?"

"Someone tried to get into the apartment."

"I know." His eyes flicked to the shattered window where the first officer could be seen searching the bottom floor with a drawn gun. Terry's hand gripped hers.

"I didn't let him in, Terry. Not when he screamed, and not when he threw that bag of bricks through the window."

Terry looked back at her. "You know it was a him? Not a her?"

"It was a man," she insisted. "I heard him cuss you out just before the glass broke."

Terry's head bowed a moment. "Did you see his face?"

"No, I hid under the blanket on the couch and didn't come out until I heard you."

"Okay." He pushed out a breath, gave her hand another squeeze before straightening. "You did good to call home."

"Terry, I'm sorry about the window."

"Why should you be? It wasn't your fault. It's an old building, and that window was one of the few I never replaced with safety glass. Looks like I will now, though. Stay put, okay? I need to talk to someone."
"Terry?" She leaned out of the cruiser as he started to turn. "Please don't leave without me."

He gave a reassuring half smile. "Don't worry, you're coming back to the house with us." His gaze skimmed over her one last time, as though trying to make certain she was all right, then he went back to the officer talking to John.

The knowledge that he'd come when she needed him, made her happier than she realized. She leaned back and snugly hugged herself.

A policewoman came and asked Madison to relate everything that had happened, while Lauren listened and hovered in the background. Madison went through it all, with Lauren interjecting her own thoughts until she was asked to please let Madison speak without interruption. Then Madison had to repeat herself when the first officer came back and wanted the same thing--except this one took notes.

"Do you need any medical attention?" he asked.

Madison shook her head, "no." She was fine--better than fine, for Terry had come. Her toes curled in her shoes and she hugged herself tighter. It felt good to be safe.

After the apartment was searched, Terry went inside and Lauren surged forward to fuss over Madison. When Lauren saw Madison wasn't saying much, she turned to talk to John as he stood beside Madison's cruiser, his blonde hair as uncombed as Terry's. They must have literally jumped out of bed to get here so soon.

When Terry emerged, his cell phone was in his hand. He stuck it into his slacks pocket, said something more to one of the policemen, then came back to where she and John were waiting. Thankfully, Lauren had already moved on.

"They said we could go now." Terry blew out a sigh. "John, would you take her home for me? I need to stick around and board over the window."

"Do you need help?"

"No, I can handle it." Terry looked back at his apartment. "I was really praying he'd leave me alone."

John gave a sympathetic nod. "Do they know if he's still living with his mom?"
The sadness that spread across Terry's face had Madison wondering who they were talking about. It almost sounded as though they knew who had broken the window.

"They're sending someone out to her place," Terry said with a shrug. "I doubt they'll get a straight answer from his mom, but who knows? Maybe she'll talk."

"Yeah, right." John folded his arms. "She'll protect him the way she always does. I wonder what that guy has to do before she'll admit her son's no good."

Terry didn't respond.

"Well," John heaved a sigh, "one thing's for sure-- I don't trust him. Men like him don't have any limits."

"I know, but we don't know it was him." Terry ran a hand through his already mussed hair. "Maybe it wasn't Victor, maybe it was someone else."

John gave Terry a look and Terry groaned.

"The spray-paint, the bricks-- I even changed the locks after he trashed my apartment, so his key no longer worked. It was him."

"Who?" Madison asked.

"I'll tell her about it on the ride home," John said as Terry helped her out of the cruiser. "Does she need anything from the apartment before we leave?"

Madison looked down at her pink and black two-piece PJs with the teddy bears all over them; Izumi had picked them out, and Madison thoroughly loved them.

Shaking his head, Terry walked her into the apartment for a change of clothes while John waited in the jeep. Someone turned off Terry's sound system, surrendering the shattered night to the squawk of police radios and the steady drone of cops as they interviewed the onlookers for eyewitnesses.

A lot of help she was to Terry, Madison thought dully. She'd kept her head down, her mouth shut, and hadn't even gone to the window so she could give a description of the intruder.

She followed Terry upstairs, passed him as he waited in the hall while she gathered what she needed from the bathroom.
"I've been thinking." Terry leaned against the doorjamb as though he carried a lot of weight on his shoulders. "It's not wise for you to stay in my apartment while this is going on. Tomorrow morning, we need to get the ball rolling, start the necessary paperwork to get you into your own apartment. It'd be safer for you somewhere else."

"I'm sorry, Terry."

"Stop saying that, would you? What happened tonight, happened because of me, not you." He shook his head. "That scares me. You were almost hurt because of my poor past judgment."

"I don't understand."

"You will. John will explain things on the ride home."

She turned her back to Terry so she could wad jeans and a shirt around some underclothes. She thought of the mess downstairs, the shattered glass, the destroyed blinds, and wished she had done something—anything—to avoid Terry being hurt.

He looked so sad. Even depressed.

Her wad of clothes bunched under one arm, she followed Terry downstairs, past the squad cars and to the awaiting jeep.

Terry opened the passenger door, closed it behind her, then leaned through the window to talk to John. "After I get the window boarded over and clean up the glass, I'll get a ride home from Lauren." Discouragement glinted in Terry's brown eyes. "I was hoping he'd keep it to the occasional ranting phone call. I really was."

"I know, Terry."

Realizing she still had Terry's coat, Madison took it off and passed it through the window. At least she could keep him from freezing to death in all that cold. At least she was good for something.

John started the engine, and Terry headed back to his apartment. She turned in her seat to watch him go inside, and kept watching as the jeep pulled away. When he went in, he went in alone and it made her feel guilty. Maybe she should have stayed to help clean the mess. Though she wanted to say that to John, his silence sat so heavy she didn't dare open her mouth.
She hurried to put on her coat, or that is, Terry's old coat.

Poor, poor Terry.

She jumped when John slapped the steering wheel, then scooted closer to the passenger door.

"I hope he's happy. I hope that poor excuse of a human being is happy." John gritted his teeth. "After all those sacrifices, everything Terry did for him, and he has the nerve to pull a stunt like this. Can you believe it?"

She gave a weak shrug, not knowing what he meant.

"Trashing Terry's apartment wasn't enough-- oh, no. He has to come back, rub Terry's nose in it. Victor ought to be grateful he's not in my face right now."

The sentiment had bite, a hint of threat and a whole lot of danger. Nibbling her lip, Madison buckled on the seat belt, then fisted her hands when they began to tremble.

"He tries so hard it breaks my heart." John checked the speedometer, and the car slowed to the speed limit. "I wish he wouldn't take so much on himself. He's a good guy-- a genuinely nice guy-- and people take advantage of that. They see an opportunity and take it. They don't think about Terry's feelings, but wipe their feet on him like he was a stupid doormat. I hope Victor's happy." John gave the steering wheel another punch. "Terry's taking this hard, and it's all thanks to his good buddy. Victor Barlow."

The edge in John's voice kept her quiet. From what she'd just heard, she realized the man at the door was someone Terry had once tried to help.

It was a sobering moment. Now she understood the reluctance she sometimes felt in John and Izzy's presence. That quiet wondering-- Madison understood it now. They were worried she was going to hurt Terry just like Victor had, and it sounded as though there were others.

It didn't make her feel good to know Terry was sticking himself out so far for her. He'd been burned before, and was still suffering for it, and yet he still wanted to put her in a new apartment. An apartment with outrageously low rent.

"After I drop you off at the house," John said, his tone approaching sanity, "I'm going back to help him clean up."

"Could I go with you?"
"And have Terry worry about you overworking your hip?" John slid a glance in her direction. "If you want to help him, start eating regularly. If he sees you're getting stronger, it'll give him a victory. God knows, he'll need something to smile about after this."

Bricks and rocks weighed her down, threatening to shatter her soul like Terry's window. She managed a quiet, "Sorry."

Looking annoyed with himself, John sighed. "There's no reason for you to be sorry. We all want what's best for Terry, you included."

"Mr. Johannes, I'll try hard not to let him down. I know I owe him a lot, and the last thing I want is to hurt Terry the way the others have."

"I appreciate your saying that." He glanced at her. "You don't have to Mister me. My name's John."

Her smile felt wobbly.

He blew out a heavy, tired sigh. "What a world we live in. What a fouled-up, crazy world." He considered her a moment, and made no further mention about the world they lived in.

She sensed his questions, and was only grateful he didn't ask them out loud. Yes, she knew it was a fouled up world. A mean world, unmerciful and unrelenting, filled with men who did very bad things. Broken windows and trashed apartments were the least of their crimes.

Aside from Terry and, okay-- John-- Madison could wish the whole lot of them in hell. It was nothing short of what they deserved.

* * * *

When he reached home, John updated Izumi on what had happened. He kept it to the facts, didn't elaborate on speculation or wallow in misery. He'd vented enough anger on the way home, now he could think without punctuating each thought with something against Victor. Terry was having a bad night; no mention of you-know-who. Terry had a nightmare to clean up at the apartment; not even a whisper of who to thank for it. By the time John kissed Izumi and started back for Chaumont, he'd only said Victor's name once.

Later, as John pulled back into the complex parking lot, he saw with relief that the police had gone and everyone had disappeared into their apartments. Even Lauren had gone home.
The shed stood open, and John found Terry measuring out remnants of board to fit over the window.

Terry didn't ask why John had come back, but gave him a quiet look as John pulled work gloves from the shelf, hauled away a metal trash can, then headed for the apartment. Sometimes they needed no words to know what the other felt. They'd been brothers for too long, to need much more than the fellowship of simply being there.

Even though Terry had a mess to clean up, he didn't have to do it alone.

Anger bubbled inside John as he cleared away the destruction. His temper eased when he thought of Terry having to deal with not only his own anger, but someone else's as well. Better to cool down, for his buddy had enough to deal with.

When Terry carried over the wood, John stopped long enough to hold the remnants in place while Terry hammered nails and closed off the apartment from the night air. Neither said a word as John got out Terry's Shop-Vac, went over the carpet several times while Terry hauled away the trash can and brought out a new one to empty the vac's canister.

By the time they finished, the sun was turning the sky into subtle colors John didn't have names for. He wasn't an artist like his son-in-law, Jake, and could give no artsy descriptions to the colors he saw. Straight forward orange, yellow, a bit of red, then solid sky blue as dawn turned to day. It was a pleasant sunrise.

They'd put in a good two hours, and Terry's apartment was as secure as they could make it until the window people could come down and replace the panes. The yellow scrawl of spray-paint remained on the outside, but nothing could be done about it now. The carpet was vacuumed, the pavement swept, the tools put away and the shed locked.

As they headed back to Three Mile Bay, John wished there was something more he could do. He hadn't been able to put that lopsided grin back on Terry's face.

* * * *

The loud whisper coming from the hall woke him. Terry pushed open his eyes, knowing his usual morning greeting from the girls had just been called off by either John or Izumi. The bedroom door stayed closed, and even though light shone around the curtains on the window, he rolled onto his stomach and went back to sleep.
When his eyes blurred open sometime later, it was almost ten thirty. It took willpower to climb out of bed, push into his bathroom to shower and shave. He wanted to crawl back into sound sleep and enjoy the bliss of not having to face life.

Maybe he would. Maybe he'd go back to bed.

He put it off long enough to get in the shave. He stalled again so he could shower, and by the time he was dressed, it no longer made sense to go back to bed. He had known all along he wouldn't, but the postponement gave a chance for routine to kick in and he no longer had to make any decisions about anything. All he had to do was not think about it.

He didn't want to think at all.

Coffee would help, he decided, and headed down the hall on his way to the kitchen. He stopped when he saw Madison sitting on the couch, scribbling in her notebook. Her bedding was neatly folded off to one side.

"Oh, there you are." Terry turned to see John emerge from the office. "I was beginning to think you were going to spend all day in bed."

"No, I'm up."

"Did you sleep all right?"

"Yeah, I guess." Terry looked back at the couch. "Has she eaten breakfast?"

"Yup. She came to the table when Izumi called her, and ate with the rest of us."

"Really? I usually have to drag her to the table before she finally eats."

"She's trying, Terry."

Terry blew out a sigh. "Good for her then. Any coffee left?"

"There should be," John said as Debbie padded over the carpet to tug at Terry's hand.

"Hey, Munchkin." Terry patted Debbie on the head, started for the kitchen with Debbie hard on his heels.

"Uncle Terry?"
"Yeah?" He nodded to Maddie, pushed into the kitchen and zeroed in on his smiley face mug.

"Are you up?"

"Am I what?" He poured himself a hot cup of java.

A pint-sized Debbie sighed. "Are you up? Are you done sleeping yet?"

Terry inhaled the aroma of ground beans, took a sip, and relaxed. "Oh, that's good." He opened one eye, saw Debbie patiently staring up at him. "Okay, I'm listening."

Her face perked. "It's Saturday."

"Okay." He sipped. "What about it?"

Another cute sigh had Terry almost smiling.

He raised his brows. "Allowance day?"

"Please, Uncle Terry?"

He warmed his fingers around the mug. "The science store in Watertown again?"

She nodded vigorously. "Daddy said we couldn't talk to you until you were done sleeping."

"I guess I'm done," he mused, pulling out a chair to enjoy the brew. "Just give me fifteen minutes, okay?"

A quick smile, and Debbie dashed off to get ready. Terry quietly flinched at having to drive into Watertown so late in the morning. When they got there, it would almost be lunch, then they'd have to do their usual hamburgers and french fries, then spend at least an hour at the science store.

What usually was an enjoyable inconvenience, was today more inconvenient than anything else. He hated himself for even having that thought, for Debbie was only looking forward to a Saturday morning with her uncle. It was their special time together, their outing. Of all the triplets, only Debbie had somewhere special she wanted to go to spend her allowance.
The other two Munchkins usually blew their wad at the MegaMart, so at least this was in the pursuit of science. Science or not, his sweet little Debbie wanted to go, and that was reason enough.

"Terry?" John strode into the kitchen. "Debbie says you're taking her to the science store. I had no idea she wanted to go this morning."

"It's all right, John. I don't mind."

"Why don't you let me stand in for you? You can stay home and rest, maybe do some fly fishing. You've been through enough, without being dragged all over creation by a girl nearing five."

Terry finished off his mug. "I can handle it, but thanks."

Even though he knew John wanted to press the issue, John didn't. That unspoken look of concern was in John's face again, and Terry understood what it meant. Everyone was afraid Terry would fall apart, including John. That was why Izzy or John had kept the girls from waking him sooner, why-- Oh. Now he got it. Why Maddie had eaten breakfast without a struggle. Now it made sense.

When John went back to the office, Terry washed out the mug and thanked God for people who cared about him. He'd been in a mood, he realized, and struggled to snap out of it before he frightened his family any further.

His mind wandered only a moment, and yellow-spray paint flashed before him. The callous words, "Thanks a lot," punched his heart yet again. Couldn't he do anything right? He'd tried so hard to help, and instead only managed to make things worse.

God, please help me. Don't let me shatter.

Movement behind Terry's back had him turning.

Silently, Madison stood in the doorway in jeans and a white T-shirt with sunny flowers splashed across the front. Her blonde hair and that shirt made her look like a slender daisy.

"Are you going somewhere?" she asked in a mouse-like, timid voice that made Terry instantly want to protect her. Heaven help him, for he had already failed with Victor.

"Into Watertown," Terry nodded, placing the mug into the drying rack. "I'm taking Debbie to lunch, then the science store. After I get back, I'd like to start the paperwork on your apartment."
Madison hung her head. She looked behind her, then at the kitchen tile.

Terry sighed. "Do you want to come with me and Debbie? I warn you, it's not going to be very interesting. We'll probably be talking science, or whatever else that pops into her small noggin. I've grown fond of it, but you... you might not want to come."

Before Terry finished speaking, Madison had disappeared into the living room.

"Never mind," he sighed, going to the cupboard to pour himself a quick bowl of cereal. He dumped in corn flakes, nonfat milk, snagged a spoon and began munching when Madison reappeared in her shoes and coat.

"Going someplace?" he asked.

She pulled up the coat's zipper. "I'm coming with you."

"Oh." Terry stopped munching, shrugged, then resumed his cereal. That was just fine with him. "By the way, I ordered that new coat last night. It should get here sometime next week."

The news pleased her, he could tell.

When Debbie came into the kitchen bundled securely against the cold, Terry glanced at his watch. "What do you know? Fifteen minutes on the nose. Hey, Munchkin, we have some company this morning." He nodded in Madison's direction, and Debbie blinked.

"Does this mean we can't go to the Weirdly Wonderful World of Science?" the girl asked all in one large breath.

Terry gave her a look that had Debbie smiling in spite of her worry. "Would I invite someone along, on our outing, if it meant we couldn't walk the aisles of the very best science store ever built?"

Debbie grinned, twirled in her pink skirt while Ruthie and Lizzie wandered into the kitchen.

He shoveled in more cereal as Debbie and Madison waited for him to finish breakfast. He tried to hurry, knowing they had to be getting hot in those coats.

"And what are my other two Munchkins going to be doing while we're gone?" Terry asked.
A practical smile came from Lizzie. "We're going to play."

"Sounds logical." Terry went to the sink to wash out the bowl. Seeing this, Debbie began hopping up and down with excitement. "You might want to stop, or you're going to overheat in that coat," he warned. "Have you used the bathroom yet? If you have to pee, I'm not stopping at a gas station. You'll have to hold it until either your eyes turn yellow, or we reach Watertown. Whichever comes first."

With a laugh, Debbie ran off to the bathroom. To Terry's surprise, so did Madison. He hoped Maddie knew he was only joking. After she went into the office to use the half bath, Terry stopped by the office to talk to John.

"Just wanted to let you know that I'm taking Maddie with me."

The mild surprise on John's face had Terry almost smiling. Almost.

"We'll be back before dinner."

"Okay, have a good time." The statement struck Terry as more plea, than anything else.

He went to his room to grab a coat, zipped it as he strode down the hall into the living room. Then Terry backtracked to the office. "Hey, where's Izzy?"

John frowned. "She's getting her hair trimmed, or something along those lines. I only know when she gets back, I need to remember to tell her she looks nice."

A near smile warmed Terry's face. He still couldn't push past that yellow graffiti spray-painted across the outside of his apartment. Wrestling back the sadness, Terry went to the garage to pull the jeep out front.

As he was closing the garage, a woman hailed him as she crossed to his side of the street.

"Good morning, neighbor!" Emily folded her arms, kept her coat tightly shut as cold wind blustered around her, pulled at her brown hair and slacks. "I can only stay a moment, but I wanted to come over and see how you're doing after what happened last night."

Even though Terry felt a surge of foolish joy at knowing Emily cared enough to check on him, he also despaired knowing she really was checking on him.
"I'm doing fine, thanks." Terry slipped his hands into his pants pockets, hoped the girls would come out soon so he wouldn't be stranded trying to pretend Emily wasn't concerned over his mental state.

"Izumi told me the police think Victor did it; I know you have a restraining order against him." A hand fluttered to her throat. "Have you heard back from the police yet? Have they arrested him?"

"Not yet." Terry shifted, tossed a glance to the house. "So far, they don't have anything to prove he was there, and they've got no eyewitnesses— at least, no one willing to come forward. At the moment, it looks like he's going to get away with it."

"Oh, my. How awful for you."

"Yeah, well..." Terry checked his watch, then the house. "I'm running Debbie into Watertown so she can spend her allowance. Maddie's coming with me."

"Oh, is she?"

Terry could almost wish he never said that, for Emily buttoned her coat with noticeable determination. And stood waiting for Madison to come out.

"So. How's your dad doing?" Terry knew when all else failed, turn the subject toward her father and Emily would carry the conversation on her own. The woman ate, drank, and breathed her father's healthcare. She knew how many medications Stanley was on and for which ailment, the last time his bowels had moved regularly, his blood sugar level at any given time of day, her favorite doctors, his favorite doctors, their preference in walkers and wheelchairs.

Not that Terry minded hearing about the psoriasis her dad recently discovered, (don't ask where), but it was the way Emily related the information. With such zeal, it often made Terry wonder if she hadn't missed her calling as a nurse.

The nanosecond the door opened, Emily went silent.

Although he had absolutely no idea why, Terry held his breath.

"Stay close to your uncle," he heard John say, then Debbie came out in her red coat and pink cap.

The door closed just a little, then pulled open when Madison stepped out into the sunlight in Terry's dark blue coat.
Terry's eyes flicked to Emily, and for once, Emily was stone quiet.

"Hey, Maddie, come over here and say 'hi' to my good friend, Emily."

Madison had only taken a step in their direction, but the greeting had Madison rooted in her tracks. Her large gray eyes fastened on Emily, and for several uncomfortable moments, the women stood there and stared at each other.

"Oh my," at last breathed through Emily's lips. What that was supposed to mean, Terry didn't have a clue, only that Emily was again speechless.

"Come on, Maddie, we have to get moving." Terry helped Debbie into the back seat of the jeep, strapped the girl into the booster seat, then looked back to find the women still staring each other down.

Emily was the first to speak.

"Izumi told me what happened last night. I'm glad to hear you weren't hurt."

Madison's razor sharp glare made Terry wince.

"Maddie." He waited until she looked at him. "Please be nice to Emily. She's my friend."

The glare dulled. Her expression turned confused, and she edged around Emily like she was some biblical plague to be avoided at all costs.

"Say 'thank you,' Maddie."

Madison's nose crinkled.

In a moment of dread, Terry half feared she would take him literally and parrot him word for word.

With a sigh, and a lowered head, Madison mumbled, "Thank you."

At least it was polite, Terry thought grimly, as Madison climbed into the passenger seat and promptly shut the door.

He tossed a glance at Madison through the window, then went to Emily.
"You'll have to forgive her. She's a little shy around new people."

"Terry, you never told me she was so..."

"Damaged?" he finished.

"No, beautiful." Emily returned her gaze to the woman in the passenger seat of his jeep. "She's stunning, Terry. I don't know what to say."

"Stunning?" He turned to look at Maddie, then shrugged. "I guess so, in her own way. She's my responsibility, so I don't dwell on things like that. She needs a lot of help, and that's the only thing I really notice, and the only thing I ever want to notice. I don't know all the specifics about her childhood, but from what I've managed to piece together, it sounds like she survived a living nightmare."

He shifted back to Emily, saw the conflicted-- what was that, jealousy?-- and the compassion seep into her soft features. His words had touched her.

"I have to get back to Daddy. I left him reading a book, but it's nearly time to check his glucose."

"See you later, Emily?"

Another flick at the jeep had Emily sighing. "Yes, Terry. I'll see you later." She gave him a partial smile, shook her head, then hurried back home to monitor her dad's diabetes.

Steeling himself, Terry rounded the hood of the jeep, pulled open the driver's side door. And aimed a hard stare at Madison.

Her eyes focused straight forward. She said nothing.

"She's a good friend, Maddie, and didn't deserve that from you."

"She's not my friend."

"But she is mine." Terry stepped into the jeep, tugged the door shut. "You had that icy glare on-- the one that gives me chills just looking at you."

"Then don't look."
"I won't, not when you're being rude to my friends."

"I don't like her, Terry."

"You don't have to like her. All you have to be, is polite. That's all I'm asking."

Though she resembled someone in great physical pain, Madison squeezed her eyes shut and nodded. "If that's what you really want, then I'll be polite. But I'm only doing it for you."

"Okay, I can appreciate that." For the first time all morning long, Terry broke into a grin. "She's not a bad person, Maddie. Once you get to know her, I think you'll like her." He started the engine, heard Debbie's eager noises to get on the road, and pointed the vehicle toward Watertown.

* * * *

Like her? Madison didn't think so.

It was all she could do to not blame Terry for wanting to touch that woman. It was the only reason he wanted Emily to like him, and Madison knew it. Madison was no dummy.

If Terry had been any other man, there would be no enticement strong enough for Madison to have gotten into that jeep. And if any man had tried to force her, he'd get a swift kick between the legs before she was beaten into submission. But Terry wasn't like that, at least, not when he was with her. He was nice, he was different.

The thought of Terry being with that woman, had the air squeezing from her lungs.

It hurt. Her chest hurt.

She leaned against the passenger door window, let the scenery slide by without notice.

So that was the famous Emily. So pretty, so confident looking, so... everything Madison was not.

The ache in her chest grew worse, and something hot stung her eyes. Smearing her face with the arm of Terry's coat, she closed her eyes and tried to think of something else. For once, she wished she could feel her hip. She reached into the pocket of her jeans, found the safety pin and opened it. Gritting her teeth, she concentrated on the pain.

* * * *
They ate hamburgers at a bright table inside a busy restaurant. She had french fries, some chicken nuggets, and a soft drink with a straw. Even though Terry told her it was okay to take off her coat, she kept it on, and used it as a shield from the people around her.

When the icy soda made her teeth chatter, Debbie laughed and said she wanted to do that too. The girl gulped down her drink, then promptly announced to Terry that she needed the bathroom. NOW. Even though Madison didn't really want to leave the safety of the table, she offered to take Debbie to the ladies' room and Terry gratefully accepted.

When they came back, Debbie forgot about trying to make her teeth chatter and soon after, they left for the science store.

It was quieter than the restaurant.

She'd never been inside such a place before, but had an idea of why Terry called it the best ever built. Planets hung from the ceiling, with the backdrop of sprawling galaxies behind them. Dinosaurs roamed the walls, interspersed with scientists in white lab coats hunched over elaborate glass tubes. Small counters devoted to different areas of science invited people to take a closer look; one held a microscope with slides of ordinary things like hair, and made them seem like something wildly from another planet.

Bold posters proclaimed that math was the language of the natural world, while others had odd designs with intricate colors. Terry said they were fractals, whatever that meant.

Everywhere she turned, scientific discovery kits for children and adults were shamelessly advertised. The owner of the store delighted in Debbie's enthusiasm, and while Terry and Debbie roamed the aisles, Madison found a seat at the back of the store and sat down.

She kept her coat zipped, kept her eyes down whenever someone happened to walk by. And relaxed when she was alone. She didn't mind them taking a long time, but was grateful when Terry came looking for her with a happy Debbie hugging a picture book about astronomy.

Madison fell in behind Terry as they left the store, watched Debbie take Terry's hand as they crossed the street to where the jeep was parked. Something tugged inside Madison and she realized she felt luxuriously safe. Even outside, with people moving about them, getting in and out of their vehicles, the scent of exhaust hanging in the air, she felt safe.

She moved closer to Terry, and he didn't seem to mind. How many times in her life was she ever conscious of having that protected feeling? The fact it felt so foreign, betrayed it couldn't have
been many. Did normal people feel this all the time? or was this only because she came from where she did? From this vantage, life seemed oddly survivable. But then, what did she know? She was only soaking up the kindness Terry didn't hold back.

She wondered if this was friendship. If it was, it felt good.

As the jeep pulled away, Terry asked if they'd had a good time. Debbie was enthusiastic in her answer, and would have bounced out of her booster seat if she hadn't been strapped in. When Terry waited for Madison's response, and his expression slipped when she didn't reply, she dug deep and gave him a heartfelt smile.

"Thanks for letting me come."

"Well, thanks for wanting to come. We surely enjoyed having you, didn't we Debbie?"

"She didn't make us hurry," Debbie agreed from the back seat.

When Terry laughed, the sound of it didn't frighten Madison. In fact, she felt so safe, she even let herself sleep on the way home.

* * * *

When Terry returned with the girls, John was grateful to notice the change in his friend. The outing had done what John could not.

Terry was smiling again.

"A merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance: but by sorrow of the heart the spirit is broken."
~ Proverbs 15:13 ~
Chapter Thirteen
Not Much Pride, but Some Prejudice

"And Jesus answering saith unto them, Have faith in God."
~ Mark 11:22 ~

He hoped she wasn't going to fall asleep again. It would be easy to do, all curled up on the couch, worn out from her trip into Watertown that afternoon.

Terry sighed as he rummaged through the filing cabinet beside his office desk. Even Debbie wasn't napping, but off playing with her sisters at a next door neighbor's house. That pint-sized little girl had more stamina than Madison, and never had that been more evident than the way Madison had curled up on the living room couch with that precious notebook of hers and closed her eyes to the world.

He hoped she wasn't sleeping.

"Hey, John?" Terry looked to his friend at the second desk. "Have you seen a dark red folder labeled 'tenant applications'? I know I had some spare forms, but I can't find them."

"Red folder?" John thought a moment. "Have you tried the locked cabinet in the corner? That's where you usually keep all the legal docs for the complex."

"No, I already checked." Terry flipped past some thick business folders, a mystery paperback that had been shoved in and then forgotten, a stack of old brochures he'd stopped using to advertise the apartments, the user's manual to the microwave in his kitchen... wait a moment. He flipped back, tugged out the paperback and groaned. A library book, and by the looks of it, grossly overdue.

He tossed it onto the desk. He'd take care of it later, but right now, he needed to find those forms.

When he found them wedged between last year's tax returns, he promised to get more organized. He pulled out a blank residency application, grabbed a pen and a stiff notebook, then headed for the living room.

The occupant on the couch wasn't asleep yet, and she blinked at him as he sat down in John's recliner.
"Okay," Terry clicked the pen, "let’s get started. This is for apartment number four. The move-in date will be... let’s say next Monday; it’ll take longer than that to find furniture, but we’ll tackle that when we come to it. Lease dates-- check, monthly rent-- one dollar."

"Terry, that's not fair."

"Quiet, I’m busy. Applicant’s name, Madison Crawford. Address, phone number-- I’ll leave that one blank; after last night, your own cell phone is definitely on the get-list. Email-- none, previous address..." here, Terry paused. "Okay, where did you live before you came to Three Mile Bay?" He looked to the couch, and those stormy gray eyes locked on him. "Come on, Maddie, I need this for the records. Where did you used to live?"

She shook her head.

"How about the state? Was it New York, or somewhere else?"

Her mouth pulled into a tight line, and she hugged the notebook closer.

"You’re not going to tell me, are you. Not even for me? See this?" He held up the paper. "This goes into a locked security cabinet in my office, right down the hall. No one will ever see this but me."

Hurt stirred in those storm-tossed eyes, but she remained silent.

He sighed, crossed out the offending questions and moved on. "Can you give me your former employer?" It was a needless question. She wouldn't tell him where she was from, and by the looks of her, he already knew she'd never held down a job. "Never mind, I'll cross that out." Despite himself, he chuckled at the situation. "I tell you, Maddie, you'd better be grateful I'm such an understanding guy." He glanced at her, and when he saw that faint smile, he breathed easier that he wasn't making an enemy by asking questions. "Social Security number?"

As if to prove they were friends, she gave it to him without a moment’s hesitation.

"Let’s see. No income, no children, no pets. Right? You haven't taken in any stray cats or dogs I should know about, have you?"

A shy smile tilted her lips.

"Okay, now there's some legal jargon you need to read before signing this. It basically states you give me permission to verify credit information, references from your previous landlord, any
criminal history, and basically anything that would give me information as to the desirability of having you for a tenant. Here, I'll let you read it for yourself." He got up, handed it to her, then went back to the recliner.

The scared bunny-rabbit-look came over her again. "Are you going to do all this? Are you going to do a background check?"

He couldn't help laughing. "What do you think? Do you see me torturing you for information?"

"Please, Terry, don't."

"I wasn't planning to, but out of curiosity, why not?"

Her chin tucked against her chest, and he could no longer see those gray eyes.

"Okay, Maddie. If that's what you want, I give you my word I won't do any background checks without your permission. This is ridiculous, because I wasn't going to do it anyway, but if it'll help you sleep easier, you have my word. Here. Take the pen and cross out the clause."

The hand holding the form shook like a tremoring earthquake.

"I'm not angry, all right? Take the pen. Cross out whatever you want, but then sign the thing. I must be completely nuts. Anyone in their right mind would insist on some answers, but not me. Here-- take the pen." When she remained where she was, Terry tossed it to her.

She stared at him.

Quietly, Izumi moved to the kitchen doorway. She had been listening, probably couldn't help but listen since she was only in the kitchen.

"Maddie, you're going to have to trust me on this. You need a place to stay, and if you don't take one of my apartments, no one will let you sign a lease without a visible source of income and absolutely no form of identity besides a Social Security number and no card to back it up. You don't even have a birth certificate, do you?"

The slender daisy was silent.

"Did you bring one to Three Mile Bay?"

She shook her head.
"But you did have one, right? Back where you came from, you did have a birth certificate?"

She nodded, "yes."

"Okay then." Terry leaned back in the recliner. "My next project is to look into getting your birth certificate replaced. I don't think you can get another Social Security card without one, and now that you have a current place of residence to go with your name, I think it should help get these documents replaced. I don't know for certain, of course, never having found a need to replace every shred of my identity from the ground up." He waited a beat, and when she didn't smile, he sighed. "Would you sign the thing before I become an old man? I'd like to get this over with."

She clicked the pen, placed the form against her notebook, and with a gathering look of fierce concentration, dug the ballpoint deep into the paper. Painfully, and with great effort, she formed each shaky stroke, just as she had in the doctor's office when filling out that patient questionnaire.

Terry flicked a glance at Izumi. He'd taken in a stray puppy who had no collar or tag to indicate a previous owner.

Worrying her bottom lip, Madison examined the marks she'd just made before looking at him.

"I think I messed it up."

Izumi gave him a look of sympathy as she went back to the kitchen.

"It's okay. I'm sure it's good enough." He took back the form, saw the signature gouged deep into the paper and said nothing. He wrote in the date, attached his name to it, then got up to file it away and get his laptop.

When he returned, he planted himself in John's recliner and started the tedious job of learning how to replace Madison's identification. After an hour of investigation, he looked over the laptop to find her watching him.

"Okay, kiddo. I need to know what state you were born in. To get a birth certificate replaced, I need to start at the state level."

A resigned groan shuddered through her frame. "I was born here in New York."

"There," he smiled, "was that so hard?"
When she didn't respond, he went back to the website.

"Did you ever have a non-driver photo ID card?"

"No."

Another thirty minutes later, and he was less sure this would be as easy as he'd naively hoped. To deter identity fraud, they needed other forms of identification she simply didn't have. He was all for stopping the bad guys, but what were the good guys supposed to do?

Deeper research showed that lesser forms of ID would be accepted, such as a utility bill with that person's name on it, and also a rental agreement. Okay, she could do those. He'd need to refill the residency application so it appeared halfway normal, and she'd have to wait to get a utility bill, but those were things she could do. Without the new apartment, these would be close to impossible.

Using careful wording, he tried very hard to explain this to Madison. Instead of ready information about where she'd come from, she glared with an icy look that made him feel he was standing in front of a freezer with the door wide open.

"To get your Social Security card replaced, you first need a birth certificate. Without either of these, you can't get your ID card, let alone a driver's license when it comes time for one. These are basic things, Maddie."

Like an ostrich shoving its head into the sand, she tugged out one of the bedding blankets, and pulled it over her head.

"I know you're under there." Terry folded his arms. "Maddie, talk to me."

"Go away," came from the blanket.

"Where do you want me to go? I live here."

Silence. Seeing she had no handy retort, Terry set aside the laptop, and went back to the office for a fresh form to start over. This had to be filled out properly, for it would stand in as part of her identification.

"Everything all right in there?" John asked from his desk.
"It's under control," Terry assured him. Before John could ask what that was supposed to mean, Terry headed for the living room.

"Okay, let's do this one more time." Terry sat in the recliner, clicked the pen and immediately realized that with no employment or income to fill in, things were still going to look out of the ordinary. Oh well, he'd fill it in as best he could, and where it asked for employer, he'd simply make a note saying she was looking for a job, and leasing the apartment for next to nothing because the landlord didn't want her to be homeless. Pitiful, yes, but it was honest.

He filled in all the things he already knew, then braced himself for round two.

"Maddie?" Then a bit firmer, "Madison. What was your former address?"

"I don't like you anymore."

He paid no attention to the remark. "I need this information. You want to make your own way in the world, don't you?"

No reply.

"A job. You want to get a job and be independent."

"Yes."

"Then you need things like a photo ID. You won't be able to open a bank account without one, and I know of at least one public library where you can't even get a library card if you don't have any photo ID. You must establish your identity."

She was silent.

"Tell me your former address."

The blanket pushed back, and she looked out. "Do you promise to never call or go there?"

He was tantalizingly close to Madison's past; he could feel it in her resistance to give him the location of her former hell. He also knew if he didn't give his solemn word, she wouldn't be able to start a new life. She had to have this, even if she didn't fully understand it yet.

"Very well, I give my word to never visit or place any calls to this address."
"And you won't ask anyone else to, either?"

"Maddie, if I'm giving you my word, it only stands to reason I wouldn't do that to you."

She looked unmoved. "Promise."

"Okay, I promise. Before God, I will never do those things."

For several long moments, she peered at him with a reluctance he could feel all the way from the recliner.

"Please trust me, Maddie."

The stare broke. She blinked, ducked back under the blanket. And recited her address.

He wrote it in, read it back and she confirmed that he'd gotten it right. Huh. New York City. The same state in which she was born.

"Okay, time to plant your signature again." He got up, tapped the blanket until she finally emerged. "Sign here, then make your initials here. And go easy on the pen."

Nothing guaranteed that whoever looked at this residency application would accept it, but Madison had no other alternative-- at least, none he could see.

He took back the signed form, included his name and date, then returned it to his office to be stored in a filing cabinet under lock and key.

This was only the first step in establishing Madison's legal existence in her new life, but Terry knew it was a vital one. He prayed God was directing his steps, and that those steps would not slide beneath their feet. The form was not complete, for he needed a cell number, and then there was the application for the birth certificate once they had all the necessary papers ready. He'd just glimpsed some of the questions, and they wanted specific names, dates, and locations.

Better to not tell her that until he needed the information. Scare her too early, and he feared Madison would close up tighter than a clam on a New England clambake.

While Madison stayed on the couch, Terry went into the kitchen. He had a loose end to tie up.

Like she often did at this time of day, Izumi stood at the stove, preparing dinner.
"Izzy, could I interrupt you for a minute?" He leaned against the counter, saw the innocence in her face and knew she had heard. "I need you to promise never to investigate the address Madison gave me, or to ever contact it in any way."

Giving the pan one more stir, she tapped the spoon and set it down. "What makes you think I know what you're talking about?"

He gave her a look.

"Okay, I admit I overheard the address. You had to give your word, but I didn't."

"Izzy, it's the same deal. If she can't trust us, then whom can she?"

With a sigh, Izumi went to the notepad by the telephone, tore off the top sheet and thrust it into Terry's hand.

"You wrote it down?"

She gave an indignant look, and he backed off.

"Thanks, Izzy." He shredded the paper, tossed it into the wastebasket as John came into the kitchen in search of food.

"What's for dinner?" John asked.

Izumi smiled. "Goose."

"What?"

"My goose is cooked," she sighed, eyeing the wastebasket. "If you want me to give you a promise, Terry, then I suppose you have one."

"Promise for what?" John asked, reaching around Izumi to poke his finger into the sauce and get a taste. He danced away with a laugh when Izzy scolded him. "I was thinking," John grinned, quickly forgetting his question, "let's have family movie night after dinner."

"There's an idea." Izumi smiled and it put Terry fully at ease. "What made you think of that?"

"Oh, I don't know." John pulled out a kitchen chair, sat down and flashed a grin at Terry.
"He thinks I need a diversion," Terry said, taking a seat opposite John. "Since you're suggesting this because of me, then I get to pick the movie."

"I never said it was for you." John folded his arms and arched a brow at Terry. "Everything isn't always about you."

Terry chuckled. "I appreciate the thought, but Maddie has been staying away from the TV. This might not be a good idea."

"Then get her to pick the movie. All I ask is that no one forces me to sit through another chick-flick; that last one we watched was brutal." John glanced at his watch and stood up. "I gotta go pick up the girls."

As John left the kitchen, Izumi called after him,

"Austen is not a chick-flick."

"You know, he's right," Terry said, leaning back in the chair. "John and I still haven't recovered from the shock of Lizzy turning down Mr. Darcy. I don't know about you, but John and I were very emotional about the whole thing. We haven't been the same since."

He could see Izumi was about to toss back a laughing retort, when Madison appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"You have Pride and Prejudice?" she asked in wide-eyed excitement.

Terry groaned. He knew what they would be watching after dinner.

* * * *

Madison couldn't believe her good fortune. She had a seat on the couch, a blanket to keep warm, and even though Terry, John and Izzy sat beside her, (in that order), she felt as though an unexpected gift had been just dropped in her lap. They passed a large bowl of popcorn from one end of the couch to the other, while the very same movie she'd wanted to see again for such a long time, played on the large screen TV.

"This is going to be lengthy," Terry sighed, nudging John for the popcorn. "I'm not staying awake for the entire thing."

John groaned. "Yeah, thanks, Buddy."
"Hey, you said to let her pick it, and she did."

"Would you two be quiet? You're going to miss the good part."

"Good part?" John gave Izzy a half laugh. "According to you, it's *all* a good part."

"Hush!"

Terry pulled out his cell phone, Googled the name of the movie. He nudged John, and showed him the screen.

"Figures. It certainly feels like a miniseries."

Izzy didn't reply, and the couch quieted as Mr. Darcy slighted Lizzy at the ball.

The movie had always held a strong fascination for Madison. She remembered seeing it once several years ago, and the absolute agony that went with it of hoping each episode would air when she had the freedom to watch. Those scarce times when the Dragon fell asleep and she could turn the channel, push the volume down to nearly mute, and watch *Pride and Prejudice*. She'd missed enough of it to nearly forget herself and cry, but during those few precious hours, she'd had the secret thrill of living in someone else's world. The beating she'd gotten when the Dragon found out, had been worth it. A face full of blood was a small price to pay for the freedom it gave her imagination. When life filled her days and nights with shame, she could close her eyes and become sharp and down-to-earth Lizzy, dazzling the pride out of Mr. Darcy.

Madison loved the way Lizzy cut him down to size when he proposed marriage:

"You are mistaken, Mr. Darcy, if you suppose that the mode of your declaration affected me in any other way, than as it spared me the concern which I might have felt in refusing you, had you behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner. You could not have made the offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted me to accept it."

Oh, Madison liked that. She could still hear the words, and they hadn't even gotten to that part of the movie yet.

The close proximity of Terry sitting right next to her, loosely crammed with John and Izzy, was becoming too much for Madison's sensibilities. Wiggling the throw pillow out from under her arm, she jammed it between her and Terry like it was the Continental Divide.
He stared at the pillow, then at her, but made no comment.

Aside from the fact Lizzy would wind up with Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth Bennet was Madison's ideal of the perfect woman. Lizzy had tons of confidence, and could stand toe to toe with Mr. Darcy whenever she wanted. She didn't care a great deal about what other people thought of her, and that in itself fascinated Madison. Lizzy had courage, was wise where her sisters were not (except for Jane), and tried to warn her father about Lydia's wild behavior. Madison had only seen the movie once, but once was enough.

And then there was Mr. Darcy.

There was no getting around the man. He was arrogant, presumptuous when it came to Lizzy, and had the gall to insult her to her face when he was still trying to get her to accept his marriage proposal.

Men.

The popcorn scooted onto Madison's lap, and she shot an accusing look at Terry.

"What?" he asked. "You don't want popcorn?"

She took a small handful, then passed it back.

Why did they have to get such a handsome Mr. Darcy for this movie? It annoyed Madison, and yet when Mr. Darcy asked Lizzy to dance with him, and she was taken by surprise so completely that she said 'yes' when she wanted to say 'no,' Madison couldn't help but smile.

The bowl nudged her side, and she turned it down.

"You didn't eat your dessert after dinner," Terry whispered.

"I wasn't hungry."

"Then have some popcorn." He placed the bowl squarely in her lap, and she took a handful.

She popped a fluffy kernel into her mouth, and watched the people on the screen as though they were tangible memories from a well-beloved dream.

* * * *
The triplets didn't have any interest in the movie, except for the popcorn, and when they'd had their fill, each and every one of them had run off to play Hoppin’ Froggies in their room.

Briefly, Terry had thought of joining them. He had no idea why he still didn't, only that Madison seemed to be having a genuinely good time.

While watching a romance, no less.

It didn't make any sense, but then, he'd noticed women seemed to have a thing for Jane Austen. This movie had played over and over on cable, and yet, here they were, watching it on DVD for the umpteenth time.

Why didn't the men in this family revolt once in a while? Terry knew the answer to that. John stayed to make Izzy happy, and Terry stayed because it was no fun going to his room and watching an action movie by himself.

Even now, he didn't really want to leave, even though the triplets would probably love it if he tried his hand at level four again. He just didn't feel in the mood to be laughed at by three little angels who could run rings around their poor uncle when it came to kiddie games. No, he'd rather be here, watching Elizabeth Bennet wince and squirm while Mr. Collins made her a marriage proposal doomed to failure. Not exactly an easy thing to watch.

When he tried to pass Madison the popcorn, she wouldn't take it. Short of dumping it over her head, he couldn't force her to take more if she didn't want any. At least she had eaten a healthy dinner, and he tried to content himself with that.

The moment the end credits started, Terry pushed to his feet and remarked how late it was getting.

"But, there's more movie left," Madison said, her eyes growing wide with alarm. "It's not over yet."

"Yeah, I know." Terry stretched his stiff limbs. "We can finish it up some other time. Maybe next Saturday night we can do this all over again."

"But it gets better. Lizzy goes to Derbyshire with her aunt and they see Pemberley!"

The way she said it, made Terry think of a child looking forward to tearing open a long anticipated Christmas present. He regarded her a moment. John was already herding the girls to bed, and Izzy was taking the popcorn bowl into the kitchen. The party was over.
"Hey, Izzy?" Terry followed her to the kitchen sink. "Do you mind if Maddie watches more of that movie without you?"

"Of course not. I’ve seen it a million times." Izumi smiled as she added dish detergent to the running water. "I’d only remind you tomorrow’s Sunday, and from what you told me, she’s coming with us."

"She’ll be there."

"You know," Izumi washed the bowl with a thoughtful face, "you could start the DVD again, then let her fall asleep while it played."

"Actually, I was thinking of staying up with her for part two." Terry moved out of Izumi’s way when she reached for three juice cups to add to the sink. "Maddie looked so eager, when she realized everyone was going to bed, she nearly cried."

"You? Stay up for Pride and Prejudice?" Izumi pinned him with an incredulous look.

"I’ll get my laptop," he shrugged, "get some things taken care of while it’s playing. Which reminds me, I need to remember to lend her my old Bible so she’ll have something to read in church."

"I’d volunteer to stay up with you," Izumi sighed, "but I’m too tired. There’s some pretzels in the cupboard if you get hungry. Don’t stay up too late."

"We won’t. After the next installment, the party really will be over." Terry grabbed the pretzels, went back to the living room and dropped them on the couch beside Madison. "Give me a few minutes to get my laptop, and we’ll start the movie." He resisted the urge to see her reaction, but when he turned down the hall, the sound of the pretzel bag opening made him smile.

* * * *

Even though he’d struggled with sadness that morning, a silver lining came in the fact he wasn't all that sleepy tonight. He sat in John’s recliner, surfing the online bookstores for a new Bible for Madison, and popping mini pretzels into his mouth while Madison held the bag hostage on the couch.

She was eating, actually munching pretzels and forgetting herself in the enjoyment of the movie. There weren’t many times when she relaxed so completely that those gray eyes would sparkle
with such pure excitement. So much for Izzy's suggestion of playing the movie until Maddie fell asleep. That was about as unlikely as John suddenly professing a love for all things Jane Austen.

It simply wasn't going to happen.

"Have you ever read *Pride and Prejudice*?" Terry asked.

She timidly shook her head, "no," and a moment later was sucked back into the story.

Acting on impulse, Terry typed in "Austen" and hit return.

On the large screen TV, Mr. Darcy was visiting Lizzy and beginning the silence that led up to the infamous proposal and her subsequent wrath. The guy had it coming, and Terry caught himself pausing to watch the actors toss around dialogue like a skillful chef attacking poultry.

On the couch, Madison's pretzels had come to a complete halt. She sat cuddled under a fluffy comforter, one hand in the pretzel bag, the other gripping the blanket. Her entire being was transfixed on Mr. Darcy and Lizzy.

Shaking his head, Terry turned back to the laptop, scrolled down and began reviewing the candidates the bookstore recommended. He selected one, added it to the cart along with the Bible, then checked out just as Lizzy began reading Mr. Darcy's letter.

Yawning, Terry checked the time. This was a miniseries, all right. A long one.

* * * *

Part two had ended hours ago, but Madison found it impossible to sleep. In the dim hue of the night-light, she looked over to the recliner where Terry was sprawled out. She'd carefully lifted the laptop without waking him, and set it on the end table so he wouldn't drop it in his sleep.

How could he do it? She didn't understand. How could Terry possibly sleep when Mr. Darcy was beginning to make Lizzy more conscious of the fact she cared for him? He'd even slept through the part where Mr. Darcy caught Lizzy taking a tour of his grounds at Pemberley. The shock of that meeting had Madison diving beneath the blanket only to quickly peer out as the two stammered out their small talk.

Now that she'd seen all of part two, she longed for more.
Light began to spread behind the soft curtains, signaling the start of another day. Today was Sunday, and even though she'd brought a fresh change of clothes especially for church, she dreaded going. People were going to stare-- she just knew they were. If the rumors of what she was to Terry didn't make them stare, then the things that made her not normal, would. Then there were the other men, widowed men like what's-his-name with the compact little dog with the impossible name of Macho. Brian, wasn't it? He'd better not try anything, or Macho's owner would soon be sorry.

Then there was Perfect Emily. She went to the same church as Terry, and as sure as Madison's hip was beginning to ache, she knew Emily would be there.

The clear image of Terry with the always Perfect Emily, holding and kissing her after they were married, struck Madison so brutally hard the air squeezed from her chest. For a desperate moment she thought she would suffocate. Her own worthlessness came crashing down on her in one gigantic wave.

She needed relief, and knew how to find it. She hadn't done it in a long time, but once every few months was okay, wasn't it? God wouldn't mind, would He? Something inside her tried to stop it from happening, but she needed to feel better again.

Careful not to disturb the person in the recliner, she got up, and limped into the kitchen.

Heart pounding, she scanned the countertop. There it was, pushed all the way from the edge, and tucked under the cupboards, far out of reach from the children.

Izzy was such a good mother.

Madison grabbed the closest knife and clamped her mouth shut.

While Terry slept in the living room, Madison ran the knife over her belly. She cut until the pain flooded her body, drowning out the hurt that hadn't been made from steel. Tears stung her eyes, but that was okay, she could cry because of the pain-- just as long as she didn't make any noise while she sobbed.

A sound came from the living room, choking her with a sharp pang of grief and fear. She waited, dreading someone would appear in the doorway and see what she was doing.

A minute ticked by, but no one came.
Careful to not turn the faucet on so high it made noise, she held the trembling knife beneath the trickling stream. She dried the blade, then slid it back into the wooden block.

The act steadied her. She wouldn't cry anymore. She could handle the pain-- all of it-- and survive what she had to. The self-inflicted punishment felt good to a soul that kept telling her she wasn't worth the flesh that held her together.

Pinning the edge of her shirt under her chin, she wadded paper towels into her pants to keep the blood from staining her jeans. She pressed a hand to the scarred, slippery skin and knew it was too late to stop the blood from getting on her clothes. After washing her hands, Madison crept to the doorway. She looked into the living room while dread pounded away in her chest.

Please be asleep, Terry. Please be asleep.

The person in the recliner had shifted in his sleep, but that was all. His eyes were still closed, his chest still rose and fell with each slumbering breath. Wasn't he nice to look at? She could stand there all morning and watch that kind face, that mouth that so often slipped into a crooked grin when he was happy.

Elizabeth Bennet would like Terry. The real world and make-believe blended in one perfect moment, and Madison saw Terry carrying Lizzy to a bedroom on their wedding night. When the door closed, Madison woke from the dream.

She refused to admit that like an actor taking on a roll, she had played Lizzy.

Closing her lips tightly so no whimper of pain could escape, she softly stole past the recliner.

She paused, but he didn't stir.

Holding her breath, she crept to the couch, lifted out tomorrow's change of clothes while praying Terry wouldn't wake up and see her with blood all over her shirt and pants.

Without a sound, she crossed over the carpet and into the hall. Ducking into the home office, she headed straight for the half bath. She sensed the movie had probably done this to her, brought on a surge of emotions that had probably overwhelmed her to the point of needing to cut again. For some reason it made her think of Terry's battle cry, but the words wouldn't comfort her while she focused on the pain so hard.

Safe behind the locked door of the bathroom, Madison finally let herself breathe. She pulled away the paper towels and looked at the wounds. Using her finger, she opened the cuts to make
them bleed more, until fear got the better of her and she stopped. She cleaned them with water, then staunched the flow by pressing folds of toilet paper to her belly. By the angry look of the wounds, she feared this time, she might have gone too deep.

Pushing aside the panic that wanted to bubble out of her, she opened the mirror that doubled as a bathroom cabinet. The moment she saw the small bottle and the half open box, a prayer of thanks fell from her lips.

Terry and John kept antiseptic and bandages in the cabinet.

After scrubbing the blood from her clothes, she wrung them out, then sneaked through the kitchen to the laundry room to put them into the dryer. No one but herself and God had to know.

* * * *

Aside from the humiliating fact that he'd slept all night in the recliner, Terry felt reasonably happy about the way the morning was going. Madison had come to breakfast without the slightest struggle, and was even dressed and ready for church. The T-shirt and jeans might not be what the rest of them were wearing, but a quick change into his own weekday clothes, he felt better knowing she at least wouldn't look so out of place. John saw Terry change and must have guessed why, for soon after, John and Izzy had dressed down to blend in with Madison.

It warmed Terry's heart to see his family do that without being asked.

Even though Madison's peaches and cream complexion might have bordered more on cream than peaches, she looked calm enough. She hardly said a single word during breakfast, but she'd eaten all her food. While the signs weren't overly hopeful, he took the optimistic viewpoint that she was getting better. If only marginally so.

Now, as John pulled the minivan into the church's parking lot, Terry saw the first glimpse of trouble in Madison's face.

"Try to take it easy," Terry smiled, unsnapping his seat belt. "They won't bite. Do you have your Bible?"

A pale hand touched the worn volume at her side. She nodded, then worked to release her seat belt.
Unease fluttered at Terry's heart, but he gave it to the Lord and tried to keep her spirits up by joking with the triplets as he helped to unbuckle them, one by one. Even in all the smiles and laughter, he noticed the wince of pain as Madison stooped to leave the minivan.

He touched her arm. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. "I'll be glad when this is over."

"That's no way to look at church," Terry laughed. "They'll be nice to you, you'll see."

The encouragement did little to make her smile. She stuck to his side so hard, when he turned to make sure Lizzie didn't lag behind, he almost slammed his chin into Madison's face.

He'd feel better if that face smiled. Just once.

Please, God, help Maddie.

* * * *

It seemed to Madison that the Johanneses and Terry knew everyone in church. People greeted them, spoke in concern about the recent vandalism at Terry's apartment, and in general commented on things that had happened during the week since they'd gathered. Like clockwork, every time Terry introduced her to someone, she heard that flicker of curiosity in their voice, that extra long look that somehow tried to gauge who she was.

She didn't have the courage to look any of them in the eye. Terry didn't make her talk, and tried to answer for her whenever a question came in her direction. She kept her eyes down, her mouth shut, and stuck to Terry like glue until she was told to sit on a long wooden bench. She wouldn't do it, until she saw Terry sit down first.

Sitting beside Terry was better than facing people while you stood. To appear busy, she opened Terry's old Bible and began leafing through the first few pages. If she looked busy, maybe people would leave her alone.

"Good morning, Emily. Nice to see you're feeling well enough to join us, Mr. McCall."

The greeting made what was left of Madison's blood turn cold. She lifted her eyes just a fraction to see the woman in the slim dress and smartly brushed hair smiling down at her. The cheerful woman stood behind a slumped old man in a wheelchair.
"Good morning, Terry, and to you, Madison. I’m glad you came."

The elbow in Madison’s side prompted a hasty, "Thanks."

"Daddy," Emily bowed over the wheelchair, "this is Terry's houseguest. Madison."

The old man pinned Madison with a critical eye. "Mornin," he said finally.

Since the man didn't appear to expect a reply, and since Terry's elbow didn't prompt her to make one, Madison lowered her eyes to the Bible and pretended her hardest to look busy.

The title pages were as old and worn as the man in the wheelchair, but the printing was clear, and the handwritten names done in a careful penmanship that was easy to read.

*This Bible was Presented to Terry E. Davis By John J. Johannes*

The date was written underneath, showing almost thirty years had passed since the Bible had been presented. Madison struggled with the math, and realized with surprise that Terry must have been only a teenager at the time. Since Terry and John were probably about the same age, this Bible was a testament to their long and enduring friendship. No wonder Terry had told her to keep it safe, that he was only loaning it to her until her new one came.

She touched the lightly yellowed pages, saw where passages had been underlined, ran her finger in the wide margins where Terry had made notes about the different verses. One was underlined heavily:

*For Thou hast delivered my soul from death: wilt not Thou deliver my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of the living? [Psalm 56:13]*

In the right-hand margin, Terry had added an "Amen! He will!" beside the verse.

The words struck a common chord in Madison and she read it over and over until Terry whispered that it was time to sing. Things were going on around her that she didn't understand, but the one time she dared lift her eyes during the singing, she saw in the row off to her right, a strikingly familiar face.
At that same moment, the man looked up and flashed a broad smile directly at her.

She retreated to the open songbook.

The memory of a man walking a tiny dog absurdly named Macho popped into her mind. Oh no. Him again. The widower who had looked at her like he wanted something, the interested man who had a teenage son and was good friends with Terry.

Brian something-or-other.

After the singing, the triplets disappeared somewhere, and Madison thought she heard Terry mention Sunday School.

For the entire time she sat on that bench, feeling the glances of the people around her, Madison was always aware of the man just across the aisle who kept smiling at her whenever she checked.

After one such incident, Terry jabbed his elbow into her side; thankfully, it wasn't near her belly where the cuts were still hurting.

"He's only being friendly," Terry whispered. "Be nice to him."

"I don't want to be nice."

"Not so loud."

Terry pulled a notepad from his Bible, clicked a pen and hurriedly wrote,

_He's going to try to talk to you after service is over. Whatever happens, be nice._

Taking the pen, Madison scrawled in large clumsy letters,

*why should i?*

It took Terry a moment before writing,

*I'm not trying to marry you off. I gave my word, remember? Be POLITE to Brian, and we'll finish Pride and Prejudice today.*

"Really?" She forgot herself and asked the question out loud. A woman in the row in front of them gave Madison a frowning look before returning her gaze to the preacher up front.
Terry wrote,

_**I promise.**_

When he underlined it, Madison knew he meant it. That was what Terry did when he was being firm about something, for she had seen the verse in the Bible.

Carefully, she scribbled her agreement on the notepad.

All too soon, everyone was getting up and Madison realized the moment was upon her. True to Terry’s prediction, Brian stepped across the aisle.

"Hey, Terry." Brian spoke to Terry, but his gaze was on Madison. "I was sorry to hear what happened at your place. I hope no one got hurt. I heard someone was staying in the apartment at the time."

"No, no one's hurt. Maddie was there, and called us when it began. Maddie, I'd like you to meet Brian Donovan. We saw him while he was walking Macho, remember? He's an environmental engineer for the USDA [United States Department of Agriculture]."

Dimples flashed each time Brian grinned. "Actually," Brian said, shoving a nervous hand over thick black hair, "I'm with the Jefferson County NRCS-- that's the National Resources Conservation Service. Right now, I'm generating toxicity level maps using panel data methods for local waterways--"

"Yeah, Dad, like everyone knows what that means." The look-alike teenage boy at Brian's side rolled his brown eyes, but there was affection in the way he put his father down. "You defend the environment. Make it easier on yourself, Dad, and explain it before they have to ask."

"That's Dave, Brian's know-it-all son," Terry said with a smile.

The teenager grinned, but not as much as his father did. Brian couldn't take his eyes off of Madison.

"Are you going to be staying long in Three Mile Bay?" Brian asked her. Even though Madison tried to, she couldn't miss the obvious hope in his voice.

"She's planning to stay indefinitely," Terry intervened. "Hey, Dave, how'd you like the sermon?"
The boy shrugged and said the sermon had been okay.

"Say, Terry," Brian spoke as though it took courage to open his mouth, "how about going fishing later on? It'd be nice to land some bass for dinner, wouldn't it?"

"It sure would." Terry glanced at her and hesitated. "I'll tell you what-- come over about three, and we'll set up on our beach. I've been seeing some good-looking bass lately, and until now, I haven't done a thing about it."

"Great. I'll be there."

Despite the reference to dinner, Terry didn't invite him to stay and eat. Madison had a hunch that was what Brian had been fishing for, besides bass.

"How about you?" Brian asked her. "Do you ever fish?"

She glared at the man, then remembered her deal with Terry. She could almost hear Mr. Darcy and Lizzy warning her to be careful.

"No. I don't fish."

"That's a pity. I could teach you, if you're interested."

"I don't like fish."

"Terry's a master at fly fishing. He'd never brag about it, but he's got a sweet casting arm. He can put that fly wherever he wants it."

"I don't want any fish."

"So. I'll see you later, Terry? About three?" Brian nodded to Terry, then took one long look at her before leaving. "Maybe I'll see you later."

"Maybe." She didn't return his smile, that flash of white teeth that showed he was on good terms with his dentist.

When the Donovans walked away, Terry sighed out loud. "Maddie--"

"I was polite."
"Poor Brian." Izzy stood behind them with John and the triplets. "He's smitten, Terry. You'd better warn him."

Terry threw up his hands. "What should I say? That she hates men? That she's prejudiced against people who don't happen to be women, and that means you?"

"You'd better tell him something," John said, herding the triplets past them. "Hi, Emily. Hey, Stan."

The mere mention of the dreaded Emily made Madison cringe. She tightened as Emily came forward, pushing the old man's wheelchair.

"Terry, I was just telling Daddy how nice it would be if we had some company to lunch. I'm fixing chicken pot pie, and would love to have you over if you don't have any plans for the afternoon."

"Sure, thanks." A dumb grin spread across Terry's face. "I love chicken pot pie."

"I know." Emily's cheeks blushed pink. "Izumi gave me a few hints about what you like so I couldn't go wrong. I'll need about forty-five minutes after I get home, so how about an hour from now? Would that work for you?"

Terry smiled. "I'll look forward to it."

"Good. I'll see you later then. Izumi, thanks again. Madison, it was so nice to see you in church."

Emily waved, then wheeled her father out as a woman started chatting with Izzy.

Activity swirled around Madison. The pastor was talking to John, Izumi introduced her to someone named Agatha, and a man with broad shoulders and a brown mustache approached Terry. Madison's head buzzed with confusion. Terry wasn't going to eat lunch at home? And after that, he was going fishing?

What about the movie?

When Terry motioned her to join them, she obeyed without thinking. The man with the mustache seemed very watchful— not interested in her the way Brian was— but watchful in a quiet, suspicious kind of way.

"This is Sheriff Peterson, Maddie. He'd like to talk to you a moment."
This man was a sheriff? That explained a lot.

"Are you from New York State?" His voice sounded with the casual authority of a cop.

She nodded "yes."

"Have any family in the area?"

"No, that's why she's staying with us," Terry tried to explain.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to hear what she has to say."

She swallowed hard. This was beginning to sound official. "No, I don't have any family."

His brows raised. "No parents, no siblings at all?"

She shook her head.

"You don't have to be afraid," he said, a smile breaking out under that mustache. "These people are friends of mine. I go to church with them, I try to take care of them, and whenever someone new comes into our community and says they're going to stay, I like to do a little checking. Do you mind giving me your previous address?"

For the second time in as many days, someone was asking for something that she'd sworn to forget. But here she was, reciting it as she had for Terry.

Sheriff Peterson pulled out a small notepad in his pocket, then scribbled on it with the stub of a pencil.

He asked a few more things, then laughed good-naturedly as his wife came over and scolded him for mixing business with the Lord's Day.

"God will understand," he assured her. "Thanks, Madison. You have a good day now."

The pain on her belly was hurting the longer she stood. When she felt weak and swayed, Terry took her outside the building, away from the people and the questions.

He placed her on a bench beneath a tree, and asked again if she was feeling all right.
More than anything, she wanted to beg him not to eat lunch at Emily's, to stay home from fishing so they could finish *Pride and Prejudice*. After that, she wanted to lay down and go to sleep. She wanted to close her eyes and let the world slip away. Right now, making the world disappear seemed a good idea.

Tiredness pulled at her limbs and she closed her eyes for one brief moment before Terry spoke.

"Did you get any sleep last night?"

She looked up at him, concern written clearly on his face.

"How did you know?"

"I didn't." He motioned to her. "You've got dark circles under your eyes and you're as pale as Texas cotton. I know you ate breakfast, and I saw you take the painkiller for your hip. I'm guessing someone didn't sleep when they were supposed to last night."

"I'm sorry," she whispered, wondering if she could lay down on the bench. Her mind strayed back to Sheriff Peterson. Depending on how much checking he did, he wouldn't find anything. Terry, on the other hand, would probe and overturn every rock in her backyard if he could… if he hadn't promised to stay away from that address.

Lightheadedness swam through her brain, and she felt so tired she almost hurt independently of the cuts.

"It was that movie, wasn't it?" Terry blew out a frustrated sigh. "It got you all worked up and you didn't sleep. Maddie, I wish you'd have told me. I would have left you home so you could rest."

"I'm sorry."

"Stop saying that. Do I sound angry?"

"Kind of."

"Well, I'm not. Stay here and I'll get the family so we can take you home." He took a step, then turned to look at her. "I'm sorry I won't be there to finish *Pride and Prejudice*. I'll ask Izzy to keep you company while I'm gone. I'm sure she'd be more than happy to watch it with you."

She nodded absently, dazed by the concern in his brown eyes.
No matter what happened in the future, she was sure she’d never have as good a friend as Terry. Yes, she thought as he went to go find the others, he was a very, very nice person.

The wind chilled her, even in Terry’s old coat. Her belly hurt, and she touched it lightly to make sure it wasn’t bleeding again. When her hand came away without finding any dampness, she rolled onto her side and tried to sleep.

God had saved her for a reason.

She just had to find what that reason was.

"And now, Lord, what wait I for? my hope is in Thee."
~ Psalm 39:7 ~
Chapter Fourteen
When the Subject is Madison

"I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end."
~ Jeremiah 29:11 ~

When Terry returned to find her napping half awake on the bench outside the church, Madison thought for sure he was angry. He said nothing, but helped her to the minivan while John and Izzy strapped the triplets into their boosters in the back.

Izzy watched as Madison slowly climbed into the middle row of seats. "You're right, Terry, she doesn't look very good. Madison, Sweetheart?" Izzy left her daughters to move past Terry and help Madison buckle her seat belt. "Are you okay?" Izzy put a hand to Madison's forehead. "Hmmm, no fever. Terry, I wish you'd stop hovering."

"Are you certain she doesn't have a fever?"

"Reasonably so." Izzy turned to give him a patient smile. "I'll check with a thermometer when we get home, but I don't think she's coming down with something."

"So you don't think it's the flu?"

People moved past the minivan's open door, more than a few of them eyeing Madison as she lay on the middle row of the vehicle's seats.

Her ears rang. She felt sick.

"Madison?" Izzy's gentle voice coaxed her to attention. "Sit up so Terry can climb in. We'll be home soon."

She heard the words and struggled to obey without throwing up. An arctic draft swept through the side door, slapping her hard in the face with ice and the pungent smell of exhaust as John started the engine.

Terry climbed in beside her, slid the door shut while the children in the back chatted like the little girls they were.
The vehicle started moving. They merged on to the road, and when she watched the pavement, the yellow center divider blurred and dizzied her.

Izzy pulled out her purse and began to dig through it for something.

Her stomach kept gurgling, though not from hunger. Smell, sound, motion assaulted her at the same time. A hand rested on Madison's shoulder.

"Izzy?"

"I know, I'm looking."

"Maddie, try to calm down." The hand squeezed her shoulder. "Do you want John to pull to the side of the road?"

"Yes," welled within her, caught in her throat and burned along with the bile that wouldn't be held back a second longer. Something passed to Terry; he opened it, then swung it in front of her as the nausea had its way.

"Ewww!" came from the back seat, followed by, "Is she dying?"

"Just a little car sick," Terry said, rubbing a hand on Madison's back.

Only after the fact, did she realize Terry held something in front of her-- a plastic baggy inside a small, discreet paper bag.

"Are you done?" he asked.

After one last lurch into the bag, she weakly nodded.

"Here"-- he pulled out a handkerchief-- "wipe your mouth. Don't worry, it's clean."

She didn't care if it was clean or not, only that the nausea had backed off. The handkerchief smelled lightly of Terry, a trace of his soap scenting the material. She wiped it across her mouth, folded it and squeezed it to her nose.

"How's she looking?" John asked.

"Better, I think." Terry kept rubbing her back as though she were contemplating more of the same. "Do you feel better now?"
She nodded, leaned her head against the window and watched as he zipped the baggy shut, then rolled the paper bag closed so no one could see what she’d done.

"Don't you think she might be coming down with the flu?" Terry asked.

"I doubt it." Izzy reached between the two front seats and took the bag from Terry. "I'll keep this on the floor until we reach home."

"So you don't think she has a fever?"

"Terry, calm down." Izzy looked into the rear view mirror. "She's probably over-excited and needs some time to settle down. I'm pretty sure she'll live."

As if to check for himself, he put a hand to Madison's forehead.

"Terry." Izzy sighed. "Calm down before you make her worse."

"But she's so pale."

"Yes, and she won't get her color back until you calm down."

The hand dropped from Madison's forehead and she felt free to close her eyes. Moving material sounded beside her, then something soft covered her chest and her shoulders in a warm hug. The smell of Terry's aftershave greeted her. She opened her eyes long enough to find his coat draped over his old one.

"We're almost home, Maddie." Terry could have added, "Hang in there," and it would have come out the exact same way.

She tried hard to smile. "I feel better."

"Do you?" Hope touched his features and her smile came easier. "I'm glad you didn't get sick in church."

"Oh," John laughed from up front, "that would have gotten some attention."

"Daddy?" An urgent voice called from the back seat. "Someone has to go!"

"Can't she hold it for five more minutes? We're almost home."
Terry twisted to look into the back seat. "Uh, Izzy? Do you have another of those bags?"

"Oh no." Izzy grabbed her purse, began digging through it while John speeded up a little more. "Hold on, I think I've got one left."

The trees began to look familiar to Madison. She no longer felt the need to escape the vehicle, and a calm relief spread throughout her. The aftershave that clung to Terry's coat made her feel safe. As a second baggy was passed to Terry, Madison cozied into his aftershave and pulled it around her like a warm blanket. She closed her eyes and let it envelop her. It felt good to feel better.

The sound from the back seat said that the baggy hadn't arrived a moment too soon. Poor little girl.

"Which one?" John asked.

"Debbie, but she's looking better." Terry sounded more confident, more in control when dealing with the children than with Madison. "Ruthie, Lizzie-- don't look until I get the baggy closed. If either of you feel sick, your mommy doesn't have any bags left."

"I don't-- that was the last one." Izzy turned to look at her children. "Sweetheart, do you feel better?"

Madison almost said "Yes," before a relieved little Debbie answered before she did.

Was that what it was like to have a mother who cared? Someone to always say "Sweetheart" when you didn't feel good, or who carried bags around in her purse in case one of her brood felt sick? What would it feel like to be one of the little girls sitting behind her? Madison wondered.

Whatever it felt like, it had to be good.

When home came into view, everyone breathed a sigh of relief. The moment the minivan parked in front of the house, Terry began unbuckling to help the triplets out of their boosters.

For just having thrown up, Debbie climbed from the back seat looking remarkably well. She jumped from the side door, ran to the swing set beside the house as her sisters raced after her with shouts of "Wait for me!"
"Not until you change out of your church clothes!" Izzy called after them. Terry collected both zippy bags, then headed off to a metal trash can while John went to unlock the house.

Izzy opened the passenger door, got out, then came to help Madison climb from the vehicle.

"Knowing John," Izzy sighed, "he'll go fishing with Terry after lunch." She started Madison toward the house and smiled. "Since neither one can sit through Pride and Prejudice without a running commentary, I'd say the timing was Providential."

"Hey, Izzy?" Terry cleaned his feet on the mat before following them through the front door. "Would you make sure Maddie takes a nap after lunch?"

"She's not a child, Terry."

"I know, but look at her. She needs rest."

"Then ask her to take a nap." Izzy took off the coat, put down her purse and Bible, then started for the kitchen. "I have to start lunch, and before long, you'll need to get over to Emily's house."

The couch looked inviting. Even before Terry started to speak, Madison was tugging off her coat to curl up and rest.

"You didn't get any sleep last night."

"I know." She watched him hover nearby, his hands stuffed into his pockets.

"I don't suppose I could extract a promise that you'll take a nap this afternoon?"

The thought drifted through her tired, hungry mind that his eyes were a nice shade of yummy chocolate. She could lose herself in those eyes and sleep forever.

"How about if I pay you?" He pulled out his wallet, opened it, and extracted some dollar bills. "I'll give you five bucks to take a lengthy nap."

Too weak to respond, she closed her eyes and fell asleep.

* * * *

"Go on, Terry. She'll be just fine without your checking her every five minutes." Izumi shooed him down the hallway. "I give my word I'll keep an eye on her while you're gone."
He frowned. "Make sure she eats. She missed lunch and I know how much she enjoys hot dogs. She'll be disappointed she missed them."

"I'll fix her more after she wakes. You have my word."

"And the movie-- I promised she could finish it today."

Their voices came to a whisper as they stepped into the living room. The little bits were in the kitchen with John, playing a Bible Memory board game at the table and digesting the hot dogs that Madison had slept through. At least she was sleeping. If Terry could find a victory besides getting her to church, that would be it.

"I don't know, Izzy. I feel like I'm abandoning her."

That prompted a sigh from Izumi, along with a decided nod to the front door. He hurried on his coat, then tossed one last glance at the couch before Izumi threw him out of the house.

She might be petite, but she could be a determined mother when it came to doing what was best for her family. And that, Terry figured as he hurried down the sidewalk, was just what Izzy was doing by getting him out of the house. Madison could survive a few hours without him-- he knew that. Izzy would take care of her.

That Emily was waiting, he also knew, and silently thanked Izzy for looking out for him.

* * * *

The McCall's house was so close, Terry reached it before his thoughts turned to lunch and the pretty woman waiting for him.

A knock on the door brought Mitch, one of the aides who cared for Stanley when Emily wasn't home or when she needed the extra help. The young man stared wordlessly at Terry, and Terry was beginning to fear he might not let him in.

"What do you want?" Mitch asked in a surly tone.

"I was invited to lunch. May I come inside?"

"I guess." The aide stepped aside, and only then, did Terry notice the red stains on Mitch's blue scrubs.
"Is Emily home? Is anything wrong with Mr. McCall?"

The young man closed the door, then gave a tired shake of the head. "Yeah, she's here."

Waiting for Mitch to follow up on the comment, Terry raised his brows as a prompt for more information.

Mitch sighed. "Stan insisted on going to church. Since I hadn't been alerted of any change of plans, I arrived as they were leaving. Meaning, I came into work when I didn't have to." The young man took a deep breath, as though it took a great deal of patience to speak. "Stan forgot to mention to anyone, including Emily, that he had M&Ms in his pocket. He claims they keep him awake so he can listen to the sermon."

The aide took a moment to calm down.

"When I gave Stan a glucometer check after they got back, I knew something was up besides his blood sugar. It doesn't get that high without help. Maybe he skipped his meds, or he's been fasting, but Emily doesn't let Stan forget his medication or his meals. It just doesn't happen."

Mitch stopped. "Do you really want to hear more?"

Terry nodded.

With a shrug, Mitch continued. "The hyperglycemia was high enough to warrant a sit-down talk about controlling his diabetes. During which talk, he admitted to the candy but insisted he had a right to it. When I told him his health was more important than his sweet tooth, he got weird on me and bumped the tray, which knocked over a pitcher. I tried to catch it before it hit the floor. The young man looked at his uniform and shrugged. "I missed. You think I look bad, you should see the bedroom."

"When did this happen?" Terry asked.

"Just now. A minute or so before you got here."

"So those red stains" -- Terry pointed to the uniform-- "that isn't blood?"

"Naw, it's not blood. Is that what you thought?" A smile cracked Mitch's lips. "Sorry about that, man. This is Kool-Aid. Nothing but cherry Kool-Aid."
Just looking at the man's splattered, red-stained uniform, Terry figured the bedroom must be quite a mess. Knowing what Terry did about tykes spilling bright colored soft drinks on couches and carpet, he doubted they'd ever get the stains out.

While Terry wondered whether it would be more rude to stay, or to leave, Emily emerged from Stanley's room.

"Terry," she smiled, her tired face seeming to light up with the sound of his name, "I'm so glad you're here." She came down the short hall, her clothes looking in better shape than the aide who'd greeted him at the door. "We've just had an episode with Dad. I've tried reasoning with him, but he simply refuses to be rational. Honestly, candy in church; just an excuse to sneak chocolate, if you ask me. I don't suppose you could talk some sense into him?"

"Uh, sure. If I can help."

To his dismay, she didn't act as though she'd just asked a rhetorical question meant to make him sigh and express sympathy. She really meant it. His heart sank further when she stepped aside to show him to the bedroom.

Okay, he could do this.

Terry took off his coat, gave it to Emily, then stepped inside the familiar sunny bedroom with sunshine yellow on the walls and pale brown carpet. Sober looking medical equipment stood about the room, evidence of what two past heart attacks and subsequent complications could do to a man in his early eighties. Stanley had become a father late in life, and now it seemed, Emily was old enough to care for him, but young enough for it to interfere with starting her own family. It was probably the only reason why Emily was still single.

Beige carpet. Terry winced, though he had yet to spy the mess the aide had claimed looked worse than his scrubs. On this carpet, artificial coloring would not hide well.

From the hospital bed, the old man smiled when he saw Terry.

"Emily said you were coming to lunch! I'm glad she thought to call you."

Terry smiled politely, knowing she had invited him in Stanley's presence, at church and not over the phone. At the moment though, it appeared Stanley didn't remember.
"Come in, come in. Mind the spot on the floor, though. That young fella-- Mitch... I forget his last name-- clumsiest aide we've ever had. Knocked over my tray and spilled the pitcher sitting on it, all over the place. Sugar-free, of course."

"Of course," Terry smiled, edging around the large stain beside the bed. From this vantage, Mitch was right. The bedroom had suffered worse than his uniform.

"I suppose Emily sent you in here." Stanley folded his arms, lowered his voice as though his daughter wasn't standing in the hall with Terry's coat. "She thinks I'm getting on. That I'm growing senile."

"Daddy, I would never say that."

The old man shook his head. "What else am I supposed to think when you keep repeating yourself, ad infinitum? One of us is slipping, and I can tell you it isn't me. Go check on lunch. You don't want this man finding he came here for nothing."

The reminder sent Emily to the kitchen.

Stanley blew out a sigh as Mitch brought in paper towels to sop up the mess on the floor.

"I'm allowed candy," Stanley looked to Terry. "You didn't know that, did you? I'm allowed a moderate amount of normal candy, as long as I keep it within certain limitations. The way those two say it, you'd think I was grabbing sugar left and right-- never mind my condition."

"You smuggled M&Ms to church in your pocket." Mitch spoke without looking up. "You can't be trusted to eat only a few, so Emily banned them altogether."

"There." Stanley nodded with emphasis. "See what I mean? Terry, it was only a handful of little candies. Nothing to get excited about, and certainly nothing God would hold against me for bringing to church."

"He mixed them in with his breath mints," Mitch said, looking over to Terry while a sopping paper towel dripped from his hand like diluted blood. "He evaded detection, only by making Emily think he was eating breath mints, not real candy."

"Candy which I'm allowed to have!" Stanley's face turned bright pink and his breathing came in quick huffs. "I never lied. I never told her they were mints."
Mitch gave a bland look, and went back to the mess. As far as Terry knew, cleaning the floor wasn’t in Mitch’s job description, but it didn’t stop Mitch from declining Terry’s help when it was offered.

Stanley motioned to a folding chair leaning against the wall. "Pull up a chair. Until Emily says it’s time, you might as well sit awhile and visit. She wants me to come to the table for lunch, but I’ll do fine right here. I don’t want to interrupt a meal meant for two."

The nod to romance seemed out of place, especially while Stanley kept eyed Mitch as though he thought the aide might jump up and find another pitcher of red drink to dump over the carpet. Mitch looked so sane he was probably hurting, and Terry felt for the guy.

The fiasco over smuggled chocolate and bright red stains had put an unbalanced, and slightly combative gleam in Stanley’s eye. Whether it was senility or the frustrations of a man trapped in a failing body, Terry couldn’t be sure. He only knew it made him careful to not make the situation worse.

"If you'll pardon me for mixing metaphors," Stanley said with a wry chuckle, "that’s quite a stray you’ve taken under your wing."

"Pardon?"

"That woman-- Madison. How much do you really know about her?"

"Enough to know she needs help." Terry forced a pleasant smile, waited a beat and when Stanley didn’t respond, continued. "She was born in New York City, doesn’t have any family to help her out, and no friends besides John and Izzy."

"And you."

"Yes, and me."

The wiry eyebrows above Stanley’s rheumy eyes narrowed. "There’s been a lot of talk in town about you and that woman. Emily doesn’t believe it, and neither do I. I like you too much to believe it. But," Terry kept his composure as the old man paused, "that doesn’t mean it doesn’t have a kernel of truth. Most gossip does. Have a kernel of truth, I mean."

"I’m only helping out a friend."
"You say that now, but I saw her for the first time in church today." Stanley shot a look at Mitch and found the young man listening.

Mitch went back to work and Stanley groaned.

"Like I was saying, I got a good look at her."

Terry remained calm. "And?"

"And I'd say my daughter is heading for a hard time, wouldn't you?"

Unsure what he meant, Terry hesitated.

Stanley shook his head. "I love my daughter and treasure her for the sweet, kindhearted person she is. But Madison isn't fair competition. She's too pretty."

Terry blinked. Competition? Terry hoped those chicken pot pies were about ready to come out of the oven.

"You need to find a way to gently get rid of her, so no one's feelings are hurt. I'm saying this for your own good, as well as for my daughter's. Nothing good can come from someone who's got all their beauty on the outside, and very little on the inside. The way she looked at you-- like if you told her to jump off a bridge, she'd do it without even asking why. As your friend and Emily's father, I have to tell you it troubles me."

"What can I say?" Terry sucked in a breath, willing himself to remain calm despite Stanley's assessment of Madison. "I'm sorry you're troubled. She's a self-professed Christian with a traumatic past who wants to lead what most people would call 'a normal life.' From what I've seen, she's kind to her friends and painfully timid around strangers. From that perspective, I can understand why people might not know how to interpret her behavior. That aside, I can safely say she's not anyone's competition."

The response was not what Stanley had wanted. Terry could see it in the patiently frustrated expression on the old man's face.

"Well. Thank you for hearing me out." Stanley folded his hands and breathed a resigned sigh. "I suppose what must be, will be."
The statement sounded rather defeatist to Terry, but in the interest of keeping the peace, he let Stanley change the subject without further comment. When an opening came to see how Emily was coming along in the kitchen, Terry politely took it.

For all the years Terry had known Stanley, this was their first real disagreement. Sure, they had some differences on politics and religion, but never in any other way than as a nodding acquaintance, someone Terry fellowshipped with in church, but rarely face to face. Back home, John was the one who visited the Mc Calls regularly, and not Terry. Stanley often treated John with the warm affection of a son, or at the very least, a very close friend. But Terry? Terry had sometimes sensed that Stanley didn't quite approve of his past decisions, such as all the volunteer work he'd done at the crisis hotline.

Since Stanley hadn't been a part of Terry's decisions, Stanley's approval or disapproval had never been an issue.

The future could easily change that.

With effort, Terry pushed his thoughts aside and went in search of Emily. She had taken the pies from the oven, and they stood cooling on wooden trivets on the kitchen counter. It smelled wonderful.

At that moment, Emily emerged from the pantry and smiled when she saw him.

"Thanks for talking to Dad. I hope you came hungry, because we have a lot of chicken pot pie to go around. Since I forgot to let Mitch know he didn't have to come in this morning, I made enough for him too. And now the floor. Sometimes, Mitch is such a lifesaver. Not all aides would do what he's done."

"He seems like a nice kid."

Emily smiled. "I wish we had more like him."

Terry stepped out of her way as she moved past with a can of creamed corn in each hand.

"I hope you didn't go to too much trouble on my account. I'll eat just about anything."

"If I were vain," Emily gave him a teasing glance, "I'd take that as an insult. But since I'm not, you're off the hook."

Leaning against the wall, Terry smiled and watched Emily open the cans into a serving bowl.
She gave him a knowing glance. "I know a secret. This morning, I caught Brian looking at Madison. It appears she has an admirer."

Instead of the laugh Terry sensed Emily had wanted, he couldn't help but wince. In the half hour he'd been here, the subject of Madison had come up twice. Even so, if he had serious thoughts about marrying Emily, shouldn't he make a concerted effort to discuss things with her? Like John did with Izzy? It was one thing to politely disagree with a future father-in-law, yet another when that person was your wife.

Deciding to make the effort, Terry shoved his hands into the pockets of his slacks and gave a candid reply.

"Izzy thinks Brian is smitten with Madison."

"Does she?" The happiness in Emily's blue-brown eyes puzzled Terry. "Good for Brian."

"Don't congratulate him too soon. Maddie doesn't exactly return his advances."

Laughing, Emily dismissed the concern. "That's a bunch of nonsense, and you know it. Sometimes people just need to get used to the idea that they're admired. Give her time. She'll leap at the first opportunity she has to land someone like Brian. He's a big fish in these waters."

It quietly amazed Terry how confident Emily and Stanley were of Madison's true character. As if they knew her, or understood her. They'd only glimpsed her on the rare occasion-- Emily had traded a few words with her on Saturday, and yet they made absolute statements about things they couldn't possibly know and yet presumed to understand.

He wanted to talk to Emily about Madison, yet had a feeling Emily really didn't want to hear it.

Instead of arguing, Terry abandoned the subject and commented on how good lunch smelled. At least he'd come hungry. On that point, he wouldn't disappoint Emily.

* * * *

The shadow closed in around her. The white flash of teeth when it grinned, the smell of putrid breath as it leered, felt too real, too livid to be anything but absolute reality. Darkness squeezed against her lungs, and just as she opened her mouth to scream, something small touched her arm.
She flinched, and with that one, brief contact, a voice inside her knew she was dreaming. The touch on her arm came again, followed by a child’s serious warning:

“You're going to miss ice cream. Madison, it's ice cream.”

Relieved, and at the same time bewildered, Madison’s eyes flicked open. Beside the couch stood one of the triplets, the girl's brilliant blue eyes looking straight at her.

"Mommy even has cones." The child lowered her voice as though about to share a great secret. "Since I went shopping with her last time, I got to pick the flavor and we’re even going to have cones."

The words sounded bizarre and strangely wonderful to someone still shaking off a nightmare.

She smiled at the child, wondering which of the triplets she was looking at. Remembering Terry had said they liked to be mixed up once in a while, she decided to make a guess and see what happened.

"Thanks, Ruthie."

The girl smiled. "You've been asleep a really long time."

"I guess I was tired." Madison couldn't help smiling, for she had guessed correct. She was finally getting to know the girls well enough to be able to tell their slight differences apart.

"Ruthie?" Izzy appeared in the kitchen doorway and sighed when she saw them. "You woke her. I told you to let her sleep."

Ruthie looked bashful. "I'm sorry. I forgot."

"You certainly did." Izzy wiped her hands on an apron. "Your sisters are eating ice cream over plates so they won't make a mess. Yours is on the table, but I want you three to stay there while you eat. I don't know why I let you talk me into those cones."

The girl smiled, then scooted around her mom to go into the kitchen.

"I'm sorry about that." Izzy came to the couch, looked at Madison and smiled. "You missed lunch, and almost our late dessert, but I promised Terry that you'd get some rest so I let you sleep. I also promised him to make you hot dogs. Do you feel up to eating lunch now?"
Madison nodded eagerly. Hot dogs. This was so much better than the dream.

"Then you stay there and keep resting until it's ready." Izzy smiled, then went back to the kitchen. "Before you eat, I'd like to take your temperature. I don't think you're sick, but I want to be able to tell Terry that I checked." Talking as she came back, Izzy held a digital thermometer as a curious Ruthie put her dessert on hold and came back to watch. Izzy ran the thermometer across Madison's forehead, lifted it and read the display. "Ninety-eight point eight. Just as I thought, no fever. Ruthie, get in there and eat your ice cream before the cone melts."

The girl giggled and ran off.

"If you'd like," Izzy said, moving back to the kitchen as she talked, "we can finish Pride and Prejudice while you eat."

"Yes please." Madison hoped she spoke loud enough to be heard, feared she hadn't and added a quick, "Thank you."

No response came from the kitchen. Worried, she sat up on the couch and thought about getting up, even though Izzy had told her to stay there and rest. They were still going to finish the movie, weren't they? What if Izzy hadn't heard her say 'yes'? Concern had Madison struggling to her feet.

Her hip protested against being used again, the ache causing her to wince as she moved. Now she needed to use the bathroom, but what about the movie? Her heart wanted to go into the kitchen and ask Izzy, but her bladder won out and she quick-limped to the office bathroom. If she hurried, she wouldn't miss lunch, or the movie.

To her dismay, John sat in his office chair, playing with what looked to be a fishing pole with lots of rubbery plastic things that had hooks in them.

"So you woke up," he smiled, reeling in some line. "Little Dove said she'd fix you hot dogs when you were ready."

Who was Little Dove? Madison wondered to herself as she moved around John and the open box with even more hooks. He had to be talking about Izzy. It had to be one of those terms of endearment that normal people said to each other when they were married.

Thankfully, she made it into the bathroom in time.
As she stood at the sink, washing her hands, she again started to feel the cuts on her belly. The memory of what she'd done the night before, disheartened her. How was she ever going to be normal if she kept doing things like that? Now whatever scars she had, would be even worse. If her doctor had paled at the sight of them before, what would she do now? Good thing she didn't have to go back to Dr. Nelson anytime soon.

Unrealistic or not, Madison couldn't help wishing that she'd never, ever, have to go back and face her doctor again.

As for everyone else, she needed time to heal, to make them look like they'd happened a long time ago and not recently; then she'd be safe from getting anyone alarmed or angry if they accidentally saw them.

Lifting the edge of her shirt, Madison's heart trembled when she saw the fresh wounds. Why had she done it? Stupid, stupid woman.

Self-loathing filled her eyes until they blurred.

She smeared away the tears, cleaned her wounds again to make sure they didn't become infected and turn bright red like the last time. The Dragon had been so angry. He hadn't taken her to a doctor, but had sworn that if she became any sicker, he'd finish her off with his bare hands. Even now, she was convinced that sheer terror had made the infection clear up.

If only she could forget.

The antibiotic hadn't stung too much when she cleaned her belly. That meant it was healing, didn't it? Or maybe it shouldn't have stung at all. Could you die from infected cuts?

Oh, she had to be losing her mind. This was what stark raving mad felt like-- she was sure of it.

God, please help me, she prayed.

The sound of Izzy's muffled voice in the office made Madison hurry. She lowered the shirt over her belly, then checked her eyes in the mirror. They looked red, but there wasn't any time to wait in the bathroom until she was normal again.

Sucking in a deep breath, she opened the door and found Izzy talking to John.
"Why am I not surprised?" Izzy shook her head as John worked to tie something to some thin line. "You'd rather stand in the sun for several hours of male bonding, rather than finish our movie."

"It's not our movie." He tossed Izzy a grin. "Besides, you know this will be good for Terry. He hasn't been out there in a while."

As John spoke, Izzy looked up and saw Madison.

"Lunch is in the kitchen," Izzy told her. "If you want, take your food into the living room so you can eat while we watch TV."

Madison nodded, kept her chin down and circled around John's desk as Izzy went back to discussing Terry, and why he hadn't been fly fishing lately; Terry's renewed interest was evidently a good sign-- whatever that meant.

The movie. Izzy had mentioned it twice.

The smell of food pulled her into the kitchen. At the table, the triplets were finishing up their cones, their mouths sticky and smiling.

"What's your favorite ice cream?" one of them asked Madison. Though Madison wasn't positive, she thought it was Debbie.

"I don't know." Madison shrugged, feeling shy at having been noticed again, and looked at the plate Izzy had left for her on the table. The plate held three hot dogs in large whole wheat buns, a green salad with tomatoes, a helping of green peas, and a few baked potato crisps. It was a generous sized meal, one Izzy obviously thought she should eat.

If it had been anything but hot dogs, Madison would have fought the food. After all, she'd eaten breakfast, hadn't she? But hot dogs with ketchup, mustard, and relish, wouldn't be turned down. Though she didn't want to admit it, she really was hungry.

"You need orange juice." Ruthie slid from her chair, went to the fridge and pulled out a large plastic pitcher that wobbled in her hands. Very carefully, Ruthie brought it to the table, then went to get a glass.

A white stain around her mouth, Debbie grinned. "Vanilla's my favorite."

"I thought it was strawberry," Lizzie frowned. "That's my favorite."
"Strawberry can be yours, but mine's vanilla."

"But what's wrong with strawberry?"

"Mine's vanilla, too," Ruthie said, coming back to tip the pitcher into a large plastic cup. Madison would have volunteered to do it for her, but Ruthie looked determined to do it on her own.

The girl poured and poured. It was a very large cup.

"Juice is good for you 'cause it has vitamins and things." Ruthie returned the pitcher to the fridge, then went back to the table to finish the last bite of her now soggy cone.

"Thank you." Madison hefted the cup in one hand, the large plate in the other, then edged her way into the living room. It seemed everyone was intent on making her eat.

Light from the window gave a definite late afternoon cast to the room, reminding her that she'd slept away the center part of the day. As she sat down on the couch, she noticed paper money tucked halfway beneath a large cushion. Curious, she pinned the cup between her knees to keep it upright, then pulled out the money.

Five dollars.

Terry. He had put it there because she'd taken that nap.

The knowledge that someone had cared, filled her with a warmth that almost made her want to cry. She supposed she wasn't supposed to wonder if he was having a good time right now. It wasn't any of her business, it really wasn't.

Grief tugged at her, but she pushed it away and forced her concentration on to something else-- anything else-- to keep from crying again.

After praying over lunch, Madison picked up the first hot dog, closed her eyes then bit in. Oh, it was good. Those five-dollar bills were the first money she'd actually owned since spending nearly everything she had for the bus fare that had brought her to Three Mile Bay. It had only left her with fifty-two cents, and even that had gotten lost when she'd braved that first awful night at the campground.
"Why can't we have the same favorite?" Lizzie asked as the three girls came into the room. "Why can't we like strawberry again?"

Debbie crossed her small arms. "Because we like vanilla now."

"But I want strawberry."

"All right you three," Izzy came down the hall, "your daddy and Uncle Terry are going fishing later this afternoon. If any of you want to join them, go to the office and let Daddy know right now, so he can help you get your tackle together."

"Yes!" Debbie did an energetic spin. "I'm gonna land some smallmouth, maybe some pike!"

Lizzie's shoulders slumped in defeat. "But I don't want to go fishing."

With an exaggerated sigh, Debbie looked to Ruthie. "What's your vote? Strawberry or vanilla, fishing or... what else is there?"

"Careful," Izzy laughed, going to the couch and moving some of the bedding to sit down. "You're starting to sound like your big sister, Abby."

"But I don't want to go fishing. Mommy, do I have to?"

"Lizzie, did you hear me say you had to go? And why do you all three have to agree? Why can't you like different things, and still be sisters?"

Lizzie looked doubtfully at her mom, then her two siblings. "I'll watch TV with Mommy." She said the words carefully, as if to test the waters and see how the others took her news.

"Me too," Ruthie shrugged. "I'm too full to go out. Mommy, can we have popcorn?"

"I thought you were full."

"Well, I'm going fishing with Daddy and Uncle Terry." Debbie gave her sisters one last look, as if to say, "This is your last chance. Are you sure?"

With a shrug, Ruthie went to go sit on the couch beside Madison. "You need to drink your juice," she said, as Madison started in on her second hot dog.
The comment prompted Izzy to look around her small daughter, to the glass pinned between Madison's knees. "Ruthie, did you serve Madison all that orange juice?"

"She needs vitamins. You said we had to drink all our juice 'cause it has vitamins to make us healthy."

"Yes, but Sweetheart, that's a lot of vitamins."

Eyebrows up, Debbie swayed from foot to foot. "I'm going," she warned.

"Doesn't Madison need vitamins?" Ruthie looked at Madison, and Madison suddenly felt her health coming under scrutiny.

"That's still a lot of orange juice." Izzy looked to Madison and gave an apologetic smile. "You don't have to drink all that. When you've had enough, just put the cup in the fridge and you can finish it later."

"Did anybody hear me?" Debbie looked from Ruthie to Lizzie.

"I guess you'll have Daddy and Uncle Terry all to yourself, Sweetheart." Izzy smiled at the satisfaction that dawned on Debbie's face as Debbie realized that fact. "Mr. Donovan is coming to fish with your uncle, so make sure you let our guest have whichever spot on the beach he wants for fishing. Remember, company manners."

With a quick nod, Debbie ran off to go find her father.

"Okay, ladies." Izzy got up from the couch, went to the DVD player and loaded the next disc for *Pride and Prejudice*. "It looks like it's just going to be us this afternoon."

* * * *

Leaning back from a large meal, Terry looked across the table at Emily. Lunch had been more than good, it had been the best chicken pot pie of his life. With a satisfied full stomach, he declined dessert but accepted the decaf she offered.

Sipping hot coffee, enjoying a sleepy Sunday afternoon in the company of a pretty woman and good friend-- Terry could see himself getting used to this. Strange, but the future looked clearer on a full stomach.
They chatted about the weather, that morning's sermon, the probability of more rain before winter came. Like neighbors talking over a shared backyard fence, they spoke of things they had in common. Differences were not mentioned, or even alluded to, and especially-- ESPECIALLY-- not Madison.

When the most handy topics had been hashed and rehashed to the point of alarm, Terry realized they were running out of things to say. He needed to go home, think of other subjects they could talk about the next time they met. When he announced he had to leave because Brian was coming over at three o'clock to do some fishing, Emily looked relieved.

He easily guessed she had been running out of conversation, as well.

After more compliments about the meal, and a nodding goodbye to Stanley-- Terry left the McCall's house with the accepted invitation to return next Sunday. By then, he felt certain he could come up with some safe topics they could discuss without having to fear they might drag you-know-who into the conversation.

Terry was absolutely sure he wanted to try again with Emily at this thing called a serious relationship. This was his chance at normal, to become a couple like everyone else around him. He wasn't going to let it slip by and hope for something better with someone else. This was it. He wanted it, and so did Emily.

Despite the growing awkwardness that had overcome the last part of his visit, things could have gone worse. Hurricanes, blizzards, and other natural disasters had avoided the dining room altogether, so in that sense it had been a success.

Even in his heavily optimistic mood however, he had to admit that a disaster of sorts had happened that afternoon, and it had been very natural.

Hurricane Madison had swept through the McCall's house and left polite chit-chat in its wake. As long as Terry was admitting things, he also had to concede that aside from their painful effort to not mention Madison, their conversation before Madison's arrival in Three Mile Bay hadn't been much different. Only now they were being polite under pressure.

At least lunch was over and he could relax. Now he could go fishing and start dreading next Sunday.

* * * *

309
Elisabeth Bennet had just begun to read the letter from Mr. Gardiner about the news of having found Mr. Wickham and Lydia, when the front door opened and light spilled onto the large screen TV. The glare made it impossible to see what was happening.

Izzy hit pause, freezing the moment until the glare passed.

"How was lunch?" Izzy asked the intruder.

"Lunch was good." At the sound of Terry's voice, Madison felt her impatience turn to joy. He was home. He pulled off his shoes, came to the couch where Izzy, Ruthie, and Lizzie were loosely crowded together. "Well, well," he grinned. "Only half of the audience is fast asleep. Not too shabby for an Austen flick."

At Izzy's exasperated sigh, Terry laughed. Even in laughter, Madison saw it— that telltale sadness around Terry's eyes.

"Do you want to watch with us?" Madison started to scoot over and make room, but he quickly stopped her.

"I don't have the time." He moved so he wasn't blocking the TV. "I have to change and gear up before Brian arrives. By the way, where's John and Debbie? I don't see them in here, enjoying all this classic literary culture."

"John's napping in the master bedroom"— Izzy thumbed the remote's pause button— "and Debbie is taking a nap in the girls' room. They claim they're going fishing with you."

"Are they?" Terry looked pleased. "I'll be glad to have them. Do I have any special requests from the chef?"

"Just clean the fish outside before you bring them into my kitchen. I'll take care of the rest."

"I'll keep that in mind." Terry nodded, turned his eyes on Madison and smiled. "Better. You look much better. Did you eat your hot dogs?"

"Yes, and she slept for most of the afternoon." Izzy danced the remote before her. "Anything else?"

Shaking his head with a soft chuckle, Terry left the living room to the girls.
The movie started, but Terry’s sadness clung to Madison. Intent on seeing if he was all right, she got up from the couch and almost didn't hear when Izzy called after her.

"Where are you going? I'll pause the movie."

"No, I'll be back in a moment." Madison hurried down the hall, saw that he'd already gone inside, and stopped at the closed door like a car slamming on its breaks. A bedroom. She wouldn't go inside, she'd only stay in the hall. Willing herself to not look at anything behind Terry, she hesitated, then knocked.

"Just a moment," came from inside. The door opened. Terry's eyes widened in surprise. "What apocalyptic event managed to tear you away from the movie? Aren't you missing it?"

She shrugged. "How did things go with Emily?"

"You must be running a temperature to miss Pride and Prejudice." Terry looked at her with half amusement, half concern in his eyes. "Go back to your movie. I have to change out of these Sunday clothes, then Brian will be here."

"But what about you?"

Terry frowned. "What about me?"

The direct question had her shrugging again. "I don't know. You just look... different."

He stared at her, then gave a slightly lopsided grin. "That's probably because I put on several pounds after that large lunch I had. Go back to your movie. I'm all right, okay?"

She stared at the carpet, then headed back to the living room.

"Hey, Maddie?"

She turned when he called her.

"Thanks."

"Thanks for what?"

He shook his head. "You're missing the good part."
She thought back to yesterday, when John accused Izzy of saying the entire movie was the "good part," and smiled.

For a moment, they stood there looking at each other, making each other's smile a little deeper, a little fuller. Then sadness crept back into Terry's face. He closed the door and left Madison to wonder what Emily had done to make him so sad. What had she done to him?

By the time Madison made it back to the movie, the characters were discussing how much money it had taken Mr. Gardiner to pay Mr. Wickham to marry Lydia.

Izzy gave Madison a concerned look, but seemed happy that she hadn't stayed away for too long.

Several minutes later, the men and Debbie began to assemble in the hall with their fishing gear. When the commotion proved too much of a distraction, Izzy paused the movie. The girls on the couch woke up, and while they sat rubbing their eyes, the doorbell sounded.

"That's probably Brian." Terry strode past the TV in a worn pair of jeans and an old looking coat. He hadn't zipped the coat yet, and she could see a white shirt with a fish symbol on the front.

Despite wanting to watch Terry, Madison hunkered into the couch. She had to avoid Brian, and Terry seemed to understand. He promised the man they would join him in a moment, then Brian went off to find a good place on the beach while Terry closed the front door and took inventory of their equipment.

As the group headed outside, Terry lingered behind and shot a look to Madison. "Stay inside if you don't want to talk to Brian. I'll make excuses for you, but if you step outside, it'll be out of my hands."

She nodded, gave Terry a smile and relaxed when she saw him smiling back.

"Little idiot," he grinned. "Go back to your movie." With that, he disappeared out the front door.

As the miniseries played again, Madison felt better about Terry. If he could smile like that, then things would be all right. God would look after him. She felt comforted in that knowledge, and cozied down to enjoy the rest of her movie.

"They that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."

~ Isaiah 40:31 ~
"For the LORD taketh pleasure in His people: He will beautify the meek with salvation."
~ Psalm 149:4 ~
Chapter Fifteen
Chasing After Normal

"Cleave to that which is good... If it be possible, as much as [is] in you, live peaceably with all men."
~ Romans 12:9, 18 ~

Hollywood knew how to do happily ever after. Get the man and woman to the point of admitting love, then end the movie; get the man to propose marriage, then end the movie; get them happy, then end the movie before it fell apart and the woman realized what a mistake she'd just made. Hollywood, it seemed, understood that, for why else would they end it when they did?

With this firm conviction, Madison enjoyed herself as Mr. Darcy and Lizzy exchanged tender glances while the minister pronounced them man and wife. The credits would come any second, so it was safe to enjoy the moment. She could pretend all sorts of things to stop the bad from happening to Lizzy after the marriage, up to, and including, a startling revelation of some terrible illness that prevented Mr. Darcy from ever touching Lizzy. Or maybe Lizzy died of some terrible illness soon after the wedding-- or better yet, they died together before their wedding night in a tragic carriage accident.

They died happily ever after.

It was as much as her imagination could bear, the only thing that kept her from turning away from the very movie she so desperately wanted to see. She wanted to see Lizzy happy, and she needed it to be that way forever.

The front door opened as the miniseries came to an end, and Izzy clicked off the TV.

"Little Dove, you're missing out on a good time," John said, coming in with tall rubber boots up to his knees. "The fish are really biting today. If things go well, we might have a cookout for dinner, instead of messing up your kitchen."

"A cookout?" Izzy set down the remote while Ruthie and Lizzie climbed off the couch to look out the open door behind their father. "It's not too windy for the firepit?"

"Nah," John smiled, "not enough to stop us from getting in another cookout before winter hits."
"I don't know that it'll save the kitchen from getting messy, but I suppose I'm up for it, if you are." Izzy motioned for the girls to close the door. "How's Terry doing?"

A big grin stretched across John's mouth. "You should see him--casting those loops, just like the old days. I gotta get back to the guys."

Izzy nodded. "Have fun."

Another grin, and John disappeared outside.

Lizzie ran down the hall to her room. "Mommy, can I go watch?"

"Yes, but put on a coat," Izzy called after her.

"I will!"

Instead of rushing after her sister, Ruthie returned to the couch with the women.

A moment later, Lizzie dashed out the door shouting her goodbye.

The mother shook her head. "That, coming from a girl who only a few hours ago, complained she didn't want to go fishing."

Ruthie giggled.

"Well, I have to start getting things ready for dinner." Moving to her feet, Izzy took the now empty orange juice glass and plate from Madison, then headed into the kitchen.

Ruthie looked at Madison. "Want to watch them fish?"

"No thanks."

"Then how about more TV?"

"Thanks, but I think I'm done."

Ruthie sighed. "Then how about stickers?"

Madison shook her head. "I have enough."
"But we have to do something." Ruthie slid off the couch. "You want to play Hoppin' Froggies? I can show you how."

The game was in the girls' bedroom, so even though Madison wanted to say "yes," she was forced to say "no."

"Okay," Ruthie gave a shrug of her small shoulders, "I guess you can sleep then. I'm going to go watch, and when Daddy and Uncle Terry set up the firepit, maybe you can come. It'll be fun."

Not knowing what to say, Madison gave the girl a smile.

"Try to wake up before they light the fire." Ruthie tugged on a folded blanket, then dragged it over Madison's legs. "You sleep now, okay?"

Though Madison didn't want to take another nap, she did as she was told and closed her eyes to make the child happy. As the footsteps left the room, Madison wondered at the strangeness of this family. People who seemed content together, and who didn't do everything in their power to make each other's lives miserable. How odd.

When Ruthie passed the couch on the way to the kitchen, Madison pretended to be asleep.

"Can I go outside, Mommy? I have my coat."

"Okay, but stay close to the men and don't go wandering off."

The footsteps moved to the front door. The sound of it closing gave the all-clear to Madison, and she opened her eyes to find herself alone.

If only she could've played Hoppin' Froggies. If only she could've gone into that bedroom. The silent wish punctuated the sadness that seeped into her soul. If only she could be normal, she wouldn't feel this way. She would be able to watch TV like everyone else, and go places and do things without thinking twice, or even caring. She could be as carefree as everyone around her, with no sorrows or problems. Not real ones, anyway.

Unable to stay on the couch, she got up and looked into the kitchen. The picture of knowledge and ease, Izzy moved about her space dumping things into a bowl-- measuring this, adding a dash of that. It wasn't until Madison moved, that Izzy realized someone was watching.

"This is basting sauce for the fish," Izzy said, stretching plastic wrap over the bowl, "but I won't heat it until John and Terry are ready with the firepit. And of course, providing they actually
catch something." Izzy gave a smile that spoke of experience. "If they strike out, I have hamburger patties thawing in the fridge."

Madison leaned her head against the door frame.

"You still look tired." Izzy placed the bowl into the refrigerator, then turned to wash the produce by the sink. "If you don't want a nap, why don't you put on your coat and go watch the fishing?"

Madison bit her bottom lip.

"Oh, I see." Izzy smiled as she placed tomatoes on a cutting board. "You're trying to avoid Brian. It's a shame you have to miss out on such a nice day. You know, you could always sit on the back step and watch from there." Izzy nodded to the door at the back of the kitchen. The door had a window in the top half with small curtains that matched the ones on the window over the kitchen sink.

Clenching down on her lip, Madison went to the small window and peered out. It presented a good view of the water, the beach, and at least one of the three men. From the back, all she could tell was that it wasn't Terry.

"I don't think Brian will be here for dinner." Izzy pulled something from the fridge. "John said nothing about it, and I'm sure Terry won't encourage him to stay."

Feeling reasonably safe knowing Terry was nearby, Madison went to get her coat, then quietly slipped out the kitchen door to sit on the step.

Wind tugged at her hair, its cold touch sending an involuntary shudder down her back. She pulled her knees up, hugged her legs and tried not to feel overwhelmed by the sheer size of the bay. All that water and sky intimidated her. She felt like a tiny ant compared to all that openness. It was one thing to see the bay from a distance, but another to get up close.

She felt the door at her back and it gave her courage. Tearing her senses from the bay, she scanned the waterfront for Terry.

John was off in the distance, setting aside his rod long enough to untangle Debbie's line. The other two girls stood near their father, and Madison could almost hear them chatter like they usually did when together.

Several feet closer, stood Terry, arcing his line overhead in smooth, graceful curves despite the stiffness of the wind. The other men weren't fishing the way he was. What he did was different in
a beautiful way that she admired but didn't understand. How did he make the loops do that? Did they help to catch more fish?

The man closest to the house was Brian. It had to be him, for he was the only one left. Thank God his back was to her.

Okay. She could do this. She was enjoying the water, the sky, the cold wind just like everyone else. If not outright enjoying, at least trying to.

For a few minutes she could sit here and pretend. For a few minutes she would be normal.

*   *   *   *

Except for the wind, the day seemed near perfect for fly fishing. It played tricks with his line, forcing him to cast with more emphasis into the wind, but he could manage. The smooth back and forth as he loaded the rod, the release when he dropped the fly where he wanted-- it was a wonderfully peaceful rhythm. It sharpened his senses, made him profoundly glad to be alive to feel the kiss of that wind and the crisp smell of the bay.

Poor Debbie tangled her line again. He watched as she went to her daddy for more help. Just as well only one of the triplets were fishing today. With this headwind, they'd all be untangling fly line.

He flicked a glance at Brian, gave him a broad grin as Brian shouted that he was getting a bite. The wind had discouraged Brian from fly fishing, but he seemed to be having good enough success with simple casting. One smallmouth lay draining into the bay, with another being reeled in. Not bad for a guy who was still trying to work out the finer points of angling. Unlike Terry, Brian was a semi-hobbyist, someone who went out only when he wanted to socialize.

To Terry, fishing was largely fishing; to Brian, it was largely social.

Funny, but Terry had never thought of fishing as a terribly social activity. He liked having some buddies around to swap information as to where the best places were, and which lures the fish were favoring that day. Brian, however, rarely came without a cooler loaded with soft drinks and enough sandwiches to go around. It made the guy popular to have along on fishing trips, but Terry wished Brian didn't try so hard to be liked. If Brian's wife, Margaret, were still alive, he probably wouldn't be so lonely with just him and Dave for company. And of course Macho. When Margaret was alive, Brian hardly ever fished.
Letting the line go, Terry smiled when it landed near the area where a smallmouth had surfaced only a moment earlier. Brian’s son, Dave, was visiting a friend today, and had been considerate enough to take Macho with him, so the small dog wouldn’t have to brave an empty house alone. (Macho was known for panic attacks when left to himself for too long.)

When Terry glanced at Brian, Terry found him staring at the house and turned to see what the attraction was.

Ah, Madison.

It surprised Terry that Madison had somehow found enough courage to come outside where Brian could see her. He supposed that was good, but knew Brian would want to talk about her the first chance he got.

In resignation, Terry watched as Brian gave her a friendly wave. Of course, that drove her inside, but Brian was already grinning ear to ear.

Come on, Brian. She just ran from you.

Shaking his head, Terry returned to the bay and started the back and forth swish of his line.

"Hey," Brian came as close as he could without getting snagged on Terry’s lure, "want to stop and take five?"

Not really, Terry thought, but started reeling in his fly line. He wished Brian would stop grinning.

"How many fish have you got?" Brian handed Terry some cola. "I’ve only managed two bass, but I’m thinking of going with a different lure. Maybe a crankbait to get some more depth."

"Sure. Why not?" Terry popped the can open. "I’ve landed a few bass. They’re nothing to write home about, but on the whole, still a decent catch."

Terry winced inwardly when Brian stooped to inspect his fish.

"You’ve got four good ones here."

Instead of making a remark, Terry swallowed some soda and let the fizz tickle his throat. This wasn’t a competition. Terry happened to know these waters a little better than Brian, that was all.
"I've always said you were the best around here. You and Abby, of course."

Terry nodded. "She's decent with a fly rod." Normally, he'd glow about his Abby, but not now, not when Brian was busy comparing himself to them both. He wished Brian didn't take these things so personally.

"You try a crankbait, and see if you don't land some bass."

"You think it's a good idea?"

Terry gave another nod, and Brian looked encouraged.

"She was out here a moment ago." Brian motioned to the back door and grinned. "I think she saw me."

Biting back a remark about the obvious, Terry swallowed more cola.

"I think she likes me." Brian stared at the empty back step as though reliving the moment. "What do you know about her?"

"It's strange," Terry smiled, "but that's the second time today someone's asked. First Sheriff Peterson, now you."

The remark slid off Brian's back like water off a duck. "Do you know if she's ever been married?"

Terry wanted to take the guy by the shoulders and shake him. Apparently, raising the curiosity of law enforcement didn't phase him. More than likely, he was too infatuated to care.

"Brian, I should warn you..."

"She's been married before?" Brian looked at Terry, and Terry shook his head.

"I was about to say, I should warn you that she's not interested."

"How do you know? Did she tell you that?"

It took Terry a moment to answer. He didn't recall her ever putting it into those exact words, but he'd seen her dislike and felt it wasn't lying to say "yes."
"Man, are you sure? She said that about me?" Brian looked panicked. "Tell me her exact words."

"I don't remember her exact words, okay?" Terry tried not to sound frustrated; his friend was very slow on the uptake. "She doesn't like you. She very probably will never like you."

"But why? Was it something I said?"

"Brian, look." Terry sucked in a breath, held it to buy more time to think. "Don't take it personally, but she has a thing about men."

"What are you talking about?"

Terry blew out a breath. "I'm being very literal when I say she doesn't like men. To her, we're the enemy. It's nothing personal."

"But that's crazy."

"Maybe so, but that's Madison." Terry took another gulp of soda as Brian tried to handle what he'd just been told.

"But why?" Brian asked. "She seems so..."

Terry waited for him to finish and smiled when he didn't. "She seems so pretty?"

"Yeah, and nice. Very nice." Brian shook his head. "So why the aversion to men?"

Looking at his friend, Terry wondered how much he should say.

"She's had a rough life, a lot rougher than most abuse survivors."

"Abuse." Stunned, Brian looked back at the kitchen door. "So that's it? She was raped or something? I thought she wasn't from the hotline."

"She's not, but-- it's a little more involved than rape."

"What do you mean?" He swung back to Terry. "What happened to her?"

"I can't..." Terry blew out a frustrated sigh and wished he could take back his words. The last thing he wanted to do was embarrass Maddie. "I can't betray any confidences, but she's clearly hurting. There's a valid reason why she doesn't like men."
"Okay." Brian nodded. "She doesn't like me. How deep is this aversion? Is it mildly dislikes, or simply won't tolerate?"

"Brian. Really."

"Yeah?"

Terry shook his head. "She hates men, okay?"

"Hates?" Brian took a nervous swallow from his soda can. "That's a strong word."

"I know it is. It happens to be true." Terry crushed his can before tossing it back into the cooler. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't spread this news around town. She's having a tough enough time trying to fit in, without people adding this to the gossip mill."

"Terry, right now, they're saying she's having an affair with you. If they knew this, they wouldn't be thinking the other." Brian shrugged. "Personally, I know it's not true-- besides this recent news about hating men-- I know you too well to believe you'd have an affair. Hey, it's taken you this long to finally notice Emily."

"You know about that?"

A smile parted Brian's mouth. "Word gets around church."

Unsure if he liked that or not, Terry picked up his rod and began checking the fly.

"If I thought you and Madison were sweet on each other," Brian gave another shrug, "I'd never have expressed any interest. I figured since you were seeing Emily, you wouldn't mind. Hey, I'm not trying to get in your way."

Terry leveled him a look. "I'm not sweet on Maddie."

"That's fine by me," Brian grinned. He tapped Terry on the arm with his cola can. "Do you think she'll eat dinner with us?"

Terry tried to remember giving an invitation to stay for dinner, but came up blank.

Tossing his empty can into the cooler, Brian smiled. "John invited me. Since I'm helping to catch dinner, he said it was only fair."
Terry sighed.

"Relax, I'll go easy on her. If she's the one, then God will show her who I am. I can wait."

* * * *

With one wave, that man had driven her inside and ruined what she'd hoped would at least be a few minutes of peace and calm. So much for fresh air. So much for daydreaming herself normal.

Retreating back to the couch, Madison fought back the anger of having lost. The house felt like a cage-- not because it was one, but because she couldn't go outside and be with Terry. She was trapped, and she knew it.

"Why don't you turn on the TV?" Izzy suggested from the kitchen doorway.

Unable to explain why she couldn't, Madison slid onto her side. Tugging at a blanket, she pulled it over her head.

"Why don't you watch Pride and Prejudice again?"

"No thank you."

A sigh came from the doorway, but Izzy said nothing more. A moment later, Madison heard kitchen noises as Izzy went back to work.

Useless. She felt so useless.

A different kind of noise came from the kitchen. Izzy was talking to someone.

"...you know where to find the bathroom."

"Yeah, don't bother yourself, Izumi." A male voice came into the living room-- a male that wasn't Terry or John. "We're catching a lot of fish out there. I think it's safe to say we're going to have a well-stocked dinner."

The person moved past the couch and into the hall. From the safety of her blanket fortress, she peered out just as the back half of Brian went into the office.
They were going to have a well-stocked dinner. Brian just said they were, and it sounded an awful lot like he intended to stay and eat that well-stocked meal. Heaviness settled in Madison's heart like a stone dropping to the bottom of a pool.

The office door started to open a few minutes later, and she quickly ducked under the blanket. She figured she could endure almost any of Terry's friends, provided they didn't look at her the way Brian did.

The footsteps came closer, and when they stopped, she guessed he finally noticed the blanket shaped like a woman, lying on the couch.

In one terrible moment, she pictured Brian lunging at her to do something awful. What that something might be-- she had no idea-- for Izzy was in the kitchen and would surely hear her if she screamed.

Go. Please go.

The soft sound of shoes on carpet started again, this time moving more quietly than before.

Madison wondered if she should try some fake snoring. Nothing big or unrealistic, but something that definitely said "sleeping." If she did that, was it a lie? Would God mind?

Low whispers came from the kitchen, then the soft open and close sounds of the back door.

Was he gone?

How she wished she wasn't such a scaredy cat.

"Madison, you can come up now. Brian thinks you're sleeping," Izzy coaxed her out from under the blanket as the back door opened again.

Ducking back under, Madison heard John call from the kitchen.

"Izumi? Brian's staying for dinner. Will that be a problem?"

"Men," Izzy sighed. "John, I'm in the living room."

"I forgot to ask," John said, coming through the doorway, "until Brian came out and mentioned that he hoped Madison wouldn't mind eating fish tonight. Seeing as she already told him she doesn't like seafood."
"I don't."

"Well, at least you can put up a consistent front at dinner."

"About that..." Izzy hesitated. "I'll talk to Madison. She may not be feeling well enough to eat with everyone else."

"Oh." John looked at Madison. "She is looking kind of pale. Well, let me know what you decide. Maybe we could eat at the picnic table. It'll be cold this evening, but... let me know what you decide. Sorry, Madison. I wasn't thinking."

It seemed an amazing thing to Madison that John would apologize. This was his house, and Brian, his friend. She should be the one to apologize. If Terry's apartment hadn't been vandalized and the window hadn't been smashed and boarded over, she would ask for a ride home so she wouldn't get in anyone's way.

As John left, Izzy cleared away some blanket to sit on the couch. Before she opened her mouth to speak, Terry came rushing into the room.

"John just told me."

"Yes, he told us, too." Izzy sighed. "Calm down, Terry. It isn't the end of the world."

"He's interested in Maddie. He told me so point-blank."

Shaking her head, Izzy put up a hand to stop Terry. "Did you explain things to Brian?"

"I tried to. I even said she hated men."

"And?"

"He said he could wait."

It was enough to plunge Madison back under the comforter.

"Now, now," Izzy lifted the blanket, "hiding won't do any good. Brian will just have to accept that you aren't interested. He's not a bad man, and he won't hurt you. Can you believe that?"

Even though she struggled in that belief, Madison nodded.
"If Brian persists-- and I mean that in a very gentle way-- then someone will have to sit down and explain things until he understands. You're not in any danger."

Though Terry fidgeted and kept shaking his head at the situation, Izzy remained poised.

"What I was going to suggest before Terry came in, is to handle this dinner with a calm and rational mind. We have confidence that Brian is not dangerous, so let's not overreact. Try not to encourage him, and if he presses the point and gentle hints aren't enough, then we'll be more explicit."

Terry groaned. "Why do I feel like we're in high school? Any moment now, I expect Brian to pass me a note to pass to Maddie."

"Let's try to stay calm," Izzy pleaded. "One of us is very pale right now, and I don't want to start a panic."

The remark made Madison look at Terry. Aside from exasperation and a pinched forehead like he was on the brink of a bad headache, he didn't seem pale at all.

"Go back to your fish, Terry. I'll take care of Madison, so try to stay calm."

"Yeah, okay." Terry rubbed his face with both hands. "John said Brian's son will be joining us for dinner, so we'd better set out another plate. Let me know if I can help." Muttering something she couldn't overhear, Terry left to go rejoin the others on the beach.

"It's certainly proving to be an interesting Sunday," Izzy mused with a smile. "Don't worry about dinner. We'll think of a way to handle this gracefully."

Izzy's sensible calm wasn't lost on Madison. For the most part, Madison had lately faced difficult situations by hiding under various blankets. She couldn't go through life doing such a thing, for that would be silly. Madison might be crazy, but she drew a line at silly. Reasonable, rational, normal adults were never silly. Not ever.

"I won't panic."

"Good." Izzy patted Madison's knee. "I hate to see you in here all by yourself. If you feel up to it, I'd appreciate some help in the kitchen."
The sudden joy of having someone actually ask for her help, was quickly overshadowed by a sad but true fact.

"I can't cook."

"Then it's time you started learning." Izzy stood up. "You'll need to know how to cook for yourself when you move into the new apartment, so consider this your first lesson."

In awe of Izzy, Madison limped after her with a clicky pen and notebook. If Izzy was willing to teach, then Madison was eager to take notes.

* * * *

For all of his annoyance with Brian, Terry had to admit that after an hour or two of nonstop fly fishing, he could look on the world with a calmer eye. Izzy had been right. Better to act slowly than to rush ahead and blow things out of proportion.

He flicked the fly closer to a smallmouth, quickly checked the girls again and had to smile when he found Debbie playing with her sisters. For all of Debbie's initial enthusiasm, Abby was the only true connoisseur of the four girls. Abby was an artist with a fly rod, and the water was her canvas. Three Mile Bay had never been the same since Abby left.

He wondered when Abby and Jake were going to let them know of their traveling plans. According to Dick, the new washer and dryer would be installed in the little yellow house tomorrow-- two house warming gifts from very generous friends.

How Terry missed his little fishing buddy.

Several feet away, John waded out of the water. "I'm going to check with Izumi. It's getting late, and if she's ready, we need to set up the firepit."

"I can help with that," Brian called out. "I haven't caught anything in over an hour."

"Maybe the fish are getting tired of you," John laughed. "Try a different bait."

Good-naturedly, Brian grinned and put away his tackle.

Rolling his shoulders, Terry took inventory of his progress. He'd caught five bass to add to John's four and Brian's three. Definitely enough to cover dinner.
Time to reel it in and call it a day.

In the sand behind Terry, the girls finished a large artsy flower-- one made with stones and a smiley in the center. He was admiring their handiwork when John and Brian came around from the garage hauling the copper firepit. The flower was instantly abandoned, and the girls ran over to watch John dump charcoal into the basin.

Freeing Brian so he could leave to pick up his son, Terry upturned two buckets, then placed the cleaning board over them for a makeshift table. He took one of the foldout chairs they used for days like this, sat down at the table and began cleaning their sizable catch with a fillet knife.

Sitting down in the second foldout, John looked over the firepit as he added lighter fluid to the briquettes. "Is she eating with us?"

"Search me," Terry shrugged. "Izzy's taking care of it, and I've been told to stay calm."

"Calm is good." John smiled. "The wind's died down, so it should make for easier grilling."

The kitchen door opened, and Izzy came out to check Terry's progress. "Where's Brian?"

"He went to pick up Dave. How's everything in the house?"

Giving Terry a knowing look, Izzy smiled. "You'll see for yourself soon enough. If the girls get underfoot, send them inside." She went back to the house, leaving Terry and John to wonder out loud what she had meant.

"At least no one's yelling at me for inviting Brian and Dave," John shrugged. "Not that Izumi would yell."

Terry gave him a look. "Has she ever yelled at you?"

"Well, yeah, but not often. The fact you even had to ask, proves it."

"God's really blessed you." Terry felt a twinge of jealousy but ignored it by starting in on another fish. "You and Izzy are compatible, you suit each other to a T."

"That we do." John lit the charcoal and the firepit came to life. "Speaking of compatibility, how'd you and Emily get along?"

The question set heavy on Terry, and when he didn't readily answer, John gave him a sober look.
"That bad?"

"No," Terry shook his head, set aside the filleted fish and started in on another, "not that bad. Emily's dad ate candy in church, and it had everyone excited for awhile. Things got better after the house settled down."

John grinned. "Stan ate in church?"

The remark had Terry pausing, then he suddenly realized why.

"You just called him Stan."

"Yeah. So?"

"Why is that?"

John placed the metal grill over the firepit. "I don't know. I've always called him that."

The reply didn't bother Terry so much as the realization that John had never thought twice about the matter. To John, he was just Stan, but to Terry, he was always Mr. McCall. In Terry's mind, he was Stanley, or Emily's father, but when face to face, it was always different and always Mr. McCall. Terry couldn't remember being told to be so formal, but then John had always been more relaxed around Emily's father.

Why that was, Terry had no idea. He hoped it wasn't because Stanley was habitually more reserved with him, than with John.

"Izumi! We're ready for the baste!" John motioned to the girls to keep a safe distance from the pit. "The fire's about ready. Are you almost done with the fish?"

"Almost." Terry looked up as Madison came out with a bowl.

She said nothing, gave the bowl to John, then quick limped back to the house.

The men stared at each other.

Terry shrugged. "Brian's not back yet."

"Aha." John nodded in understanding. "She might as well enjoy the freedom while she can."
The last of the fish were cleaned and filleted, and while John began to baste, Terry went to the house to give Izzy the knife and the extra plate they didn't need.

When Terry stepped into the kitchen, he did a double take. Madison hovered near the oven like an expectant mother waiting to give birth. An egg timer sat on the counter, innocently ticking off the minutes while Maddie kept an anxious eye on its progress.

"Shouldn't it be going faster?" The accusation in Maddie's tone caused him to smile. "The timer has to be wrong. It sure feels a lot longer than five minutes."

"Patience," Izzy said, wiping her hands on a towel as she came to Terry. "I'll take the plate and knife. Do you know when Brian and Dave will get here?"

"They're due any minute," Terry said, his eyes still on Madison. "John told them to bring Macho."

"I guess the girls will enjoy Macho, but what am I supposed to feed him?"

"That's the trouble with us" -- Terry glanced at Izzy-- "you've never had a pet, and neither have I. I'll ask Brian when he gets here."

Looking frantic, Madison waved her hand to get Izzy's attention. "Do you think they're burning?"

"Do they smell like they're burning, to you?"

Maddie's teeth caught her bottom lip. "Couldn't I check?"

"No, you've already opened that oven so much it's going to take longer than it already should. Pull out the stool again and sit down. And be patient." Izzy ran water in the sink and started washing some dishes. "Terry, if you're just going to stand there, would you tell the girls to come in and bundle up? And does John need a knit cap? It's getting late and it'll only get colder."

Amused by the way Maddie was perched on the stool, glancing back and forth between the oven and the timer, Terry smiled. "I'll go check with John."

"Don't forget the girls," Izzy called after him.

After Terry had told the girls to go bundle up, but before he checked with John to ensure John's ears weren't about to fall off from the cold, the Donovans arrived with Macho in tow.
"You guys have good timing," John told them, as fish sizzled on the firepit's grill. "The first few are almost done. Where are the girls?"

"Getting their coats," Terry said, squatting to pet the dog. The small terrier barked and danced about at the end of its leash, his black nose sniffing everything, and his stubby tail wagging in overtime.

"Man," Dave breathed in the fresh air, looked up at the sun that had a half hour before it set, "you guys are so blessed to live this close to the water."

"What do you mean?" Brian nudged his son with an elbow. "We live next to the bay."

"Dad, we can't even see the water from our place."

"That's only because we're blessed with so many trees, we can't actually see it. It doesn't mean it's not there."

Dave rolled his eyes but grinned as Terry gave Macho one last pat. "Dad says you really hauled in a catch today, said you had to beat the fish off with a club."

"Not hardly," Terry laughed, "but we didn't do too bad."

Even as Brian chuckled, Terry saw the casual looking about, the relaxed anxiety in the way Brian kept shoving his hands into the pockets of his everyday slacks. It made Terry groan inwardly. Was it possible for a man to fall so quick? He sure hoped not, or Brian would learn the painful lesson of not falling in love before you were first sure of your affection being returned.

Though Terry wasn't so sure he believed that theory.

Why did it sound like something he'd once read in a Jane Austen novel? Come to think of it, Jane hadn't believed it either. To a guy who'd just escaped seeing the last of *Pride and Prejudice*, AGAIN, Terry found that incredibly annoying.

The back door slapped shut and everyone around the firepit turned to see Izumi.

"Dave, I'm glad you could make it."

"Thanks for having us, Mrs. Johannes."
Her arms wrapped tightly to keep warm, Izzy smiled. "I was wondering... about Macho... I have some leftover chicken I could heat up."

"Thanks, but we'll feed him later." Dave gave the leash a firm tug to get the compact little terrier to stop pulling. "I brought some doggie treats, so he's taken care of."

"Izumi, the first of the fish are done," John said as the back door sounded and three girls came running to see Macho. The dog twirled and barked, his pink tongue eagerly kissing each little girl as they poured over him with affection. "Do you want us at the picnic table, or are we eating inside?"

Terry looked to Izzy.

"Inside," Izzy smiled. "It's too cold for a picnic. Since Macho is housebroken, you can turn him loose in the house. Girls, I hope you three wash your faces before you eat."

Concern tugged at Terry, but he kept his mouth shut. Izzy had told him to stay calm, she was handling things. And, Terry reasoned to himself as Dave and Macho followed Izzy back to the house, Madison could always hide in the office. There was always that.

Hands in his pockets, Brian chatted with John about basting sauces for fish; they were about to rope Terry into that conversation when Terry excused himself to go inside. He wanted to make sure Izzy didn't need any help.

"I'll do that," Brian offered.

Terry only smiled, shook his head, and strode away. He hoped his fishing buddy took that talk they had earlier, to heart. Maddie was not interested.

When Terry stepped through the back door, he found Madison at the stove, nervously pushing around a vegetable stir-fry in a large skillet.

"I don't know, Izzy. It's starting to change color."

"Wait a moment, let me see." Izzy pushed past Terry to get at the stove. "Turn off the fire, and move the pan to a cold burner."

"Did I ruin it?"
"No, it's just a little overdone, that's all. No one will mind." Izzy patted Madison's arm. "Use the bowl I told you about, and for pity's sake, try to relax. You're doing fine. Terry, would you please get out of the way?"

As Terry stepped back, a small dog tore into the kitchen in pursuit of the rubber toy that bounced past Terry's feet.

"Sorry," came from the living room, and Terry looked up to see a sheepish Dave surrounded by the laughing triplets. "It sorta got away from us."

Barking frantically, Macho's claws slid on the linoleum, bumping first into Izzy, then Madison, as he lunged for the toy.

"Mommy, look! Isn't he cute?" Debbie asked as Izzy tried not to step on the dog.

"Come, Macho. Come." Dave tried to take command of his pet, but the commotion of barking and children's laughter, and the fact that everyone's feet kept knocking the rubber toy out of Macho's reach, were more than enough for the dog to keep barking.

Terry looked for an opening, lunged forward and trapped the small dog with both hands. Macho wriggled and squirmed, his little heart bumping against Terry's hand as he gave the dog back to Dave.

"Sorry," Dave apologized again before going back to their play in the living room.

"Terry, would you go check on John? Dinner's ready, and people can start eating before the rest of the fish is done."

With a nod, Terry got out of Izzy's way and went outside. Even with the kids in the next room, they were still loud and he came away with a vague feeling of having escaped. At least Maddie was holding herself together.

Clearing his throat, Terry went to the firepit. John had to stay and finish, so the only person there to leave and go eat, was Brian.

"Izzy said dinner's ready," Terry nodded to the house. "It's a little loud in there, but I expect food will quiet things down."

"Pardon?" Brian gave a puzzled smile.
Terry only shook his head. "You'll see what I mean when you get your food."

With a shrug, Brian strolled to the house. "Let me know if I can help out here," he called to them.

A minute after the back door closed, Terry decided he had to be there to make sure Maddie was okay. He left John, went inside and was immediately relieved when he found her busily filling cups on a counter, away from Brian. She kept her back to him, and although Brian made some comments about how good the food smelled, Izzy was the only one who responded.

"We're eating buffet-style," Izzy explained, "so make yourself comfortable in the living room. Dave has his food, and the girls are still washing up. Terry, do you want to go next?"

"Yeah. Sure." Terry moved past Madison to wash his hands at the kitchen sink.

Only after Brian went into the living room, did Izzy give Terry a big smile. "Guess who made the biscuits?"

At Izzy's nod, Terry looked to Madison. "Really?"

"M-hum. She did a good job, too."

Looking flustered, Madison kept her head down and filled the last of the glasses.

"She's been a real help in the kitchen. Until she moves into her apartment, I'm going to keep teaching her. She's a quick learner." Izzy took two of the glasses and smiled at Terry. "Since this is buffet-style, she can eat wherever she wants. It doesn't have to be in the living room." Izzy could have added, "I told you to stay calm, and I was right," and Terry wouldn't have felt any less relieved. She had kept her word and looked after Maddie.

Izzy took the glasses into the living room, then came back to fill her own plate.

When Izzy left them to go eat with the others, Madison tugged at Terry's sleeve and whispered,

"I'm not good at all. Izzy's just being kind. She told me what to do, and I didn't always get it right."

"That's okay," he assured her, "you're showing improvement. Just keep going in the general direction of forward, and you'll get there."
"Get where?" she asked rather helplessly.

Unable to give a ready answer, Terry picked up a plate and started loading up. "God has a purpose for you, Maddie, and as long as you keep moving forward, you'll have what you're supposed to. It's the only answer I've got."

Male laughter from the next room made her shrink behind Terry.

"I'm going to eat this outside." Terry hefted the plate in one hand. "Care to join me?"

With a smile as bright as afternoon sunshine, Madison eagerly grabbed a plate and started helping herself to the food. Terry waited by the back door, then with Maddie tucked close behind him, he went outside to a beautiful pre-sunset sky.

"You don't have a coat," he observed when the first puff of wind had her shivering. "You'd better get it."

She shook her head. "I left it in the living room."

"Hey you two," John called from the firepit, "I thought the party was inside."

"Hold this," Terry said, handing his plate to Madison. "I'll be right back."

He went into the house, moved past the empty kitchen and into the living room.

"This is good bass," Brian smiled as Macho sat and stared at Dave while the teenager ate. "My compliments to the chef."

Half expecting Izzy would mention Madison's handiwork in the meal, Terry braced himself for Brian's interest. But Izzy only smiled and continued eating.

The coat wasn't on the couch, for someone-- probably Izzy, had cleared away all the bedding to make room for the guests. Going on a hunch, Terry pushed into the hall, went into the master bedroom and found Madison's things.

From the living room, Macho barked once, and Terry guessed the small dog was doing his best to guilt-trip Dave into feeding him early.

Coat in hand, Terry made his way back to the living room, paused long enough to chuckle at Macho, then headed out the back door before Brian had a chance to ask questions.
Right where he'd left her, Maddie stood holding two plates and shivering noticeably.

He led her to the picnic table, and after she set down the plates, she rushed into her coat. Even though Maddie was freezing, he knew better than to ask if she wanted to go inside.

"Do you want to eat next to the fire?" he asked. "It'll be warmer there."

She nodded, and followed behind him like an obedient puppy on a leash. Terry hated the analogy, but there it was. Hard to deny the resemblance.

Casting a glance at Terry, John gave a long look at Madison and made no comment. If John had jokingly wondered why they left the party, he didn't anymore. He knew.

Terry carried over the foldout chair he'd sat in while cleaning the fish, opened it beside the firepit and coaxed Maddie to sit down. He hadn't forgotten the way she'd paled in church after being on her feet for several minutes, or the way Izzy had kept insisting that she sit on the stool in the kitchen.

"That looks good," John commented as Terry ate a forkful of the rice pilaf that Izzy and perhaps even Maddie, had made.

"I could finish up out here so you can go eat," Terry offered.

"Nah, I'm almost done." John turned the fish, then looked up at the sky. "Sure is pretty out here. I wish AJ were here to enjoy it."

"I was just thinking about them," Terry said, picking up a buttered biscuit and smiling at Maddie. "I wish they'd tell us when they're planning to come."

"After tomorrow, the house will be ready," John said, looking at the quiet yellow home where so much of their family history had taken place. "Dick will be here tomorrow to make sure the dryer and washer are properly installed, but aside from that, the house is ready for them."

"Maddie," Terry nudged her elbow, "these biscuits are good."

She gave a shy smile.

"Okay, I'm done." John placed the last of the fish onto a platter, then stood up from the foldout chair. "I'm taking these inside and getting my share of the food. Make sure you stay warm."
"We will," Terry said, watching as his friend went to the house. John left the firepit burning, so Terry sat down in the vacated chair and soaked in the warmth.

All through their dinner, they sat and enjoyed the setting sun, the flames in the firepit curling and licking in the light breeze, the quiet backdrop of water, trees, and shore. A boat out on the bay had its cabin lights on, and Terry knew someone else had probably enjoyed a dinner on the water and the richly painted sunset.

"It's been a good Sunday," Terry breathed, his stomach full after a very pleasant meal.

Maddie smiled, but remained silent. At least she'd eaten her food.

They were enjoying the quiet friendship of silence when the back door gave a small slap.

Zipping up his coat, Brian strode over to them with a genial smile.

"Hey, nice blaze." He stooped to warm his hands over the firepit. "I don't think it's going to rain tonight. The sky's too clear."

Terry nodded in agreement.

Several moments of quiet followed. Terry wanted to find something to say-- a joke to lighten the silence, but for once in his life, no jokes came to mind. He could usually handle conversation pretty well, but the lunch with Stanley and Emily, then all this fishing, had drained him of jokes and conversation. He was tired.

Brian cast a longing look at Madison, but she said nothing. She refused to even look in his direction, and Brian seemed to take the hint.

"Well, it's getting time for us to go." Brian stood, slid his hands into the pockets of his slacks and sighed. "I guess I'll see you around sometime."

The words had been directed to Madison, and she responded with a one-shouldered shrug.

"The food was good. I saw you helping Izumi, and I wanted to let you know I thought everything tasted real nice."

"Thanks." Madison shoved the toe of her sneaker into the sand.
"John said you're moving into your own place soon. If you need any help moving furniture..."
Brian broke off, apparently running out of courage. "If you need help, I'm in the phone book."

Terry winced when Maddie didn't respond.

"Well," Brian said again, gathering the last of his tattered courage, "I'll see you around. Thanks for dinner."

Lifting her eyes from the sand, she looked up long enough to give him a quick nod of recognition.

Brian gave one of the stupidest smiles Terry had ever seen, and Madison's eyes darted back to the ground.

"Good night," Brian said, as if testing whether she would look up again. When she didn't, and made no reply, he turned and left.

Only when the back door sounded, did Madison finally look up.

"Try not to be too offended." Terry set his empty plate on the ground beside his chair. "Most women would be flattered by so much attention."

"I don't like him."

"I know." Terry folded his hands and watched the boat on the bay. "You're an attractive woman, Maddie. You'd better accept that, or you'll go through life angry. Try to appreciate it when a man takes a gentle hint, and leaves you alone. Brian is not the enemy."

She was silent.

"Are you cold?" Terry asked.

"No." Her shoe dug into the sand. "If I were normal, I suppose I should like Brian."

It wasn't exactly a question, but it held open a back door for someone to comment.

"Don't look at me for an answer," Terry sighed. "In my own way, I'm struggling with normal, too, so I don't know. Make up your own mind about him, but be kind. That's all I'm asking."

"Will you stay with me until he leaves?"
The timid plea left Terry breathless. He focused on the boat and nodded "yes."

The fact he sat next to someone who longed for a normal life as much as he did, struck Terry as rather ironic. Even though it gave him no comfort to consider this, they were more similar than she knew. Like dogs chasing cars, they were chasing after normal, and getting about as much success. She wanted something different than he did, but it all resulted from the same loneliness.

Keep moving forward, he told himself. Not much else to do but trust God, and keep moving forward. He believed it was God's will for him, and Terry only prayed he wouldn't let God down by quitting before the answers came.

His requests weren't huge in the great scheme of things, but they were still important.

A wife, a family of his own.

It was all Terry wanted.

"Delight thyself... in the LORD; and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart. Commit thy way unto the LORD; trust also in Him; and He shall bring it to pass."
~ Psalm 37:4, 5 ~
Chapter Sixteen  
Terry's Puppy  

"He that handleth a matter wisely shall find good: and whoso trusteth in the LORD, happy is he."  
~ Proverbs 16:20 ~  

When Brian's vehicle pulled away, Terry could almost hear Maddie breathe a sigh of relief.  

She'd made it through the day, and had earned some peace and quiet on the living room sofa while the rest of them cleaned house. Maddie had wanted to help, but all Terry would let her do was raise her feet when he vacuumed the carpet near the couch. He picked up the napkin Macho had ripped to pieces before being caught, the crumbs that had fallen from plates, the sand that had been tracked in from the beach, all the things that announced a party had just taken place.  

A fly fishing, cook-out-on-the-beach kind of a party, with good friends and good food.  

Terry retrieved Maddie's bedding from the master bedroom, gave it to her and let her get ready for bed in her own way. He watched as she spread the blankets over the cushions, arranged her pillow, then disappeared into the office with her toothbrush to use the half bath and brush her teeth. It had been a big day for her. She had been introduced to the church-going members of Three Mile Bay, and they, to her.  

Except for a little carsickness and some paleness, Maddie had come through it with flying colors. Okay, maybe not flying colors, but she'd managed to survive the day without hiding in the office. That had to count for something.  

After the dirty dishes had been cleaned, dried, and put away, John went into the office to play with his laptop, while Izzy started getting the girls ready for bed. Terry stepped outside to move the now cool firepit into the garage, and lingered to look into the heavens.  

Stars spilled across the dark sky like diamonds on rich, black velvet. It was the kind of night that made Terry smile. Tired though he was, he could appreciate all that beauty. God was indeed rich, to splurge on so many stars.  

The thought eased some of the weariness from his mind. It had been a good day. Long, and not without surprises, but good.
He rounded into the house, locked the back door, then went into the living room to make sure the front was secure for the night. On the couch, Maddie sat in her shirt and jeans, intently scribbling in her notebook. It did his heart good to see her so content. He checked the locks and turned on the outdoor security light.

Not wanting to interrupt, he left off saying "good night," and headed to the master bedroom to make sure he’d gotten all of Maddie's things off of John and Izzy's bed.

"Hey, Terry," John caught him as he passed by the open office door, "hold on a sec, I've got some news." John resumed talking to whoever it was on the other end of his cell phone. "Are you sure about this? That's a lot of distance to cover in under a week."

Curious, Terry came inside, snagged a chair and sat down.

"I know, but you've only got one driver, Abby. You're going to need a lot of breaks, and even then you've got a four-year-old who won't like sitting for most of the day."

Terry breathed a silent prayer of thanks. They were coming!

"Then you've already made the hotel reservations?" John nodded while he listened. "Okay, but that's a lot of driving, Abby. Are you sure? Okay, I'll try not to worry, but we're definitely going to pray about this. So when do you think you'll arrive in Three Mile Bay?" John leaned forward, punched some keys onto his laptop. "Late Saturday afternoon. Okay, have you called Dick yet? Uh-huh. I'll let you get to it then. Get a good night's sleep, and call us after you check in each night. I don't mind if you do wake us up-- call. It'll help your mother to know you've made it all right."

John dragged a hand through his blonde hair. "Give Ricky a hug from Gramps, and tell Jake the house will be ready. Yeah, after tomorrow, it'll be ready. What's that?" John smiled deeply, then feigned a casual, "Just some last minute details-- you'll see for yourself when you get here. Okay, good night, Sweetheart."

The moment John hung up, Terry clapped his hands.

"They're coming!"

"They are," John sighed. "Izumi?" John waited a beat until Izzy came to the door. "I just had a call from Abby. She and Jake are taking off early tomorrow morning, and will be here this Saturday. They're calling Dick to tell him their plans."
"This Saturday?" Izzy came in while a triplet moved around her to climb onto John's lap.
"Driving cross-country in six days? Can she do that safely?"

"It's doable," Terry replied. "Ambitious with a little kid along, but doable. Come on, John, you know it is. Abby's a good driver."

"She is," John admitted. "I was hoping they'd talk with us before they made reservations, but Abby says everything has been taken care of. They've even thought ahead and bought some new toys for Ricky. He can't play with them until after they're on the road, and Abby says Ricky can hardly wait."

Izzy looked at John. "Did you tell her what Dick's planning, tomorrow?"

"No," John said with a wide smile, "she doesn't know yet. If AJ finds out, it's up to Dick to tell them. He's paying for the whole thing, so I don't want to ruin it if he's trying to keep it a surprise."

From John's lap, Debbie looked up at her daddy. "What surprise?" she asked.

"You'll see tomorrow," John said, and gave her a hug.

"At least they're coming before it snows." Terry stood up from his chair and checked the wall calendar. "Things usually start picking up in October, and November through April, they'd be fighting some road hazards. Icy roads can make for some interesting driving."

"You said it," John sighed. "At least they're coming before it snows."

Izzy shook her head. "I'll feel a lot better after they're home, and I won't stop praying until they are."

"I'll be praying, too," Terry added, moving to the door. "I'm turning in early tonight, but the house is locked up and everyone is present and accounted for."

John grinned and gave Debbie a hug. "It'll be great to have all my daughters back in one place again."

"Amen to that," Terry grinned, and said good night before crossing the hall to his room.
As he closed his door, all happy and expectant over AJ’s return, the realization of it began to sink in. Abby would be here before the week was out. While it filled him with hearty gratitude, it also gave him pause to think.

Madison. No one in the family had breathed a word of her to Abby or Jake, and Terry knew why. He could hear it now...

Welcome home, AJ! Who is that stranger on the couch? Oh, it's just my latest needy person. I found her at the campground in the driving rain after dark. Really. No family, no money, and whoa, is she ever needy. But you know me and my crusades.

Oh yeah.

Abby knew his crusades all right, and no one in this family wanted to mention Madison until they absolutely had to.

In a moment of stark clarity, Terry realized Abby was coming home to a total stranger. Jake wasn't as much of a concern, but Abby... she would have something to say about Madison.

Reaching into a pocket, he pulled out his smartphone. He had to get furniture—enough furniture to make Maddie comfortable in her new apartment. She would need towels, bedding, food in the fridge, plates, pans— all the things she didn't have and would need. If he had to, he'd give her his things to make sure the move took place before Saturday. And a cell phone. She positively had to have a cell phone. Terry refused to turn Maddie loose in her own apartment without a lifeline back to himself.

He already knew Maddie would need him.

Then there was his trashed apartment to think about. If he paid extra, the glass people would come sooner than later, and repair his boarded-over window. And he absolutely had to hire someone to remove the "Thanks a lot" scrawled on his wall. Spray-paint would come off, wouldn't it? He pictured the beautiful masonry of his brick and mortar complex, and shuddered. Whatever the cost, he had to get rid of it before Abby came. All he needed was a fresh reminder to Abby of his past and current failures.

He punched out a game-plan on the phone's notepad. He had a lot to do, and a deadline of Saturday to get it all done.

* * * *
Her tummy full and her eyelids heavy, Madison slipped the notebook beneath her pillow and got up to turn on the night-light. She had a lot to write about. Her evening with Terry on the beach had sent her soul humming. He’d sat with her, ate with her, and they’d watched the sunset. It had felt so wonderful to just be there with him. Of course, it hadn’t all been good, for Terry had said he thought she was attractive. That part hadn’t gone into her notebook. She’d pretended he hadn’t said it, and only concentrated on the really good parts. Like watching the water and enjoying things together.

It was wonderful to have Terry for a friend.

Even though she knew a normal woman would probably like Brian, she just couldn’t bring herself to be one of them. Brian wanted to be noticed as a man, and that alone terrified her. To normal people, Brian might be nice, but he was no Terry.

There wasn’t anyone half so nice as Terry.

Climbing under the covers, she cozied into the pillow and sighed. She could close her eyes and still see Terry, the wind ruffling his hair, his eyes on the bay like he was taking in a great masterpiece and not just a bunch of water and lots of trees. Or the way he looked at her when she was busy filling glasses in the kitchen with Izzy, or the way he asked her to join him for dinner outside. Unthreatening, harmless, not wanting or expecting a single thing from her besides friendship. Men were frightening monsters, big and strong and out for one thing and one thing alone. But it was different with Terry. He didn’t stare at her or want anything like Brian did.

She liked Terry. Really liked him a lot.

Her glowing emotions turned uncomfortable when the need came back. Time to think of something else. The fish she’d tasted that day, and had enjoyed, or the way Terry had went about the house and made sure the doors were locked and everyone was safe.

Uh-oh, Terry again. She shifted beneath the covers. If she had to, she’d turn on the TV and keep the volume turned low. If it would stop the ugly feeling inside her, then she would chance triggering those things Terry had called flashbacks. The memories didn’t have to come, for the television hadn’t always done that to her. In the old days, TV had been her friend, giving her a window of escape into other people’s lives, a point of view different from her own. But now, the pictures sometimes reminded her of things she was trying hard to forget.

She would have to be very careful.
Getting up, Madison located the remote, pushed the volume down, then went back to the couch to snuggle under the blankets. She tucked the remote beside her pillow and watched the images move on the large screen.

A man with brown hair and even browner eyes started talking, and she smiled. He wasn't anywhere near as nice as Terry.

Her eyes drooped, and before long, she was fast asleep.

* * * *

The next morning, Terry didn't come to the breakfast table like he usually did. Madison ate her cereal and drank her calcium-fortified milk with the Johanneses, but aside from coming in to fill his smiley mug, Terry kept to the office.

"He's calling the glass people," John told Izzy over a hot cup of coffee.

"Good," Izzy nodded, and left it at that.

Though Madison wondered what John had meant, she lacked the courage to ask. She guessed it had something to do with Terry's broken window.

While the girls munched cereal, John and Izzy talked about AJ-- the family's codename for Abby and Jake. Izzy's oldest child was coming home, and the anticipation on the mother's face said it all. Abby was loved. It made Madison wish her own momma had felt that way about her.

Why was it that other people always had it better than she did? In almost every way, she lacked what everyone else took for granted.

Struggling not to feel sorry for herself, Madison focused on John and Izzy's happiness. She would be glad because they were glad. Even the girls were excited. Their big sister was coming home, wasn't that great?

Madison supposed it was. She'd never met Abby or Jake, and couldn't summon anything beyond a smile and a quiet dread that she would have to negotiate two more people. She was still adjusting to Izzy and John, and soon there would be two more to worry about and try to figure out.
The last of her cereal had turned to mush, but she spooned it down so she could tell Terry that she’d eaten all her food. She finished off her milk, then got up to go use the bathroom. The fact she had to go through the office to get there, gave her the first genuine smile of the morning.

There he was, sitting at his desk, looking so busy and important as he thumbed through a thick yellow phone book.

She moved in front of his desk and waited to be noticed.

"Hi, Terry."

He glanced up and nodded, then went back to his book.

She chewed her bottom lip.

"I ate all my cereal."

"That's good." Terry flipped through some more pages, went back one and stopped.

"You didn't eat," she ventured.

"I know. I'm not hungry this morning." Terry lifted his cell phone, read something from the book then punched in a number.

She sighed deeply. From here, she could smell the soap he used, even the slight scent of his shampoo. All that thick brown hair, the shadow of stubble on his jaw, even the small nick on his hand where he'd probably got a paper cut-- it all fascinated her in a way she couldn't understand.

He was a man, he was one of them, and yet he was so wonderful her insides ached.

"Hello?" Terry spoke into the phone. "I saw your ad in the Yellow Pages and wondered if you have a delivery service. We're talking several large items, at least two room's worth and I'd like them delivered as soon as possible. That's not a problem? Yes, I'll pay extra. Great. Thanks a lot." He hung up, punched more numbers and letters into his phone.

"Terry?"

"I'm really busy, Maddie. Can it wait?"
"Okay." She bit her lip, hoping he'd look up and smile. It sure didn't sound like he was talking to
glass people to her, but then, what did she know?

When he kept working, she went into the bathroom and carefully shut the door so she wouldn't
disturb him.

Why did her heart have to beat so fast?

She lifted the bottom edge of her shirt. The cuts were still there, of course, for she'd only done it
the night before last. The thin slashes had dried together, and were surrounded by pale skin, so
that was good. They weren't infected, so she was healing.

And yet her heart pounded so loudly she could barely hear herself think.

What was happening to her? It didn't make sense.

She cleaned the wounds again, washed her face, then got out the brush and ran it through her
blonde hair. The pale reflection in the mirror caught her attention, and for once, instead of
glancing away, she willed herself to look. Torment shone in those eyes, but she forced herself to
keep looking.

Did Terry really think she was attractive? How could he, when her face was too narrow, her nose
too small, and her eyes so sunken she looked like she'd been beaten? Images flickered before her,
and she saw her own face, her own sheet covered body as her hands and feet stretched tight
against the rope lashed to the bed. She heard the screams and knew it was only one of the
countless movies that she'd been forced to watch, over and over.

And they were all of her.

She wilted inside, and turned away from the mirror like she'd just seen a vision from hell. It had
been hell, her own personal hell with a very real Dragon.

Her hand reached beneath the shirt and she dug her fingernails into the skin beside the cuts.
Not enough to make them bleed again, but just enough to feel the pain. She had to forget,
though each time she saw her whole reflection, it was a reminder that she never would.

How could Terry possibly see a woman in all that mess? She had no color, she wasn't pretty, and
she certainly wasn't attractive.

And yet that's what he'd said.
It made her want to vomit and tremble with pleasure, all in the same breath.

A knock sounded on the bathroom door. It made her jump, and sent a bolt of shock to her wildly beating heart. In that moment, she was certain the Dragon was outside the bathroom door.

"Maddie? As soon as you're done in there, we have errands to run."

Sickness turned to joy, and her insides did a happy dance at the sound of Terry's voice.

"Oh, I'm coming! I'm coming!" she called back eagerly. Insane, ugly creature that she was, she would get to be with Terry today.

Thank You, God. Thank You so much!

She changed into fresh clothes, a pair of loose jeans and a yellow shirt, and hurried from the bathroom before he left without her. He wouldn't forget her, would he?

Relief flooded Madison when she found Terry still in the office.

Her coat was slung over the back of a chair, so she put it on and waited.

Slipping into his own coat, Terry checked the lit-up display on the cell phone on his desk. "Did you take your painkiller?" he asked without looking up.

"No, I forgot."

"You'd better go take it." He looked at her and gave one of those lopsided grins. "We'll be doing a lot of walking today, and I can't carry you if your hip starts hurting."

She couldn't help smiling. He was simply the most wonderful person there ever was.

"Maddie? Are you okay?"

"Uh-huh."

"Then go take your acetaminophen." He zipped up his coat, and she hurried to obey before he left without her.
In the kitchen, Madison's hands trembled so hard Izzy took the bottle from her and dumped two pills out before she spilled them everywhere.

"Calm down," Izzy told her as she swallowed the pills with a glass of water. "You keep breathing that fast, and you'll pass out."

"Are you ready?" Terry came into the kitchen as Ruthie scampered past him in her yellow nightgown. "Sometimes, this family worries me," Terry said with a grin. "It's nearly eight, and Izzy and John are still in their pajamas, and so are the girls. What's this family coming to?"

"Just getting a late start," John grinned from the table. "Are they going to put in the glass today?"

"Yup," Terry pocketed his phone. "Sometime after lunch. When's the washer and dryer coming?"

"Sometime later this morning," John said, as Madison joined Terry.

"Take your pills?" Terry asked her.

She nodded, excited beyond words that she was going with him. She had no idea what errands they were going to run, or where they were going, only that she would be with him. She'd heard a woman on TV call a man cute before, and until now, she didn't know how a man could possibly be cute.

But Terry was-- oh, he was.

"Is she feeling all right?" John pointed his mug at her.

"She's probably just eager to get started," Terry said as he checked his watch. "This will take a while, so don't hold up dinner on our account."

"So you're getting it all done, today?" John asked.

"I'm sure going to try," Terry said as he steered Madison out of the kitchen. "Say 'Hi' to Dick for me."

"Let me know if you need any help," John called after them.

"Thanks," Terry called back, and ushered Madison out the front door.
Wherever they were going, it was a nice day to be outdoors. The cold nipped at her face, but the wind wasn't strong, and when she waited for Terry to bring the jeep around, sunshine warmed her just enough to still be pleasant with a coat on.

Her insides hummed as she climbed into the jeep and buckled up. It wasn't often that she was so very aware of being happy. It hardly ever happened, but today was definitely looking like one of those days. Unable to contain the happiness, she hugged herself as Terry pulled onto the main road.

He glanced at her and frowned. "Are you feeling all right?"

Fearing he might take her back, she gave a quick, "Oh yes."

"Did John and Izzy tell you the good news about AJ?"

When Madison smiled, Terry grinned so broadly she could tell he cared for Abby and Jake very much. No surprise there, for Terry felt strongly about all his family, from the smallest right up to the biggest.

"About today," he continued, "we have a lot to get done before lunch. I have to be at my apartment before one o'clock. My window is getting replaced and I need to be there before the glass people arrive." He sounded almost apologetic. "I don't know how fast we'll be able to find everything, but I won't rush you. What doesn't get done today, will get done tomorrow."

"Okay. Thank you." She didn't know what else to say, but figured that ought to cover it.

"When you see something you like," he glanced at her, "I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know. This will be your home, and I want you to like your furniture."

She gasped in surprise.

He must have heard it, for he gave her a sidelong look. "You didn't know we're going furniture shopping this morning?"

She blinked, and feared he'd laugh at her for being so stupid.

He gave a small chuckle.

"Sorry, Maddie. You've been so quiet, I just assumed you understood."
"Are you angry?"

"No, of course I'm not." He frowned and slid her another glance. "Stop looking as if I'm about to kick you. It's my fault for not telling you, not yours."

"I'm sorry, Terry."

Terry pushed out a sigh, checked the speedometer and slowed.

Her lip hurt, and it wasn't until she tasted blood that she realized she'd bitten herself.

"Let's start over, okay?" Terry smiled at the road ahead. "I'll say, 'I want you to like your furniture,' and you'll say, 'Me too.' Then we'll change the subject and enjoy the rest of the morning. What do you say?"

She gave a timid smile. "Me, too."

"There," he grinned, "that wasn't so hard, was it? The next time you don't understand something, pipe up and ask. I promise I won't be angry."

"Terry?"

He checked his speed, and she plunged ahead.

"I like you, Terry."

"Thanks, I like you, too."

The sunlight played against Terry's face, highlighting his eyelashes and haloing his cheek. He didn't glow from inside like real angels were supposed to, but he sure came close.

"What?" he asked after several moments of silence.

"I like you an awful lot, Terry."

His mouth opened and she could almost hear him repeating the compliment back to her. He flicked her a look.

"Okay," he said slowly. "I suppose that's all right. There's no harm in liking someone."
"But Terry, I like you so much it hurts."

"Whoa." Terry blew out a breath. He nervously checked the rear view mirror, as if to make sure no one could hear them. "Maddie, let's calm down, okay? You don't know what you're saying."

"Yes, I do. I like you."

"Okay... when you put it that way..." he looked intensely thoughtful. "I don't think I have a problem with that. It's only natural that friends should like each other. Sure, okay-- I like you, too."

"You do? Really, you do?"

"Hey, hey." He looked at her again. "Cut that out. 'Like' is just what it means-- I didn't say 'love.'"

"Neither did I."

"Good." Terry straightened in his seat. "Just as long as we understand each other." He blew out a breath and she could see him steadying himself, bit by bit. "Okay, then. Okay." He blew out another breath, gave her one more look before quickly returning his eyes to the road.

"Terry?"

He didn't answer.

"Terry?"

"Maddie, I'm right here."

"You're not angry, are you?"

His mouth opened but he didn't say anything for a full minute.

"That's a good way to catch a fly," she said, and saw him close it with a smile.

"How about we start this conversation over again?" he suggested. "I want you to like your furniture."

"Me too," she smiled.
"Good." Terry gave a nod, then switched on the radio.

As the local news filled the jeep, they sank into a long but friendly silence.

* * * *

What had just happened? And where had it come from? Terry trained his eyes on the road and not on the woman in the passenger seat. He was pretty sure she was staring at him, but he didn't want to risk checking.

She might start talking again.

He steadied himself. He could handle this. As soon as he figured out what had just happened, he would handle it.

A sign caught his eye and he got off the main road before he missed his turn. He hadn't been paying attention, but who could blame him with Maddie talking the way she had?

He flicked her a glance. She was watching him, all right.

Time to think this through rationally. She wasn't like other women. This was Maddie. A survivor with huge scars that still pulsed from the pain of what she'd endured. He knew that, could see it in the way she handled herself, doubted and hated herself, and from her overwhelming need to be normal.

The survivor, he could understand. The woman, however, baffled him to no end.

Was it getting hot in here? He thought about turning on the A/C, but remembered they were wearing coats. And he wasn't hot, not really. His face and neck burned, but it wasn't from heat.

"Maddie, please stop staring."

He heard her sigh, and chanced a look only to find her watching the traffic. Maybe he had been overreacting.

So she liked him. He liked her, too, so what was the big deal? He still couldn't figure out her liking him an "awful lot," but this was Maddie. She was confused on a lot of things.

When he thought about it, she was probably just grateful. He was being nice to her, so she was grateful for the kindness. The way she had expressed it was still a little over the top, but so what?
She was a walking contradiction, a woman who hated men and yet one who evidently liked him enough to say so.

The compliment wouldn't go to his head. As Terry turned into the parking lot for the Pre-Loved Furniture Corner, he reminded himself that this abused puppy was vulnerable. Taken on the whole, "like" was probably harmless enough. He could allow that. It wasn't "love," and as long as she didn't say that word, it was okay.

He switched off the engine, saw her slip out of her seat belt then push open her door.

"Maddie, hold up a second."

She looked back at him and smiled.

"What you said before, about liking me-- I'd appreciate it if you didn't say things like that in front of others. They wouldn't understand."

She cocked her head like a sweet, innocent puppy.

"They wouldn't understand that we're just friends, and nothing more. Please don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

Terry pushed out a sigh. "Never mind. Just be careful what you say about me to others, all right?"

That breathless look was in Maddie's face again, and he decided to drop the subject. He didn't trust that look, or the way it made him feel. No woman had ever looked at him that way before, and it scared him.

Shaking himself from the moment, Terry got out of the jeep. He had to remember who she was--a hurt, confused woman who hated men.

He pushed open the entrance door for Maddie, held it as she passed by him into the store.

She was a vulnerable woman in a desperate situation. He thanked God he wasn't the kind of man who would take advantage of all that gratitude.

Hugging herself, this time probably out of shyness, Maddie tucked herself behind him as he moved into the "showroom." The word could be used mildly, for the Pre-Loved Furniture
Corner was basically one large room stuffed to the gills with couches, tables, recliners, and lamps. The walls teemed with picture frames, lamp fixtures, artificial plants, and knickknacks that probably came from garage sales.

The store had a crowded but cozy charm that had Terry smiling.

As he stopped to look at a recliner, Maddie bumped into his back. He pulled her around until she stood beside him.

"Don't hide behind me. I can't keep an eye on you back there."

Off to one side of the room, an elderly gentleman sat in a recliner next to a small desk. He was probably the store owner, or manager, and he looked to be dozing.

"Well," Terry prodded her, "start looking around."

She gave a lost look and he chuckled.

"Come on, Maddie, have some fun." He pulled her by the coat sleeve to an assortment of small round tables. Some were simple, almost ugly, while others had solid wood finishes that scented of lemon cleaner. "Your apartment is small, only three rooms, not counting the bathroom, kitchen pantry, and closets. Your main space will be the bedroom and the living room."

At the sound of the word, "bedroom," Maddie shrank back and started hugging herself even tighter.

"Like I said before," he quickly reminded, "you don't have to have a bed. You can have a couch, maybe some shelves for books... I don't know, but you don't have to have a bed. Okay? Stop hugging yourself and start looking at these tables."

The elderly man at the table snorted in his sleep, woke up, and sat blinking at them.

"Can I help you folks?"

"Not yet," Terry smiled. "We're still looking."

"Holler if you need help," the man said, and pulled out a magazine.

This place was definitely relaxed.
"First, a table." Terry pointed to a small round one made of solid maple. It had a carved pedestal and four matching chairs that had the classic look and feel of a colonial farmhouse. "Look," Terry pointed to the two leaves behind one of the chairs, "the table opens up, and you put in those leaves to make more space. When you don't have company, take out the leaves and you have yourself a nice place to eat."

When Terry moved closer to look at the finish, he found the usual wear marks of something that had been gently used over the years. Then he saw the price tag.

"They're only asking two hundred and fifty." Terry let out a low whistle so he wouldn't disturb the man in the recliner.

"Is that good or bad?" Maddie asked.

"That's good. Very good." Terry moved to another table, and out of curiosity checked the handwritten price tag. It was higher, but then this table had less wear and it looked more trendy than the other. "What do you say, Maddie?"

She gave a helpless shrug.

"Come on, woman, this is going to be your home. 'Yes' or 'no' to the table?"

"Are you sure it doesn't cost much?"

Terry sighed. "Do you like it?"

She turned about and looked at the tables crowded together on that side of the room.

"This one's the prettiest," she admitted.

"Pretty?" He shook his head. "I guess we can go with that. I see sensible and quaint, and you see pretty. Interesting."

"Well, you asked."

"That I did," Terry smiled. "Wait here a moment, I'm going to see the owner."

It was a snug little store, but she still managed to look frightened as Terry left her beside the pretty table.
"Excuse me?" Terry waited for the man in the recliner to put down his magazine. "We'd like that table-- the small round one with four chairs. Is that the actual price?"

"It is," the man confirmed. "Comes with the leaves, and if you pay extra, I'll have it delivered."

"So you told me when I called earlier," Terry nodded. "We'll take the table, but we're not done yet so there's probably no need to get out of that recliner."

"Music to my ears," the man chuckled, and returned to his magazine. "Pull off the price tag so everyone will know it's yours, and hand them in when you're ready to check out."

They had the store to themselves, so there wasn't much danger of people fighting over who got what. Even so, Terry went back and pulled off the tag.

"How am I ever going to use four chairs?" Maddie asked glumly. "What if I never have any company to use them?"

"I don't know about Izzy and John," Terry said, moving on to the couches, "but I expect an invitation to dinner every now and then."

"You do?" Maddie looked surprised.

"Just because you're in apartment number four," Terry said, handing her the tag, "it doesn't mean you're suddenly on the other side of the world. You have friends here, and I expect to be treated like one."

"Oh, I will," she beamed, "I will."

"Good." He looked back at the selection of couches and wished he hadn't been so emphatic about being her friend. Still, he wasn't about to stand by and watch, just because she now had her own place. She still needed a lot of looking after.

"Since you don't want a bed in your room," Terry proposed, "I suggest you put a really comfortable couch in there. You'll have one in your room-- notice I didn't say bedroom-- and one in the living room for company and watching TV."

"But I don't have a TV."

"You will. I found you asleep in the living room with the set on this morning, so you'll have one." He looked her over. "You're on the tall side-- almost as tall as me-- so you shouldn't have a short
couch in your room." He turned to the assorted sofas, waded between them and tried to judge quality and length. "Come over here. You need to try these out and see if they fit."

Obediently, she came over and sat down.

He motioned for her to stretch out.

"Comfortable?" he asked.

She couldn't give him an answer, so he moved her to a lengthy fabric covered couch with some of the deepest cushions he'd ever seen. When Maddie lay down, it still had some room left over.

"Is it comfortable?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Then try it a little longer, and see if any wild springs suddenly appear." He pulled off the price tag, handed it to her and started looking for a couch to put in the living room.

He found a nice one with a floral print of red and pink flowers and immediately knew Maddie would think it pretty. He called her over and when he saw the smile, pulled off the price tag and moved to the lamps.

A check of his watch showed it was only ten, so they were making decent time.

While he inspected floor lamps, she wandered over to the curios against the wall. He watched as she came to a striking, Victorian style, guardian angel figurine with blonde hair and flowing green robes. She stood about a foot tall, her wings spread over a scene with two children crossing over a storm-tossed river with a rickety bridge.

Maddie was so enthralled by the angel, and stood there so long, Terry came closer to get a better look. He noticed a cord came from its base and plugged into the wall, and turned on its clicker switch. The angel lit up from within, casting a heavenly glow on Maddie's face.

A comforting night-light Terry decided, and pulled the tag off.

Pulling Maddie away, was another matter.

"That was an angel, wasn't it?" she asked as he tried to get her to look at a TV cabinet.
"A guardian angel," he nodded. He looked over the cabinet's construction and decided it would be too big for her apartment.

"Do I have a guardian angel?"

"Sure." He moved to another cabinet and she followed.

"Do I have an angel of my very own?"

"Probably more than one," he smiled, crouching to open the cabinet's doors. "'For He shall give His angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways.' That's from Psalm ninety-one, a good passage. Hey, this shelf slides out."

"Are you one of my angels, Terry?"

The question floored him, for he could tell she wanted him to say "yes."

He slid the shelf back in and shut the cabinet.

"Let's just say God's enlisting my help." He turned to look at another, and was profoundly grateful when she dropped the subject.

Him? An angel?

That woman had some very strange notions.

He hoped he wasn't getting in over his head.

In addition to the floral couch for the living room and a small TV cabinet, Terry added an oversized upholstered armchair that he could picture Maddie curling up in with a good book. For the bedroom-- make that "her room," he bought a pine dresser where she could keep clothes, and a small bookcase where he figured she could put things. He added in a ceramic rabbit wearing a country dress with a sign reading, "Home Sweet Home," and headed to the man in the recliner with their tags.

They had her furniture. The bathroom and kitchen needed to be addressed, but her room and the living room would now be fully furnished. On the whole, he felt reasonably sure Maddie liked the choices. They'd taken care of the furniture, which meant they could eat, then get to his apartment before the glass people arrived. The furniture would arrive tomorrow, and the driver would call beforehand to make sure Terry would be there to accept the delivery.
As Terry led Maddie outside, four customers came into the store. Two more went in after them, and Terry knew things were going to get crowded in there in a hurry. They'd come early enough in the day to have the pick of the merchandise, and now he was grateful to leave.

Like a drooping flower needing to be watered, Maddie sank into the jeep and closed her eyes. When Terry told her to buckle up, she had trouble getting the seat belt to work.

"Keep your eyes open," he coaxed, and finally reached over to do it himself.

Knowing she wasn't up to a packed restaurant during the busy lunch hour, Terry swung by a grocery store and left Maddie waiting in the jeep. By the time he returned with their food, Maddie had climbed into the back seat and fallen asleep.

She looked so peaceful, he hated to wake her.

The leaves of an ornamental tree rustled overhead as Terry opened his window to give them some air. The grocery's parking lot had few good places with shade, but this was one of them.

As he unwrapped a large hoagie fresh from the grocery's deli, the aroma of Italian sausage and melted cheeses reminded him again of just how hungry he was since he'd skipped breakfast.

"Maddie?" He looked into the back where she lay curled on the seat. "Come on, Maddie, time to eat."

She gave a weak protesting moan, and he smiled as her eyes blinked open.

"Lunch," he said, and passed her half of the hoagie. "Thirsty?" he asked.

She gave a small nod, and he handed her a can of cold soda.

"Is your hip hurting?"

Peeking into the hoagie, she shook her head.

"It's just a sandwich, Maddie."

"But it's so big."

"Then eat what you can, and I'll finish the rest. Are you sure your hip's all right?"
She nodded.

After praying over their food, Terry took off his coat, then settled back against the door to enjoy the pleasant atmosphere while he ate. The rustle of trees, the quiet enjoyment of a good lunch made for a relaxed, pleasant afternoon.

A small burp came from the back seat. When a giggle followed, Terry arched a brow and picked up his soda.

Gulping down several swallows, he gave a loud, manly burp, one that would make men everywhere proud.

A slightly larger, but oh-so dainty burp answered his, and when he outdid her a third time, she broke into laughter.

He looked at her and took another bite from his hoagie.

Peaches and cream sweetened with giggles and laughter-- that was Maddie when she was happy. She was so beautiful.

The thought caught him off guard, made him swallow without chewing. It choked him until he washed it down with soda. He couldn't think that about Madison.

"You really should chew your food," she commented from the back seat.

He tossed her a look and she smiled.

"I'll make a note of that, thanks." Terry set aside the rest of his hoagie and finished off the soda.

When he burped, Maddie laughed.

He forced himself not to look at her until it was safe and she was eating again.

She liked him-- HIM, Terry Davis, and not someone else. It wasn't easy to forget that. It endeared her to him, and he'd already been struggling not to get too attached to his puppy. After all, she wasn't his, she didn't belong to him no matter how long he took care of her.
Well now. "Like" was a more dangerous word than he'd thought. It introduced things Maddie had most likely not intended to introduce into their friendship, and it gave him thoughts he now had to fight back with both hands to keep from thinking.

It was only natural, he reasoned. He was a man after all, and susceptible to... well, to what Maddie had in such great abundance. It would be easy for a man to want her if he let it happen, especially a man who knew he was liked.

He was liked. It was a heady thought, one that would bolster any man's self-confidence.

But he wasn't any man, and she wasn't any woman.

He had befriended a very vulnerable, very confused, and yes, very pretty woman. He would not take advantage of her. Saying that to Maddie would only serve to scare her, so he kept silent and let her finish lunch.

For his sake, as well as hers, Terry was glad she would soon be moving into her own home. It would give a bit of distance to what was fast becoming a very close friendship.

"Pleasant words are as an honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones."
~ Proverbs 16:24 ~

"For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh."
~ Matthew 12:34 ~
Chapter Seventeen
Mr. Darcy's Replacement

"Because of the savour of thy good ointments thy name is as ointment poured forth..."
~ Song of Solomon 1:3 ~

A full tummy felt good. Madison kept thinking that as Terry drove to his apartment to meet the glass people. Food didn't always feel good, for she didn't always allow herself to enjoy it, for to enjoy it would be to need it. This time, however, she didn't mind the full feeling that said she'd eaten a lot. The half hoagie Terry had given her was still too much, but she'd managed to polish off a good three quarters before giving her leftovers to Terry.

He'd eaten it, too, along with the rest of his lunch.

Wasn't he wonderful?

All this zeal for Terry made her sleepy, and she closed her eyes for a nap. In her mind's eye, she saw a well groomed estate in England, Terry striding into one of those rooms with chairs and a small table. She saw herself in a long off-white dress, delicately sewing while Mr. Bingley spoke to Jane about their upcoming marriage. There were no proposals from this Mr. Darcy, just a content willingness to be there and share the moment with her.

She felt warm and safe, and blissfully happy.

The movie had churned up all this emotion, most probably, but she didn't care. Eyes closed, sitting in a parlor with Terry, she felt almost normal. It was like the sweetest dream ever, mixed with the feeling of a cool breeze on a quiet evening, the awe of the first light of sunrise, the peace of a sunset on the bay-- all the most wonderful feelings rolled into one perfect moment.

She slid into a warm nap, and when her eyes blinked open, something felt different.

The jeep wasn't moving. She lurched forward in the seat. Where was Terry? He wasn't behind the wheel, he wasn't in the back of the jeep, he wasn't anywhere.

Panic squeezed her heart. He'd left her.

Her hands fought with the seat belt, but the thing wouldn't let her go. She had to find Terry, she had to get out.
Please, God, help me.

Something caught her attention through the windshield. A brick building, a yellow scrawl of "Thanks a lot," the beautiful sight of a familiar door-- Terry's door. She was at his apartment, and relief washed over her with the realization.

Terry hadn't left her.

Wet stung her eyes, and she rubbed it away with the palms of her hands. She'd been acting silly, like a child suddenly lost with no parent in sight. She wasn't alone, Terry was nearby.

The door with the shiny gold three-- Terry's apartment number-- opened, and Terry came out with a crowbar. He glanced at the jeep, saw her watching, and came to her door.

She rolled down the window.

His grin vanished when she tried to quickly smudge away the tears.

He reached through the window, unlocked her door, then tugged it open.

"Are you all right? What happened?" He didn't have the chance to ask anything else, for she rushed into his arms and hid her face in his shoulder. "Hey, what's this?" His arms felt loose, as though not really wanting to hold her. "What happened?" he asked.

"I woke up and you weren't there, and I thought-- I thought..." She couldn't get the words out and she felt a sigh move through Terry's chest.

"You thought I'd abandoned you." His hug tightened. "Someone's done that to you before, haven't they? Oh, Maddie, what am I going to do with you?"

She couldn't answer, for the tears kept coming.

His hand stroked her hair, his movements careful, cautious. "I didn't mean to frighten you. You'd fallen asleep, and I didn't have the heart to wake you up."

"I'm sorry, Terry."

"I wish you'd stop saying that." His arms released her, and when she tried to cuddle against his shoulder, he gently pushed her away at arm's length. "Is that why you wandered into Three Mile Bay on that bus-- because someone abandoned you?"
She shook her head.

"But someone's left you alone before, haven't they?"

"Yes."

"For long periods of time?"

She nodded.

"Couldn't you leave and go somewhere else?"

The old memories renewed the feeling of having been punished unfairly, and she shook her head.

"What kept you from leaving before you did, Maddie?"

How could she possibly hope to ever explain? Blood tasted in her mouth and she realized she'd bitten herself again.

The questions held a quiet intensity, the same intensity flashing in their owner's brown eyes. "Couldn't you leave any sooner?" he asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

She felt stupid for not answering, but no words came.

"I'm trying to understand." The muscles in Terry's jaw were working, tensing, flexing even when he wasn't speaking. "Help me, Maddie. I'm not blaming you, I'm just trying to understand. What prevented you from finding help?"

She blinked. "Get help from who?"

"Are you telling me there wasn't anyone-- not a single blessed person, who could've helped you leave sooner?"

Again, she shook her head.
The answer frustrated Terry, she could see it in those searching eyes. "Was he your father? A relative?"

"Please, don't, Terry."

"Was he?"

"No."

"Okay, one more question. Just one more." Terry blew out a breath. "Is he dead? Is that why you were able to leave?"

It took effort to push out, "Yes."

"Did you kill him?"

"Terry, you said one more."

"After this-- please, Maddie, or the curiosity will haunt me forever. If you killed that animal, then it was in self-defense."

"I didn't kill anyone, and yes--" she couldn't bring herself to finish.

"He's dead?" Terry asked, and she nodded, "yes."

"So that's why you were able to finally leave." Terry studied the pavement. "He died, so you left and got on a bus."

"I didn't kill him."

"I believe you. Calm down, Maddie, I believe you." Terry set down the crowbar he'd been holding, shoved his hands into his coat pockets and sighed. "Does anyone know he's dead?"

"Terry, that's not fair. You promised."

He frowned, turned and paced a few feet away to work off frustration. It rolled off him in great waves.
"Yes, people know he's dead." Maddie followed example and tucked her hands into her large coat pockets. "The woman he leased the house from came and found me, said he'd had a heart attack and died, and that was why he hadn't come back." Madison gulped in air, hoping her courage wouldn't give out. "She unlocked my chain from the bed and said I had to go. I'd dreamed of leaving, and suddenly I was told I had to."

"Chain?" Terry stiffened, but she continued.

"I sold some things, bought some different clothes from a homeless man so I wouldn't have to wear what the Dragon had."

"The Dragon?"

"The Dragon, the monster-- HIM." Madison rubbed her arms against the chill of those words. "I was free, so that meant I could go where I wanted."

"This man-- this animal you call The Dragon-- how did he get you?"

"Momma gave me to him."

"Your mother gave you away?" Terry looked incredulous. "Was he a friend of hers, a boyfriend, a husband?"

"The Dragon knew her a long time," Madison shrugged. "They grew up together, so I came to live with him."

"Did he adopt you?"

Automatically, Madison nodded. "But I never called him 'Daddy,' because he was never my family."

"What was his name?"

"No." She started backing away. "I'm never saying that name again. Take my food away, put the chain back on-- I don't care-- I'm never saying that name again. You can't make me. I'm going to forget it all, and someday I won't remember any of it." The curtain on a nearby window moved, and Madison's heart sank. "Lauren's watching."

"Never mind Lauren." Terry kept his eyes on Madison. "Why did your mom give you away?"
The pain flared in Madison's soul, and she hugged herself until it hurt. "Momma didn't want me anymore."

Terry groaned. "You're crying again."

"No, I'm not." Even as she made the protest, she tasted the shameful salt of her own tears.

"Are you going to be all right?" The frustration in Terry's voice gave way to concern.

She sniffed, nodded and tried to stop the tears.

"I need to get the boards off my window before the glass people arrive. They should've been here as it is, so I have to get started. Do you want to wait in the apartment?"

She shook her head, climbed back into the jeep and reclaimed her seat. She couldn't watch Terry from the apartment, not like she could out here.

Terry was so wonderful, so beautiful.

His eyes made her breathing come short, and the way the breeze teased his hair, she wanted to run her fingers through it and think of him in the sitting room of Pride and Prejudice. She wanted to smile and see him across the way, content and happy and not wanting anything more.

Even in her anger of having said more than she wanted, she couldn't help herself. He was so wonderful....

Terry closed the passenger door, looked through the window and met her steady gaze.

And winced.

"You're going to have to ease up, Maddie. Ease up, and calm down, okay?"

She had no idea what he meant, but nodded anyway.

"I'd be grateful if you could scale back the intensity."

She didn't understand, but rubbed at her tears and kept nodding.

His hand rested on the door. He took a step back, watched her.
"Are you sure you're going to be all right? You are going to stop crying?"

"I stopped," she whimpered.

"If you've shut off the water works, I sure can't see it." He gave a small, cautious upturn of his mouth. "Please try to stop. I'll give you five dollars if you can do it in the next five minutes."

She hiccuped, rubbed her eyes even harder, and he reached through the open window to pull her hands away.

"Easy, Maddie, you're going to hurt yourself." He swallowed hard, a giant swallow that made the bump in his throat bob up and down. "Be a good girl, and stay in the jeep. Okay?" His hand pulled away. He straightened, moved back but kept both eyes on her. "Five dollars. I mean it."

She nodded, determined to win that money.

"I'll be watching you," he smiled. It came a little easier now, for it reached his eyes just a bit. His head turned to look at something, then he checked his watch. "Better late than never, I guess."

A large delivery truck pulled beside the jeep, one emblazoned with a huge window and bold letters that declared they were reliable. A man emerged from the truck's cab, his frame compact and short, his coat open, the top of his uniform unbuttoned to expose a V-neck undershirt.

"Terry Davis?" the man asked, and Terry nodded, stepped forward and shook the man's hand.

Another man appeared from the other side of the delivery truck, more tidily dressed than his friend, and both started doing whatever it was people did when installing a new window.

After checking, then double-checking that the jeep doors were truly locked, Madison pulled off her coat, rolled it into a pillow, then climbed into the back to watch from the safety of the back seat. It was hard to see much, but she didn't mind, as long as it afforded her a view of Terry.

The memory of Terry, and how he'd felt when he hugged her, taunted her into wanting something she didn't want. Desire, and much worse.

It made her reach beneath her shirt to make the cuts hurt. She dug her nail into the seam of a wound, but the pain wasn't enough.

She'd told him. Why had she told him? She said so much that she hadn't wanted to, and the pain wasn't nearly enough to make the ugly feeling go away. Terry was so cuddly despite his muscles,
so patient, so absolutely perfect, and now he knew. Her fingernail dug deeper, but it wasn't enough.

She had to get rid of this feeling. She felt sick, like she had to vomit, and purge the ugliness from her system. That pain inside of her that was so much worse than physical hurt.

While the men talked, Madison softly opened the passenger door, crept from the jeep, moved around the men, basked in Terry's smile as he saw her go inside.

Then headed straight for the kitchen.

She'd said so much. Why? Because she had wanted to please Terry. He hadn't yelled, or blamed her for making the Dragon hurt her. He hadn't even raised his voice.

Her breathing came in huge gulps. Thank God Terry wasn't here, or she might do something she didn't want to do, like drag him somewhere private and rid herself of this ugliness. Fear, shame, desire-- they boiled inside her veins until she thought she'd burst.

The knives were there, right where she knew Terry kept them. She grabbed one, concealed it behind her back as the men pried the wood from the window. Not wanting to be caught in the downstairs half bath if they had to use the toilet, she rounded onto the stairs just as light poured into the living room.

Heart pounding in her chest, she ducked into the bathroom, quickly shut the door and locked it.

God, please don't be angry.

She lifted the shirt, ran the blade across her belly, and gasped at the vivid shock of pain. As blood dripped onto her jeans, she pressed toilet paper against the wound before it ruined her clothes. If she had to throw anything away, Terry might ask questions.

He'd already asked so many.

She braced against the bathroom sink. The image of herself on the bed, covered with the sheet yet screaming because she knew what was coming, had been seared into her mind. She felt the tight grip, the dread as she was shoved onto the chair to watch the movie. If she flinched, it'd be worse for her next time, and there would be a next time. If she looked away for even a second, she'd hurt for it. If she spoke until it was over, interrupted the movie for anything at all, she'd find herself being dragged and kicked into the bedroom.
The images started to play. She had to watch. Did she want more of the same? Then watch, you stupid pig. Watch and listen, and I'll make it fun for you the next time.

Trembling violently, Madison reached for the knife. Searing pain jarred the movie, and the Dragon, from her mind.

She dropped the knife, held her hand and several wads of toilet paper to the cuts, and promised herself not to pass out. If she did, she might bleed to death. She wasn't trying to kill herself, just get rid of those images, the dirty scars left by that monster.

Her knees buckled, she slid to the floor and trembled.

He hadn't yelled at her, or looked at her with rebuke. He hadn't even raised his voice....

Madison closed her eyes, desperate for the refuge of Terry. The sitting room, the light coming in the window as Mr. Bingley sat and talked with Jane about their coming wedding, the quiet Mr. Davis watching so intently from a distance... wanting, and yet never taking.

She would keep those stupid tears from coming back if it was the last thing she did. Had she won the five dollars?

How she hoped she had. Please, God, she needed that money.

There were another five dollars in her pocket, the money he'd given her for taking a Sunday nap, and that would make ten.

It had to be something special. A notebook? No, that would be stupid, for she loved spiral-bound notebooks and he obviously didn't, or he never would have given her one; he would have kept it for himself. Clicky pens were no good, either. It had to be something extra-special.

She had no idea when the next time might come to go back to the MegaMart, but when she did, she would be ready.

How long had she been in the bathroom?

She had to get downstairs so Terry would see she wasn't crying.

Still shaky, she climbed to her feet and began to clean herself. She knew what to do, for she had done it before.
Even as the boards came off the window, Terry struggled to pay attention. He felt dazed, grief-stricken beyond words by what Maddie had told him. Her mother had given her away to a man Maddie had called The Dragon?

If he had ever wanted to believe that Maddie was making all this up, it was now. Mentally unbalanced, emotionally unstable-- that described her, it was true, but that didn't mean she wasn't telling the truth.

But that chain. She'd been chained, and for long periods of time? That must have been why she couldn't escape, or find help.

If Maddie said it had happened, then it was true.

"Hey, Mr. Davis"-- the one called Gary elbowed Terry-- "if you'll stand back, me and Ralph can get your window in, in no time flat."

"So you don't want my help?"

"Like I always tell the customers," Gary grinned, hiking up his baggy pants, "watching is cheaper and faster than making a problem that I'll have to fix."

"Then I'll let you get to it." Terry moved aside, his mind falling by natural gravity to the lowest point in his heart. Maddie. The reality of what she must have gone through had yet to sink in.

No wonder she wasn't used to sanitary pads, or eating on a regular basis, or why she so often behaved like a lost puppy following him around.

Poor, poor, Maddie.

Terry went to find her. Something she'd said stood out in his mind, something that disturbed him about her expectations for the future. She thought she would completely forget, and recovery didn't work that way. Terry knew that from firsthand experience.

She wasn't on the couch, and when he checked the kitchen, all he found was an open silverware drawer. He closed it, rounded into the dining area and saw her emerge from the direction of the stairs.
"Maddie, could I talk to you a mo--" he stopped, caught off guard by her pale face. "Are you feeling good?"

She gave a shaky smile. "I'm tired."

"Then lay down on the couch. I put your bedding upstairs, but I'll get it so you can rest. Please, sit down before you fall down." He went to help her, but she sidestepped and moved around him to the couch. "That talk did this to you, didn't it? I'm sorry, Maddie, I really am. I never should have pressured you into answering my questions."

"It's okay. It isn't your fault I'm tired."

"Yes, it is," he groaned. "Stay put, I'll get your bedding."

He took to the stairs, two steps at a time. She wasn't resting enough, that was obvious. He had to take better care of Maddie before he accidentally killed her.

He located the blankets and pillow, headed downstairs and decided to talk about her expectation for the future later. Now was not the time.

She was still sitting upright on the couch, her head leaned back, one arm at her side, the other draped in her lap. The enormity of what he was trying to do, struck him hard. He was trying to help this woman stand on her own, somehow make a living for herself, take care of herself, maybe one day have a family of her own.

However improbable the first three were, the last was too farfetched. Maddie would never marry. She would be doing good to do the simple things like hold down a job, go home and fix herself a hot dinner, then go to bed without any flashbacks to intrude on her dreams. She would wake up in the morning, force herself to dress, eat breakfast, go to work, and start the cycle over again.

That would be Maddie's victory, though it broke Terry's heart to think of it.

Hope took a lot of courage, courage he felt she had. She'd survived. She had won. She was alive and she was free.

Sucking in a deep breath, he went to the couch, set the bedding on the cushion beside her.

Maddie's eyes were closed, and he realized after a few moments that she was asleep.
Good, she needed rest. He spread a blanket over her shoulders, then stepped back. The installers were making noise, but it didn't seem to bother her. She was too tired to notice.

In the anguish of his thoughts, he admitted something that he hadn't before-- not really, not fully. If she never married, never had any children-- and let's face it-- if she never made any close friends besides himself and the Johanneses, if she kept so entirely to herself as to shut out the world so she could merely exist, then she would always need him. There would never be a point at which he could say, "I've done all I can. Have a good life," and then walk away.

With Maddie, there would never be a walking away.

Bittersweet thought.

He wanted to be useful to someone besides his family, but not because someone else was so terribly scarred they had no choice but to accept help whenever it was offered. The rest of his life needed to make room for that offer of help to always be extended to Maddie. He would need to guard that, or else she would be by herself. God would be with her-- Terry was confident of that-- but for someone who hid from her own shadow, he knew Maddie wouldn't make new friends easily. John and Izzy would do what they could, but Maddie needed so much more.

Yes, he could do that. He would go on helping her, and make sure that whatever his own future held, he would always make enough room to be a friend to Maddie.

He turned to watch as the new window was lifted into place.

It needed a few shims to make it even, but with a little more work and patience, Terry knew it would be a perfect fit.

* * * *

Well before bedtime, Ricky had fallen asleep on one of the two beds in the motel room while the local news droned in the background. Jake occupied the only chair, finishing off the last of his burger and fries while the TV news anchor commented for the umpteenth time what beautiful weather they were having. Either the weather wasn't usually this warm, or the man didn't have a lot to report.

Considering this was a small city in Arizona, Abby decided on the latter.

Abby watched TV from the bed next to Ricky's, struggling to keep her eyes open. After nine hours of driving, with an hour off for lunch, she was as worn out as Ricky.
The four-year-old’s surprise for today had been a rough, tough, firefighter action figure with a big red helmet. Stan, as he was quickly christened, had supposedly drank half of Ricky’s juice box, then needed to use the potty at the same exact time Ricky had. Which of course, made it all that more of an emergency.

Somehow, Abby had still managed to get in a good nine hour drive before they checked into their motel for the night.

"Have you called yet?" Jake asked, as he stood up and began collecting fast food wrappers.

"Called who?"

He turned, gave her an are-you-serious look.

"What?"

"Now, this is an interesting situation." Jake went to the wastebasket, dropped in the fast food bag. "You’re going to hear about this later, and you'll say you forgot. Because you did-- obviously. But the next question will be, 'Where was Jake? Why didn't he remind you?'" Jake gave her a playful smile. "I wonder if I could get paid for this kind of service-- say, a dollar per reminder, and ten when you keep forgetting and I hear about it from Mom and Dad."

"Ouch. Mom and Dad." Abby squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them to find Jake smiling. "You could have told me, you know."

"I thought that's what I just did." Jake moved to the bed where Ricky lay sprawled on the mattress. "Come on, time to brush your teeth."

"If it's almost five o'clock here," Abby scrolled through the contact list on her cell phone, "then it's about seven in New York. That's not too late to call."

"If you don't call them, they'll call you," Jake said as he carried Ricky into the bathroom. "We brought his bag in from the car, didn't we?"

"In the bathroom, next to the door," Abby said, selecting her parent’s name on the list. She placed the phone to her ear, and noted the way Ricky held on to his firefighter even when Jake started to undress him.
"Hello, Abby?" Dad answered the call so quick, it didn't take a rocket scientist to know he'd been waiting. "Did you get to your hotel safely? Where are you?"

"Hi, Dad. Sorry I didn't call sooner."

"Never mind that, is everyone all right?"

"Yes, we're fine."

"Where are you?"

"Holbrook, Arizona." Abby smiled as Jake negotiated the firefighter in Ricky's hand, trying to pull the shirt over Ricky's head with Stan in Ricky's small fist. "We're safe and sound, and in our motel room. It's not fancy, but at least it's clean."

"Is the truck handling well? Have you had any trouble?"

"Dad, stop worrying." Abby rubbed at the tightness in the back of her neck, an ache that came from sitting so long behind the wheel. "I have a list of Bible promises Jake and I claimed before we started out this morning. If you want, I'll give you a few."

"Did you have the truck looked at by a mechanic before you started out?"

"Dad--"

"Did you have the truck looked at?"

"Yes, of course."

"And?"

"And we're in good shape. The rental trailer is fine, the truck is fine, Jake and Ricky are fine."

"Good, I'm glad to hear it. We're all praying for you, so I'm sure you'll make it."

"You don't sound very sure."

"Then I'll take a few of those promises on your list so I'll sound better the next time you call." Dad inhaled, the stress of the moment coming through loud and clear over the cell phone.
"Dad, I'm being careful."

"I know you are."

"Okay then." Abby inhaled, wishing she didn't feel like such a little kid talking to her Daddy. She heard Mom's voice in the background, and Dad relayed the message.

"Mom said to make sure your motel door is locked."

"It is." Abby didn't bother to check. It was locked, she already knew it was. "How's everyone? Are the girls looking forward to seeing Ricky?"

Mom's voice came on. "Make sure you get enough sleep before you start out tomorrow."

"I will. How's Uncle Terry?"

"He's..." Mom hesitated. "He's looking forward to having his Little Fishing Buddy back."

"I'm looking forward to that, too." Abby smiled as Jake got Ricky into the boy's bright orange pajama bottoms. "Can you put Uncle Terry on?"

Mom must have handed the phone back to Dad, for Dad answered.

"He's not here right now. He's with a friend."

"Oh, okay. It's no big deal, I just wanted him to know I finished that fly we talked about. I can hardly wait to see how the smallmouth in the bay react to this one."

"As a matter of fact," Dad continued, "he's been out all day."

"It's supposed to imitate baitfish-- it's an eye popping design, almost looks like the real thing. I don't think we've tried the pattern before."

Dad cleared his throat. "Your uncle has been keeping busy."

"That's good." Abby patted the bed as Ricky came running from the bathroom, then climbed up on her bed with a giggle. She kissed Ricky on the cheek, snagged an arm around the laughing boy and gave him a tight hug. "Uncle Terry really needs to relax, and find something to get his mind off of his crusades. I'm glad he's keeping busy. It'll be good for him."
"He's busy, all right."

"He's going to be crazy about this fly," Abby continued. "I got the pattern from some guy up North, and made one especially for Uncle Terry. I have one for you, too, even though I know you don't fly cast."

"Thanks, it sounds interesting. The point is, some things have changed since you've been away."

"I've been gone for four years," Abby laughed, "so I already know that." She smiled as Jake sank onto the mattress beside her, picked up the TV remote and let Ricky crawl onto his lap. "When you hang up, would you call Dick for us, and let him know we're in Holbrook?"

"Sure thing." Dad cleared his throat again. "Your Uncle Terry has been making friends."

"That's nice." Abby watched as Jake flipped through the TV channels with the mute turned on.

"These friends, well, friend, actually--"

"Dad, maybe we could catch up some other time? It's getting late, and I have to hit the sack if I'm going to get enough rest for tomorrow."

"Yes, you do that." Dad sounded relieved, more relaxed for some reason. "You get some sleep, give our love to Ricky, and tell Jake thanks."

"Thanks for what?"

"For reminding you to call home. Good night, Sweetheart. Drive safe, keep praying, and God will get you here in one piece."

"Dad, I've made this drive before. It's how we got to San Diego in the first place, remember?"

"Give my love to Jake and Ricky. Sleep tight, Sweetheart."

"Good night, Dad. Tell Mom I love her."

"I will. I love you, Abigail."

"I love you too, Dad."
Dad hung up, but Abby stayed on the line a few moments longer. It seemed the older she got, and the more independent she became in her career and life away from Three Mile Bay, the more she felt her parents tugging her back to the way things used to be. She would always be their child, their baby girl, and would forever have trouble treating her like a grown adult. They wanted her to go back to the way things were, but things had changed.

For pity's sake, she was twenty-three, married, and had a child of her own. She was older now, more mature, more sophisticated. Not at all like she used to be.

She touched the "End Call" button on the cell phone's display, then reached over Jake and Ricky to put the phone on the night table.

"I'm glad you reminded Dad to trust God." Jake inhaled deeply as Ricky laid his head against Jake's chest and closed his eyes.

"It's not God they're having trouble trusting," Abby sighed, "it's me. Dad acts like I have no idea of what I'm doing."

Smiling, Jake pulled her close. She rested against his shoulder, stroked the hair from Ricky's eyes and felt the road weariness begin to melt away.

Tired but cozy, she snuggled closer to Jake, grateful that he kept the TV turned low so it wouldn't disturb Ricky. As soon as this program was over, they'd go to bed. For now, she'd close her eyes for a few minutes of rest and let herself enjoy Jake's warmth, and the strong arm holding her close.

Within moments, she was fast asleep.

* * * *

Maddie woke when the men used the nail gun to install the window, then fell asleep again when they stopped. She whimpered in her slumber, but nothing so alarming that Terry felt the need to wake her.

After the men left, he paced the living room trying to think, then gave up and tugged a book from the shelf.

At least the animal who had hurt Maddie was dead. He couldn't harm anyone else, and the thought comforted Terry. It allowed him to focus on her, and to not have to wonder who else might be in danger.
It was after seven before he noticed Maddie stir. As he watched from the recliner with his book, he felt a sense of relief that she was waking up. A crazy thought had plagued him that she might not. She was so very pale—she still looked pale—but at least she was alive. She had survived the Dragon, and Terry felt profound gratitude that God had led her to Three Mile Bay.

He was supposed to help her.

Maddie's head raised. With a cry, she frantically looked about and seemed on the verge of panic.

"Maddie, I'm over here."

He saw relief wash through her. The panic faded, and a smile came to her lips as her gaze met his.

"Feel any better?" he asked, closing his book.

She nodded.

"Are you hungry?"

"Not really."

"Well, you're going to eat." Terry stood up."That's non-negotiable, so don't even bother fighting me on that. You're going to eat."

"But I don't want to."

"Maddie, did you just hear me say you were going to eat?" He gave a look that silenced her mouth, but not her scowl. "What do you want for dinner? I could take you home, but I'd like you looking a little better before Izzy and John see you. I think you'd scare them."

"I'm sorry, Terry."

"That's enough of that." Terry tossed his book onto the coffee table."From now on, only apologize if you deserve to. Are you in the mood for pizza? We could have some delivered."

"Could I have hot dogs?"
"Haven't you had enough of those lately?" Terry noted the bashful way her chin tucked against her chest. "If you'll eat them, then I suppose hot dogs it is. We don't have any in the apartment, though, so I'll have to make a run to the store."

"To the MegaMart?" Maddie looked up at him, her face hopeful.

"I wasn't planning on it, but sure, I can get them at the MegaMart."

"Can I come?"

He stared at her and realized he was smiling. "Get your coat, but if I see you beginning to wilt, you'll wait in the car. Do we have a deal?"

She nodded, got to her feet and tugged on her coat.

Such a simple thing as going to the store, and Maddie made it seem special. He marveled and kept those thoughts to himself as they stepped outside.

"The window's in." Terry gestured to the new unit. "I need to get the frame painted, and of course, there's still the graffiti to remove."

She gave him a pretty smile. "It looks nice."

"It'll do," he nodded, and went to unlock the jeep's passenger door. "This new window has safety glass, like the rest of the complex."

"Like my apartment?" she asked, getting into the jeep.

He smiled, nodded. "Like your apartment." He closed the passenger door, rounded the hood and knew he needed to call home so they wouldn't be concerned. He'd warned them not to hold up dinner, but still, he knew John.

He climbed behind the wheel, then dug out the cell phone in his slacks pocket. It reminded him that he intended to get a cell for Maddie. Maybe they could swing by the electronics department, now that they were going to the MegaMart.

Terry called home, and Izzy answered.

"We just heard from AJ," Izzy said, even before Terry could tell her why he called. "They're in Arizona."
"Have they run into any trouble?"

"No, they're doing good. I wish Abby wasn't pushing her schedule so hard to get here this Saturday. I know she's made the drive before, but not in six days."

"She can do it, Izzy. Our Abby can do it." Terry breathed a silent prayer of thanks. Like John and Izzy, he'd feel better knowing they were safe and back in Three Mile Bay. "I just called to let you know Maddie and I won't be home until later. We're going to the MegaMart to pick up a few things, then coming back here for dinner."

"Oh, okay." Izzy's tone held an uneasiness Terry couldn't deal with. Not right now.

"Did the washer and dryer come?"

"Yes, Dick was here and oversaw the whole thing. Is your new window in?"

Terry forced himself to smile, hoping Izzy would hear it in his voice. "Yup, it's in. It needs primer and paint, but it's a big improvement over the boards."

"So does this mean Madison will sleep at your apartment, tonight?"

The question disheartened Terry, even though he knew Izzy was right. He hated the thought of leaving Maddie by herself, but knew he would have to very soon. If he worked hard, her apartment might be ready in the next day or two.

"Think about it, Terry, but if you want her to stay with us a little longer, she's welcome to the couch."

"Thanks. I'll think about it."

When Terry hung up, he forced the question aside but knew he wanted her on the sofa at home, for just a little longer. Her bouts of paleness troubled him, and then he recalled the way she'd nearly panicked when she woke and couldn't find him.

Terry started the jeep, tried to enjoy the fact Maddie seemed to be genuinely enjoying herself. Her excitement was contagious, although Terry didn't know why it should. It was just the store.

"Terry?"
"What?" he asked as he pulled onto the street.

"I stopped crying in under five minutes."

Puzzled, he slid a glance at Maddie. "Okay."

"So, doesn't that mean anything?"

"I'm afraid you've lost me, Maddie."

Maddie tugged at his coat sleeve. "Five dollars."

"Oh, right. I remember now. Are you sure you stopped crying, and that it was inside the five minute limit? I hate to part with five dollars for nothing. That's a lot of money, you know."

"I did," she said eagerly, "I stopped in time. Honest, I did."

"I'll take your word for it." Terry felt a bittersweet chord sounding in his heart. He'd been teasing her, and yet she was so very serious he wanted to cry. To feel so strongly about five dollars... he shook the thought from his mind. "I'll pay you when we get to the store, okay?"

"Okay." She settled back in her seat.

The drive to the MegaMart didn't take long, and soon they were pulling into the parking lot, trying to find an empty space. The sun was retreating for the night, leaving a still busy lot to the mercy of the outdoor lights as they flickered on. Remembering Maddie, he tried for the nearest parking space to the store's entrance so she wouldn't have far to walk. The moment he pulled the jeep to a stop and turned off the ignition, she tugged at his sleeve.

"What's it going to be-- another notebook?" He shook his head, reached into his pocket for his wallet and resisted the urge to tease any further.

Such earnestness for so little. He placed the five-dollar bill into her hand and felt her tremble.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked, putting away his wallet. "Are you sure you don't want to stay in the car and get more rest?"

"Please, can I come?"

"Easy, Maddie. You can come, but calm down. You're not going to start crying, are you?"
She shook her head.

Not knowing what to make of her, Terry sighed and got out of the jeep. Maddie followed his example, locked her door before closing it, then checked to make sure it was locked before walking away. If she hadn't been so pensively serious, he'd laugh and tell her to cut it out.

Oh, how he wished she'd scale back some of her intensity. It seemed when Maddie felt strongly about something, it was either all or nothing.

Yesterday’s cookout on the beach had set off something in Maddie. For the life of him, he couldn’t figure out what happened, he only knew her emotions were so close to the surface he could feel her tremble three feet away.

The entrance doors slid open, and they went inside.

He grabbed a grocery cart, then put Maddie in charge of it so she would have something to do besides looking scared.

The store was crowded with people running errands after work. Terry glanced at Maddie, saw the look of determination on her face, and decided to go to the electronics department. They would pick up the hot dogs last thing before checking out.

If she needed the help, Maddie could use the cart for support. He could tell she was in pain, and wondered if he should have made her take something for her hip before they left. Too late now, he thought, and moved slowly so she could keep up.

It didn’t take long to find a cheap, fifteen-dollar prepaid flip phone. For Maddie’s needs it would work fine. Before he paid for it at the electronics counter, his eye caught the TV sets and he went over to get a better look. She needed something practical, something the right size to fit on her new TV stand.

He flicked a glance at Maddie and saw her leaning on the cart.

"Do you want to wait in the car?"

She shook her head.

Terry sighed, went back to the displays and picked out a nineteen-inch LCD HDTV, and lifted it into the cart.
"I'm going to check this out now, store it in the jeep, then come back to finish our shopping."
Terry didn't wait for a reply, but led the cart to the checkout. "I want you to wait for me. Don't worry, I'll be back." He saw the shaky smile, and tried to take heart.

Bringing her had been a big mistake.

* * * *

She wondered where the restroom was, then decided against asking Terry. She didn't think her belly was bleeding, couldn't see any blood on her shirt and tried to be brave.

The moment Terry left to take the new TV out to the jeep, Madison left the spot by the display rack where he had placed her, and started down a long aisle. He had taken the grocery cart, but she could manage without it. She didn't know what she was looking for, only that it needed to be special. Her belly hurt, and her eyes were wet and burning, but she palmed them dry and kept looking.

So many things were over ten dollars. She moved to another aisle, praying as hard as she knew how to find something nice. This area had nothing but electronics and games, and they all looked alike to her.

"Excuse me, Ma'am?" She turned to find a short woman in the store's yellow uniform smiling up at her. "Are you looking for something?"

She must have looked awfully pathetic for an employee to stop and offer help.

"I want a present for a friend," Madison forced herself to stand her ground and keep talking, "and I only have ten dollars."

"I see." The woman politely smiled. "Would this be a man or woman we're shopping for?"

"A man."

"Is he sentimental? The best ones are."

Madison couldn't help smiling.

The woman led her to a glass display, poked a finger at a chain with a small screen attached. "How about this? It's a digital photo frame on a keychain, and it's within your budget."
Madison smiled and nodded. She had no way of knowing if Terry already had one, but she was desperate and needed to get him something.

The woman checked her out, put the keychain in a bag with the receipt, and Madison thanked her for the help. All she’d had to do was hand over the ten dollars, get back a dime in change, then go back to the display rack with her treasure.

She drew the back of her hand across her forehead and realized she was perspiring. Did she feel hot? Was her belly infected? She felt her skin, but couldn’t find anything different about its temperature. She needed to calm down. Her heart was pounding so hard she wanted to pass out.

People moved past her, but she held on to her grocery bag and tried to have faith that God was watching.

Terry would come back. He would find her. She double checked her display rack, knew it was the same one Terry had told her to wait beside, and prayed he would come. God wouldn’t forget her, and neither would Terry.

Someone tapped her on the shoulder. She jumped, spun about and saw Terry grinning at her.

"Sorry I startled you. What have we got here? You bought something while I wasn’t looking? Couldn't hold on to your money, huh?" He smiled, and she breathed a sigh of relief when she saw he wasn’t mad. Even better, he didn’t ask to see inside the bag.

She gripped the cart, followed behind Terry and let herself relax. Her heart was beating calmer now, and she didn't feel so very close to passing out. There still wasn't any blood on her shirt, but she figured if there were, she could zip up her coat.

She felt so stupid for having cut herself again. Discouragement pulled at her soul, and it took another smile from Terry to make it lighter.

Please, help me, God. I don't know what to do.

She leaned into the cart, careful not to put all her weight on it but just enough to give some support.

As they passed an aisle of bathroom towels, Terry paused long enough to put an assortment into the cart. They were all pink.
They came to sheet sets and bedding, and Terry came to a full stop.

"Pink is your favorite, right? I hate to get everything in one color, only to later find out you can't stomach so much pink."

"I like it," she nodded.

Pretending to roll up his sleeves, Terry looked over the selection of sheets and pillowcases. "You don't need a fitted sheet on the couch in your room, so we'll skip that part." He located what he was looking for, placed two large sheets and two matching pillowcases into the cart. "Do you like this?" he asked, and lifted down a large quilted comforter with soft pink roses on a white background.

She nodded, and he added it to their cart.

"Aren't you spending an awful lot, Terry? You bought furniture this morning, and now all this."

"I can afford it, don't worry." Terry gave the cart a forward tug, and she pushed the cart after him.

They weren't just wandering, she realized, for he kept going to different places in the store and kept finding what he was looking for. He bought four white dinner plates, some silverware, four plastic plates in bright colors, some glass cups, and some plastic cups, a set of pots and pans, a toaster, some cooking utensils she didn't know how to use, and a pretty linen tablecloth.

He bought a hairdryer, some hand lotion, Q-tips, toilet paper, shampoo, even bath soap.

"I don't expect to find everything you'll need tonight," he told her, "but just enough for you to set up housekeeping."

By the time they picked up their hot dogs, the cart took more effort to push. They made their way to the checkout, and Madison prayed she would have enough strength to make it to the jeep.

The moment they left the crowded store, she breathed a deep sigh of relief. She had her present for Terry, and her insides twinkled with excitement.

The sky was dark and dreamlike as they moved through the parking lot. She had to be living some other person's life, not her own. It didn't feel real. Despite being so tired, she thrilled at knowing all these things were for her and that she was with Terry. Cold nipped at her face, her neck, and she pulled her coat shut. Was this what Christmas felt like?
Before unloading the cart, Terry unlocked the jeep's passenger door and told her to get in. She gratefully obeyed, and sank into the seat with a small groan. In her hand, she kept tight hold of Terry's present.

Thank You, God.

She closed her eyes, and hugged the bag to her heart.

"I shouldn't have stopped for all this." Terry sounded of remorse. "I'm sorry, I should've taken better care of you. We could have done most of this shopping later."

"I'm fine." She hoped that didn't count as a lie and tried to give him a smile.

He started unloading the cart.

Needing a nap, she leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes.

* * * *

Terry let her sleep for as long as possible, and marveled at her need for rest. She'd taken a long nap that afternoon, and now slept like there was no tomorrow. He lightly touched a hand to her forehead. She didn't feel feverish, so she probably wasn't sick. She was just exhausted. All that ardent zeal had worn her out.

Oh, Maddie.

He touched her shoulder, gave her a slight squeeze and saw her eyes pop open. She shrank from his touch, and he quickly withdrew his hand before she panicked.

"We're home." He said it gently, and she slowly nodded in understanding.

He got out, unlocked the apartment, watched her limp all the way to the couch.

She took off her shoes and climbed into the blankets without even shedding her coat.

While he carried in the small fortune they'd brought back from the MegaMart, he tried to think of ways to get her help. Real help, not the stuff he was doing, but real, professional help. He wanted her to see Dr. Jacoby, a dear friend of their family ever since he'd helped Jake. Maddie wouldn't like him because he was a man, but Terry could at least try.
It wouldn't happen tomorrow, but Terry knew something had to be done about Maddie. As much as he didn't want to believe it, he felt she wasn't getting better. Fatigue and oversleeping were possible signs of depression. He also knew her hip was bothering her, and it confused him, for maybe those symptoms were because of pain, and not depression.

This wasn't simple. Maddie wasn't simple, and Terry knew deep down where his biggest prayers lay, that she needed more than he alone could give her.

He would pray, ask God for wisdom, and work toward getting her into Dr. Jacoby's office. Easier said than done, but Terry wasn't going to give up. However long it took, he would see to it that she got professional help.

It was late, but he started the hot dogs and prepared dinner, knowing Maddie had to be starving by now. If only he hadn't dragged her through that store.

He shoved aside his self-reproach, and went into the living room to wake Maddie for dinner.

To his shock, she wasn't on the couch.

"Maddie? Where are you?" He heard movement upstairs, and went to investigate. Before he reached the top, the bathroom door opened and she came out in a fresh pair of jeans and clean shirt. "Dinner's ready," he said, and moved aside so she could pass him on the stairs.

She smelled of soap, so she must have been washing up for dinner. There was a slight antiseptic tint that puzzled him, but then, it could've been medicine from the pharmacy-- that prescription that was supposed to make her other pain go away. He wondered how that was coming along, but kept the question to himself. It wasn't any of his business.

"Sit down, and I'll bring in our food." He moved around her, went to the table and pulled out a chair.

He noticed she flinched as she sat down.

"Can you take more painkiller for your hip? Is it too soon to take more?"

She shook her head and he went to get her some pills.

When he came back, he found a small package on the table, neatly wrapped in white paper and tied with what looked to be packing tape from the storage room. She had shaped the packing
tape into a bow, and for a moment, the ingenuity of the design overtook his curiosity over what was inside the package.

He gave her the pills and a glass of water. "What's that?"

"It's for you."

He paused, looked at the present-- for that was what it was-- then back at her. "Is this what you bought while I wasn't looking? Is this what the five dollars were for?"

She swallowed down the pills.

"Maddie, you didn't have to do this. That money was yours. I'm not expecting a single thing from you, besides you doing your best to get better."

She nodded, and he was glad to see that she agreed to do her best.

"Please, Terry. It's for you."

Sucking in a sigh, he picked up the present, unfastened the bow, unwrapped the paper and found a keychain encased in packaging with a splashy picture of what the product was supposed to do. A keychain with an LCD. Intrigued, he opened the clear packaging, took out a sturdy looking chain with a two-inch LCD display that sported a USB port.

"It's a picture frame," she explained, but he nodded, for that's just what the packaging had said it was. "You can put your family on it, and have them with you wherever you are."

"Thank you, Maddie."

"Do you like it?"

"I do, I really do. It's a thoughtful gift."

Tears leaked from her eyes and ran down her cheeks.

Not knowing what else to do, Terry went into the kitchen, came back with dinner and hoped she would eat.

He prayed over the meal, then puzzled to find her smiling, tears still shimmering in her eyes as she attacked a hot dog. He'd thought she was sad but she looked so happy, it stunned him.
Women were difficult to understand.

At least this one was happy, he decided, and started in on his meal.

His to-do-list was shrinking and that meant he might be able to get it all done before Saturday.

Maddie smiled at him over her plate, and he smiled back.

Warmth settled around Terry though he didn't understand what it meant. He only knew when she looked at him in just that way, he felt strangely buoyant. A little light-headed, more confident than he had ever felt in his entire life, and pleasantly warm. Like he'd just swallowed the moon and was now glowing from inside.

He'd never expected to find happiness over a plate of hot dogs and a tossed salad, but even Maddie was glowing. He didn't know it was possible to feel like this, and decided they should have this meal more often.

"The LORD is good to all: and His tender mercies are over all His works."
~ Psalm 145:9 ~
Chapter Eighteen

A Safe Place for Madison

"Hear me speedily, O LORD: my spirit faileth...."
~ Psalm 143:7 ~

The knife. The moment she finished her second hot dog, Madison remembered the knife she'd hidden in the upstairs bathroom. Her happiness tip-toed away.

She had cut herself Saturday night, and now, here it was Monday, and she'd already done it again. This time it was worse. She didn't have to take another look at her wounds to know that. It hurt worse than last time, and the fact she'd done it again so soon, probably didn't help.

Stupid, stupid idiot. Can't you stop hurting yourself?

Discouragement sank the last of her hunger, and she put down the third hot dog. Why couldn't she stay happy for a little longer? What was wrong with her? Terry had liked his present and that had sent her over the moon with joy. Now, she felt as though she were in a night with no moon at all.

"Maddie?"

She looked up, saw the concern in Terry's face and realized she was still crying.

Terry put down his food. "Is it your hip?"

"No."

"Then what is it? You're in pain-- I know you are, I saw you moving around in the store."

"Please, Terry..."

"Please, what?" Terry heaved a sigh, leaned back in his chair and stared at her. "I'll do everything in my power to help you, but I have to admit, I'm in over my head. You need help. What I'm doing isn't enough."

"Do I have to leave?"
"Did I say that?" He gave her a mild look of reproof. "I'm not giving up, okay? I just think you need more help than I alone can give. I know I've mentioned this before, but I'd like to take you to a friend of mine-- a psychiatrist."

She said nothing.

"His name is Dr. Jacoby. He's a professing Christian, and he's been a good friend to my family. I trust him."

"Terry, I can't."

"He won't hurt you, Maddie."

"I can't." She pushed away from the table, and pain winced through her belly as she stood. "Don't make me. You can't make me."

"Maddie, calm down."

"I'll run away if you make me-- I will, I swear I will."

"Maddie, sit down."

"I won't."

"Maddie." Terry nodded to the chair.

She sat down.

"If you want to leave, then I won't stop you. I will try to talk you out of it, though." Terry folded his arms. "You need to stay, and you need Dr. Jacoby's help."

"You can't make me."

"That's true-- I can't." Terry leaned forward, reached across the table and lightly touched warm fingers to her wet cheek. "Please, Maddie. You aren't getting better. You're so pale, so delicately fierce, I'm afraid you'll die before my eyes and there won't be a thing I can do to stop it from happening."

The memory of her fearing if she passed out after cutting herself that day, that she might die, came back and haunted her.
God, please help me! she cried in silence.

"Maddie, I can't bear to watch you in so much pain." His hand withdrew, but his eyes continued to plead.

"Do you think I'm crazy?" She swallowed hard. "Do you think I'm insane and that's why I need a psychiatrist?"

"No," Terry paused, as though trying to pick his words carefully. "I think you've been hurt and you need someone to help you work things out. And then there's that--" he nodded to her belly. "You keep reaching for your stomach, and I'm beginning to think that's what's causing your pain tonight. Did you tell your doctor about that pain, or did it come after your last visit?"

She didn't answer.

"If you can't tell me, then maybe you'll tell Dr. Jacoby. Or maybe you want me to take you back to Dr. Nelson?"

"No."

"She's your primary physician, Maddie. You can trust her."

"No."

"Then speak with Dr. Jacoby."

"NO."

Terry's mouth opened, he sucked in a sharp breath. "Okay." He pushed to his feet. "I have to start clearing the table. Go brush your teeth, get anything you'll need for the night, then we're going home." His eyes didn't meet hers as he gathered the dishes, then headed for the kitchen.

Relief washed through her. She breathed deeply, got up and started for the stairs. She wouldn't have to see anyone, and they wouldn't find out about her cutting.

A muffled sound came from the kitchen, one that stopped Madison in her tracks.

It couldn't be. She'd seen him do it once before-- that time he stood in the rain, when he thought no one was watching-- but surely, not now.
She crept back through the dining room, hesitated at the kitchen and peeked inside.

He stood at the sink with his back to her, his shoulders heaving.

With a pang of shock, she realized Terry was crying.

Not knowing what to do, she stood there and watched him clamp a hand over his mouth, most likely to keep the sounds from traveling upstairs, where he thought she was.

She edged away from the kitchen, not wanting him to catch her watching.

Terry, oh Terry. She wanted to put her arms around him and make him feel better, but couldn't.

Why was he crying? She tried as quietly as possible to go upstairs without making any noise. If her belly didn't already hurt so much, she'd take the knife and cut again.

What had he said to do? Brush her teeth? She needed to obey.

She went into the bathroom at the top of the stairs, leaned heavily against the bathroom door and wished she were anyone but herself. If she were normal, he wouldn't be crying. That woman-- that Emily-- she would know what to do. Emily would soothe away his tears and make him forget he was sad.

He was sad because of her-- Madison Crawford-- and no one else. This was Madison's fault.

She had made him cry.

Seeing Dr. Nelson again was out of the question. A physical exam would prove she hadn't stopped cutting, so Madison could not, and would not, go back-- not until her scars had healed over so they looked old enough to escape fresh notice.

But that psychiatrist. She wouldn't have to take off her clothes for an exam, would she? What did psychiatrists do, anyway? Talk?

Please, Terry, don't cry.

She slumped onto the floor, her tears coming faster than she could stop them. This wasn't fair, but he was crying and the thought of that was more than she could bear.
Glimpsing the clothes hamper, she remembered the knife and pushed herself up. She reached behind the hamper, drew out the knife and clamped a hand over her mouth to smother her sobs the way Terry had done. Tugging down a bathroom towel, she wrapped the knife and continued to cry. She hated tears. They were a sign of weakness, and yet she was helpless to stop them.

She pulled herself up, located one of the shopping bags with her clothes and shoved the towel inside so it hid under the jeans and shirts. This wasn't fair, she thought as she found her pajamas and put them into another bag to take to the Johanneses' house. It wasn't fair. Terry wasn't playing fair.

She swiped at her wet cheeks, then opened the bathroom door and headed downstairs, making as much noise as possible along the way. He had to know she was coming so he could stop crying.

Psychiatrists did a lot of talking, they had long couches where people stretched out and stared at ceilings and blabbed about feelings. That's the way it worked on television, wasn't it?

It took courage to keep going. She was drowning in grief, and if Terry wasn't careful, she might die right in front of him, just like he'd said. It wouldn't be because she'd bled to death accidentally, but because she couldn't bear to see him cry. Her blood would simply stop pumping out of sheer grief.

The closer she came to the kitchen, the more she heard splashing sounds like someone washing the dishes.

Madison leaned against the kitchen entrance, watched Terry scrub then rinse each plate, then start on the glasses. Those strong shoulders didn't heave anymore and she closed her eyes in grateful relief.

"Terry?"

For a moment, he didn't respond. Then, with a sniff, he said, "Yeah?"

"I'll go." She leaned her head against the wall, opened her eyes and watched those strong shoulders come to a stop. "I'll let you take me to that psychiatrist."

He raised a shoulder, dried his face and said nothing.

"I'll go." Though the words wouldn't come easily, she forced herself to say them. "If you want me to go, then I will."
Terry didn't turn around, but remained at the sink with his back to her.

"Why?" he asked.

She couldn't answer. He finally turned, and she saw the tears that said he'd been crying.

"Why?" he pressed.

Madison shut her eyes rather than see those tears. She tried picturing them in the English sitting room, but the image wouldn't come.

"Maddie, why?"

"Because I like you." She willed herself to look at him and her insides ached.

"It's not because you think I'm forcing you, is it?" Terry sniffed away more tears. "I don't want you to go because you think I'm forcing you."

"Terry, I have to. You're crying."

"You are too," he pointed out.

"I am not."

He gasped half a laugh, then turned back to the sink.

She watched the back of his head, those shoulders as he finished the dishes. Her belly hurt, her insides hurt where her heart was supposed to be, and at the same time, little shimmers of happiness glinted through the pain. She kept watching his back, keeping her distance but knowing he had cared enough to cry.

How could that be? All men were raging monsters, but not Terry. Not her sweet, wonderful Terry.

"Did you brush your teeth?" he asked over his shoulder. The tears had subsided-- she could hear it in his voice.

"I forgot."
"Your teeth will rot out," he warned.

"Terry?"

He sniffed again, let out the water in the sink and turned to face her. He looked braced and ready for something difficult. "What?" he asked.

"You have a dishwasher, so why did you clean those by hand?"

A laugh came to his lips. He palmed his eyes. "I guess I needed to keep busy." He pushed away from the sink, gave a wide berth around her as he passed into the dining area. "Are you ready to go?"

She nodded and followed him into the living room. He handed her a coat, and when she reached to take it, their eyes met.

Wow. He was so incredibly wonderful she felt she had to be dreaming. This had to be a dream, a wonderful, wonderful dream she didn't ever want to end.

He groaned softly. "I wish you'd tone it down. You're going to get me into trouble, if you keep looking at me like that. Why do you do it, anyway? What do you see that other women don't?"

The question surprised her. Before she could answer, he turned away.

"Forget I asked. Let's get out of here before we start crying again." Terry grabbed his coat, his keys, went to the front door and opened it. "I'll get in touch with Dr. Jacoby."

"Terry, I like you."

He winced as though the words gave him pain. "It'd be better for the both of us if you didn't."

"But I can't help it."

"Try, Maddie. Please try." He hefted the keys, then nodded to the door.

She just had to ask.

"Do you like me?"

His mouth shut and pain came to his eyes.
"Terry, please. Do you like me, even just a little?"

He looked away, motioned to the door and kept his lips clamped shut.

"Terry?"

He shook his head, and motioned to the door more forcefully.

Wet stung her eyes but she obeyed and went outside.

He locked the apartment, then moved to the passenger door of the jeep. He opened the car door, held it for her as she climbed inside then put her bag on the floor by her feet.

Madison looked up at Terry, and saw the kindness in his face. He liked her. She didn't see desire in those deep brown eyes, or physical need; all she saw was Terry, her best friend ever.

He shut the door, rounded the hood while her insides shimmered and danced even more. Her breathing came in large gulps, and when Terry climbed behind the wheel she felt strange.

"What's wrong now?" he asked. "You aren't going to faint, are you?"

Her ears began to ring, her face felt hot.

"Maddie, don't you dare." Terry scrambled from the jeep, fumbled for his keys, and after that, Madison's world went blank.

* * * *

She was doing it again. The first time had been after he found her in the rain, had carried her to his jeep, and she'd panicked and keeled over in the passenger seat in a dead faint.

He raced to the kitchen, grabbed a glass, filled it with water, and hoped he wasn't already too late. As he came back, he saw through the windshield that he was. She'd passed out cold, just like before.

He opened her door, tipped the glass and let water splash down her face.
"Maddie, wake up." He poured more water and her eyes fluttered open. He set aside the glass, took her hand and rubbed it between his own. "I don't think you panicked, so what was it this time? Why did you pass out?"

"Terry, what's going on?" Lauren appeared from her apartment, came over to him dressed in a bathrobe and house-slippers. "What happened?" she asked.

"Maddie fainted."

"Why?" Lauren moved to the other side of the jeep, got in through the driver's side and began rubbing Maddie's other hand.

By now, Maddie had recovered enough to look embarrassed. "I'm all right. I breathed too fast, that's all."

Terry leveled her a look. "I warned you, didn't I? I've been telling you to calm down."

"I'm calm," she nodded, and tried to get her hands free. Terry let go, but Lauren wouldn't. "Does she need to see a doctor?"

"I'll leave that up to Maddie," Terry said, watching that pale face regain more color. Even though it came because of embarrassment, he was glad to see her not looking so pale.

"She needs to be more careful," Lauren said, still rubbing and patting Maddie's hand. "She has to think of someone besides herself now."

The comment slid past Terry.

"You need to take better care of yourself," Lauren went on, now addressing Maddie. "Don't overwork yourself, and make sure you have a diet rich in calcium. Calcium grows strong bones, you know."

Picking up on that, Terry nodded. "I have her drinking calcium-fortified milk."

"It's the least he can do," Lauren mumbled. She gave Maddie's hand one last pat before getting out of the jeep. Lauren gave Terry a no-nonsense look that puzzled him. "I hope you intend to take care of her."

"I'm trying," Terry shrugged.
Lauren shook her head, turned and went back to her apartment where her husband, Ralph, stood watching from a window.

"I really am," Terry sighed. He looked into the jeep and found Maddie calmer than he had seen her all day. "Are you okay?"

She nodded.

"Do you want a doctor?"

"No, I breathed too fast, that's all."

Afraid of the answer she might give, Terry wasn't about to ask again why she fainted. He felt he already knew. Did she pass out every time she really liked a man, or was this a first for her? That was another question Terry wasn't about to ask.

Though he'd never had this kind of trouble before, Terry didn't let the situation go to his head. He was flattered, but not so flattered he suddenly saw himself as anything but what he was-- a middle-aged man who was still single, and had trouble attracting women. No wife, no children, no family of his own. A failure.

Depressed again, Terry locked his apartment. Maddie liked him, and it only pointed to the fact that this woman needed professional help. He needed to call Dr. Jacoby.

Grateful he had her permission, Terry turned back to the jeep. And stopped. Maddie sat holding the glass of water, her head leaned back against the headrest, her eyes closed and looking very much happy and content. Sleeping Beauty, he thought with a sigh. God had really outdone Himself when He created Maddie.

At that moment, Terry caught himself smiling.

* * * *

She didn't say a word on the drive home. Fine by Terry. He didn't want her to work herself up into another faint. When they reached the house, she kept quiet, though Terry thought he detected some dread in her silence.

He unlocked the front door, stepped inside the living room only to find everyone had turned in for the night.
"Where is everyone?" Maddie whispered.

Terry thumbed at the clock. It was one-thirty in the morning.

He closed the door softly, glanced at the couch and smiled. Izzy had already made a bed for Maddie, no doubt guessing that Terry wanted their guest to stay a little longer.

Terry made a mental note to hug Izzy in the morning.

Some of the dread eased in Maddie's posture, that chin that no longer hugged her chest, and it occurred to Terry she hadn't wanted to face John and Izzy.

"Do we have to tell them I fainted?" Maddie asked in such a low whisper, he nearly didn't catch all the words.

"No, but they'll probably hear about it from Lauren." Terry rubbed a hand over his eyes. "Go to bed as soon as you can. Your furniture's coming tomorrow, so you'll need your rest."

She nodded, and started off with her grocery bag for the half bath in the office.

What a day, Terry thought as he looked about the dimly lit room. The night-light was already plugged in, so he headed into the office to see if anything had come for him in the afternoon mail.

He clicked on his desk light, found two boxes and a pile of envelopes, all addressed to him. Shedding his coat, Terry dropped into his chair and stared at the mountain. He didn't feel like going through it tonight, but tomorrow was probably going to be busy with getting Maddie's apartment ready.

Besides, he thought with a grin as he lifted the larger of the two boxes, Maddie would need this. Taking a pen knife, he slit open the packing tape, looked up as the bathroom door opened.

Maddie came out in her pink and black teddy bear pajamas, and the knife slipped, nicking his hand. Terry sucked the cut on his finger while she hurried back into the bathroom.

"I can help," she said eagerly, returning with all the first aid in the bathroom cabinet.

She looked so sweetly desirable in those pajamas, it alarmed him.
"Leave that stuff on my desk-- I'll take care of it. Maddie, just back off. I can handle this." He saw the disappointment in her face, but if she even had a hint of the thoughts that had tumbled into his mind just now, she would have fled the house and never looked back.

"Can't I help you?"

"Not now. Don't look at me like that, Maddie. Here," Terry stood, pushed the half open box across the desk. "Your coat came."

"But you're bleeding."

"It's just a cut. Put on the coat, will you?"

"But, Terry--"

"Put on the coat or get out of here. How much do you think I can take?" He one-handed the box of bandages. "What's gotten into you lately? All we did was have a quiet dinner on the beach, and then the next day you have stars in your eyes. Just back off, Maddie. You're not the only one who's confused, all right?"

Biting her lip, she took two steps back, then kept going until her back bumped into a filing cabinet.

"I should've had my head examined for bringing you home tonight. I should've left you at the apartment." Terry ripped off the bandage wrapper. "I've never had to be careful before-- not really, not like this."

"Be careful of what?"

"Just take your coat and go to bed." The bandage stuck to his fingers. He gave up and peeled it off. "Take the coat box." His eyes slipped over her figure as she moved, and he turned away. "Maddie, after tonight, you'll have to sleep at the apartment. This situation..." Terry blew out a breath. "I don't understand what's happening, I really don't. I was minding my own business, wasn't I?" He glanced at her. "What did I do to provoke this?"

"Did I do something wrong? Terry, I'm scared."

"You should be." He picked up his mail, sorted through the first few envelopes and realized they were medical bills. Maddie's medical bills. It was a reminder that Maddie wasn't a well person--physically, or emotionally. She'd been severely wounded by that animal for much of her life.
It meant Maddie’s scars ran wide and deep.

It also meant he had to steel himself. He had to be stronger. God was trusting him not to mess this up. He could not get tangled in Maddie’s emotionally unbalanced heart, if she was even aware that it was happening.

Terry looked at her, saw her clutching the box to her chest, her eyes wide with fear.

"I'm sorry." He pushed out a steadying breath, dropped the mail on his desk and desperately prayed for wisdom. "I shouldn't have scared you like that, even though a little fear right now might be healthy."

"I'm sorry, too."

He gave a tired smile. "You don't even know what you're apologizing for."

She didn't answer, but hugged the box closer.

"Are we friends again?" he asked.

"Always, Terry. Always and forever."

The over-the-top answer made him pause. Was it any wonder he felt so confused? He sat down, winced outwardly as she added,

"I like you, Terry."

"I know." What in the world had he gotten himself into? "Go to bed, okay? I'm getting really tired, and... just please go to bed."

She left, leaving Terry to the pile of bills on his desk.

Instead of opening them, he lifted the remaining box, slit the tape, pulled out the packing material and stared at the contents.

Her Bible had come, along with the surprise he'd bought for her on the spur of the moment.

Later. He'd deal with this later. Closing the box, Terry left the office and went straight to bed.

Terry's Journey: A Sequel to Abigail's Journey by Judith Bronte
She hadn’t understood most of what Terry had been saying, but then, she wasn’t so sure he knew, either.

One thing she did understand, however, was her need to be more careful about coming out of bathrooms dressed in pajamas. Terry's reaction to her was unsettling, though very explainable. He'd been tired, and for the briefest of moments, had acted like a man. Her sweet Terry needed rest, that’s all, and would be better in the morning. He'd already begun to sound more like himself before she left.

The new cuts were healing, even if they had looked a bit angry when she'd cleaned them in the bathroom. Each time she felt them hurt, it was a fresh reminder of her own insanity.

She ran a hand over the soft fabric of the new coat. She’d put it on like he wanted. It felt velvety and warm on her, like a fancy hug from someone rich. Nice though it was, she still preferred the other one.

Taking off the fancy coat, she picked up Terry's and climbed beneath the covers on the couch. Tired and worn out, it didn’t take long before she fell asleep, her arms still hugging his old coat.

"Uncle Terrrrry." The sound of giggling little girls in the hallway woke Terry from his hard-earned sleep. Lifting his head, he stared blurry-eyed at the LCD clock on his night table.

"Maybe he's not in there," said a voice in the hall.

"Yes, he is. I heard him snore."

Terry frowned at the door. He didn't snore... did he?

"Uncle Terrrrrrrrrrrry."

He dropped his head on the pillow. "Uncle Terry doesn't live here anymore," he said groggily.

"Yes, he does."

He heard the doorknob turn, the giggles and laughter as they rushed into the room.
"I'm getting too old for this, girls." Terry felt the bed bounce as they piled onto the mattress, then on top of him.

"He's still sleeping," said one with hot cocoa on her breath. It breathed very close to his face, and he couldn't help smiling. "Nope, he's awake," the girl pronounced, and proceeded to tickle his cheek to get him to open his eyes.

"If he's awake, then why aren't his eyes open?" The sensible one had to be Ruthie, but he could be mistaken.

More hot cocoa breathed on his face-- a lot of cocoa, meaning he was being inspected by more than one munchkin.

"Uncle Terry? It's time to get up."

"Maybe he died," said a grave voice.

"No, he's awake."

"Prove it," came the challenge.

"Okay, I will."

Terry couldn't help feeling a little worried, but he really didn't want to get up. Didn't these sweet children know he hadn't gotten to sleep until nearly three? Have pity.

The blanket covering his feet was tugged back, and he felt a rush of cold air. Uh-oh.

Something brushed the sensitive middle of his foot.

"You're not doing it right," said an exasperated voice. "You need to use the tips of your fingers, or it won't tickle. Like this--"

"Okay!" Terry jerked back his foot and fought back the laughter as the girls piled on him with tickles and hugs. "I'm awake, I'm awake. I give up."

"I knew it," Debbie said with a smile.

"Oh, you did, did you?" Terry went for an underarm and the girl screamed with laughter.
"Okay, girls, give him room to breathe." John came into the bedroom, lifted Ruthie and gave her a hug before placing her on the floor. "Debbie, Lizzie, get off Uncle Terry." John gave Terry an apologetic smile as the last girl scooted off his bed. "Mommy's waiting to help you get dressed so she can drive you to preschool."

Rousing himself, Terry tossed back the blankets, swung his legs over the edge of the mattress. "Wow, I could use some coffee."

"In the kitchen," John smiled. "Did you see the mail on your desk?"

"Yeah." Terry blinked at the light as John opened a bedroom window. "I've been expecting those medical bills for a while."

"Anything you can't handle?"

"Nah, keep your money. I've got it covered." Terry gave him a grin. "But thanks."

"Anytime," John said, and sat down on the edge of the bed next to Terry. "So. You came in late last night."

"I guess." Terry rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "Maddie and I got a lot of things done yesterday. In fact," he gave John a grin, "her furniture's coming today."

"Need any help with that?"

"Maybe." Terry thought it over. "Another strong back might come in handy, thanks."

John nodded, his face too casual, too on purpose.

"What's up? It's not Maddie, is it? She's all right, isn't she?" Terry began to stand, but John shook his head.

"She's still asleep on the couch."

"Then what is it?"

John paused.

"Go on."
"It’s about you and Madison..." John hesitated, obviously not wanting to intrude but still needing to express his concern. "Lately, you're always together, and well... she’s become very attached to you. I don't know if you've noticed."

"I've noticed. Man, have I ever noticed." Terry breathed deeply. "I know what you're getting at."

"You do?"

Terry nodded. "As soon as she's moved into her new apartment, things will be different."

"They will?"

"I stayed up late last night thinking about it. I already bought her a cell phone, and after I show her how to use it, I won't have to be around her so much."

"That's it? That's all you could come up with?"

"I was tired," Terry defended, and John shoulder bumped him with a chuckle. "That's not all I'm planning. She gave me the green light to call Dr. Jacoby."

"She did?" John turned hopeful. "I like that-- then you could share some of the responsibility with someone else."

Terry stared at him.

"I've been trying to help," John shrugged, "but it seems all I can do is pray and watch you get deeper and deeper."

"I know," Terry sighed.

"Do you think she'll talk to Dr. Jacoby?"

"Search me. I'm certainly going to find out, though."

John remained silent.

"Hey," Terry slapped his friend on the back, "thanks for the concern, but I'll be all right."
Though he could tell John wasn’t convinced, John backed off. "Have you found anyone to get off that graffiti yet?"

"No. Have anyone in mind?"

"Actually, I do. Brian called up and said he had Friday off, that he can get his hands on a power washer and take care of your problem. If you’re interested, he said to give him a call."

"Brian?" Terry didn’t know how to take John’s news. "That's nice of him. I guess."

John shrugged. "You can always turn him down."

"No, if he thinks he can take care of it, I'll let him try." Terry pushed to his feet. "I need all the help I can get."

"Ready for some breakfast?" John asked.

Grateful for John’s friendship, Terry nodded, and the two of them went in search of coffee and cereal.

*   *   *   *

After breakfast, Terry settled at his office desk with a Bible, intent on getting in some quiet time with the Lord. The house sat quiet with the girls at preschool, Izzy running errands, and John at his desk tapping away at email. And then of course, Sleeping Beauty on the living room couch, still fast asleep after the long day she’d had.

After the long day she’d given Terry.

Terry sighed, kept reading until his cell phone rang.

The typing stopped, and John looked over his laptop as Terry answered the phone.

"This is a courtesy call from Pre-Loved Furniture Corner," an elderly man said, most likely the store’s owner. "The van left five minutes ago, so please make sure you’re home for the delivery."

"Thank you." Terry hung up. "The furniture is on its way."

John closed his laptop, pushed back from the desk and started putting on his shoes. "Are we taking Madison?"
"It's her apartment," Terry said as he ducked out of the office. "Maddie?" He strode into the living room, went to the couch and proceeded to shake her by the shoulder. "Wake up, kiddo. Your furniture's coming."

"No," she whimpered, her eyes still shut.

"Hey, wake up."

"I'll be good," she mumbled, "I promise. Don't hurt... please..."

"Maddie, it's Terry." He shook her a bit harder. "Come on, princess, wake up. Don't make me toss more water in your face."

Her breathing came faster, and he gave her one hard shake before those gray eyes opened. They filled with panic until recognition set in, and she began to relax.

"You were having a bad dream." Terry straightened and took a step back. "If I'd known this was how you were going to spend your morning, I wouldn't have let you sleep in. We have to leave as soon as you're ready. The delivery truck is on its way to your apartment."

"Delivery?" She sat up, blonde hair spilling onto her shoulders.

Terry looked away. "Your furniture is coming, so get up. You can eat breakfast at my place." He tossed the new coat to her, and found she'd been snuggling with his old one. "Get up," he said, and left her to sort out the sleepy cobwebs on her own.

He went back to the office, and a few moments later, saw Maddie traipsing through in his old coat, on her way to the bathroom.

"Five minutes," he told her, and she nodded before closing the bathroom door.

"How much furniture did you get her?" John asked, sliding a wallet into the back pocket of his jeans.

"Enough to make sure she's comfortable." Terry took out his old key ring to add the keys to the new one Maddie gave him. "She bought me something."

"She did?" John came close, took a look at the keychain Terry held. "I've seen that at the MegaMart. Have you loaded it with photos yet?"
Terry grinned, punched a button and started a slideshow of the triplets' last birthday.

"She bought that for you?" John gave him a curious look. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"So do I." Terry pocketed the keychain that now held his keys. "Maddie, are you almost ready in there?"

"Just one more minute," she called back.

John lightly punched Terry on the shoulder. "I'll start up the minivan."

Terry nodded, grabbed his coat and wondered how long it could possibly take for a woman to put on jeans and a T-shirt. She didn't wear makeup-- not that she needed to-- so he reasoned it shouldn't take her long to get ready.

He glanced at the time, heard the bathroom door open and looked up and found her in the shirt and jeans he expected.

"Terry?" She came to his desk.

"Why is it whenever you say my name like that, I brace myself for something unexpected?" He tried a smile, found it came easily and decided the strain of yesterday had lessened.

"Terry?"

"I'm still here, Maddie." He led her out into the hall. "Take off my old coat, and go put on the new one. It fits, doesn't it?"

She nodded. "I dreamed about you last night."

"You did?" Terry made a last minute check to make sure the house was locked up tight while she put on the new coat.

It looked good on her. He didn't ask anything about her dream, but when he took her outside to the minivan, she tugged at his sleeve.

"I dreamed you had angel's wings."

He slid open the side door for her.
“Your face glowed, and you said I had to walk faster.”

“I did?” Terry motioned for her to get in.

“We were in someplace big,” Maddie talked as she stepped into the minivan, “and I wasn’t walking fast enough to keep up with you.”

“Sorry about that.” Terry smiled, and slid the door shut.

He got into the passenger seat, buckled in as John pulled away from the house.

“You kept telling me to hurry,” Maddie continued from the back, “and then the Dragon took me and...” She didn’t finish.

“The Dragon?” John asked.

“The man who hurt her,” Terry explained. “I’m sorry you couldn’t keep up, Maddie. It was just a dream. It wasn’t real.”

“I know.” He heard her sigh. “I woke up, and you were still telling me to hurry.”

John flicked a glance at Terry.

“When we were in the MegaMart, I went slow enough you could keep up,” Terry reminded, “so I hope you won’t hold that dream against me.”

“Oh, no, Terry, I could never do that to you.”

John slid Terry another glance, and Terry decided not to respond.

Oh, yes. The day was getting off to a great start.

Thankfully, Maddie kept her mouth shut the rest of the way to Chaumont.

The moment they parked in front of Terry’s apartment, though, Lauren approached with a serious face that wearied Terry even before she uttered a single syllable. The woman was a busybody, but she made an excellent building superintendent. She knew everything that went on, and when a problem came up, she either handled it herself, or called Terry.
"How is she doing?" were the first words out of Lauren.

It took Terry a few moments to realize she meant Maddie.

"You could've of knocked me over with a feather, I was that surprised."

"Surprised about what?" Terry asked as he unlocked his apartment door to let in Maddie. "She hyperventilated and passed out. It was no big deal-- right, Maddie?"

Maddie gave Lauren a timid smile before going inside his apartment.

"But in her condition." Lauren turned to John. "You can never be too careful about these things."

"What about her condition?" Terry asked, moving to apartment number four, just one door down from his. He unlocked the door, opened it, went inside with John and Lauren trailing behind.

Lauren sighed. "I'm referring to the baby, of course."

"What baby?" Terry blinked, looked to John, and John shrugged.

"Why the baby you're having with Madison." Lauren folded her arms. "I can only assume it's your child, after I saw you out front yesterday, hugging and kissing for everyone to see. Really, you hardly even know her, but that's none of my affair. It's yours-- though I hope you know it'll hurt Emily to know she's been outmatched by someone prettier than herself. But like I said, it's none of my business. I know you'll do right by that poor girl, and whatever anyone else says, I wanted you to know you can count on me."

"Hugging and kissing?" John asked.

"Count on you for what?" Terry asked. "For jumping to conclusions? For not even reporting what you saw accurately? I hugged Maddie once-- that's it. She was scared and needed a little comfort." Lauren's mouth fell open. "And another thing-- Maddie isn't pregnant. Not by me, or by anyone else. There is no baby."

"Well." Lauren sighed deeply, looked about the empty apartment and Terry could see her trying to piece together her tattered pride. "I'm sure I didn't mean any harm."
"I appreciate your concern." Terry felt the heft of the keys in his hand, the smooth LCD picture frame on the keychain. "It’s one of the reasons why you make such a good super. You care about people, and it shows."

Lauren looked somewhat pacified. "I’m sure I try."

"You do, and I appreciate it." Terry glanced at John and saw his thoughtful face. "I’ve been under a lot of pressure lately, so maybe I overreacted. You meant well, and I apologize."

"There’s no need for that." Lauren came to Terry, gave him a big hug that Terry had to return, or risk further hurt feelings. "If you need anything, maybe someone to keep an eye on Madison, let me know and I’ll do all I can to help."

"Thanks." Terry watched as Lauren moved to look about the apartment.

"I hope she appreciates everything you’re doing for her. I’ve never seen anyone go to such great lengths to help out a total stranger. But then," Lauren gave him a pitying smile, "you always did have a big heart. Bigger than all of the great outdoors, and that’s just what I’ll say, next time someone says anything about you and Madison. I’ll put them straight, you can count on that."

"I appreciate it." Terry watched John, saw John lean against a wall and stare at the blue carpet.

"I have to run along," Lauren said with a smile, "but let me know if Ralph and I can help."

"Thank you." Terry nodded to her as she left.

John moved to close the door.

"Oh, man." Terry dropped his hands at his side. "I have to be more careful what I do outside, where Lauren and the neighbors can watch."

"She passed out?" John asked.

It was to John’s credit that he didn’t ask about the hug, or the baby. It was a sign that John trusted Terry to do the right thing, that he not only counted on it, but he didn’t even question it for a moment. Unlike Lauren.

Before Terry could decide how best to explain, a large moving van backed in front of the apartment.
"Time to get to work," John said, and tugged out the work gloves in his back pocket.

Terry wished he didn't feel a wash of relief at the interruption. It seemed to him he always told John everything, but this time... this time Terry felt things strike closer to home, and it wasn't as easy for him to speak about it to John.

Pulling on his own gloves, Terry went to his apartment, found Maddie sitting comfortably on the couch with a bowl of cereal.

"Your furniture's here," he said, and she hurriedly started gulping down the last of her breakfast. "Don't hurt yourself, but come over when you can."

She nodded, and gave a neat little burp.

Fighting a smile, Terry went to join John as two men in white overalls opened the back of the moving van.

"Hey," one of the men nodded to John, "you've got a lot here. We're paid to carry it into the address on the delivery sheet, but if you want us to stick around while you decide where you want everything, that's extra. Unless, of course, you already know, and can tell us where to set it down."

"You're talking to the wrong man," John said, and motioned to Terry.

"I've got an idea where it all goes," Terry nodded. "Anything beyond that, we can handle."

"You're the customer," the man said, and started getting ready.

The delivery men began with the long couch with the deep, deep cushions, and Terry pushed out a sigh. This was going to be some work.

"We're going to have to take off the cushions," John said, eyeballing the front door of the apartment, then the couch. "Someone have a tape measure?"

One of the men tossed John a tape measure, and John started measuring the door, then the couch while Maddie came outside.

"Whoa." One of the men elbowed the other, nodded in her direction and started grinning.
Terry shot them a look, and the men backed off, probably thinking Maddie was Terry’s girlfriend. No matter-- as far as those two men were concerned, she was.

"We’re going to need to take off the front door." John gave the tape measure back while one of the men retrieved a toolbox.

While the men took off the door, Maddie slunk behind Terry and watched the proceedings from the safety of his back.

"Stay out of the way when we start moving this inside," he told her over his shoulder.

"I will," she said in a timid, mouse-like voice that made him smile.

He couldn’t help it.

"Okay, we’re ready to give it a try," one of the men said. "We’re going to have to manhandle this thing, turn it on its side and fit it through the door. Anymore doors this has to go through?"

"One more," Terry nodded. "This couch goes in the bedroom."

The man gave him a puzzled look. "You’re the customer," he muttered, and went inside with Terry to take off another door.

Maddie stayed outside, and when Terry came back, he found her hiding behind John.

"Now we’re ready," said the man, and he and his partner lifted one side, while Terry and John lifted the other.

"Maddie, get out of the way," Terry said as she bumped behind him in her scramble to move.

They rotated, angled, then pushed and wiggled until the large couch made it inside. Then they pushed and wiggled until it fit into the bedroom.

"Over against the wall," Terry directed, and they set it down.

"That is one beast of a couch," the second man shook his head. "Glad they don't make 'em all that big."

As they filed outside, Maddie moved past them with the couch cushions. She could only manage one at a time, but Terry let her help and they started in on the second, normal sized couch.
It only took two men, and Terry had them set it against the left-hand living room wall. He placed the table and four chairs on the opposite side of the room, beside the kitchen entrance so Maddie wouldn't have far to carry food. The TV cabinet was placed against the far wall beside the tiny hallway that branched off to the bedroom and bathroom, while the oversized upholstered armchair went in front of the living room window. You had to sidestep the armchair to get to the kitchen, but there wasn't much choice, because there wasn't much space. Still, it worked.

Terry glanced at Maddie, saw her quiet, happy face and was content to start on the bedroom.

The way it looked right now, it might have to be renamed the "couchroom," for that large, deep cushioned couch took a third of the room.

He directed the pine dresser into the far corner of the opposite wall, then filled the remaining wall with a small bookcase. The way it fit so snugly, you'd have thought it was measured and bought for just that spot. Terry took it as a sign God was making things work out, and silently thanked Him.

When John carried in the foot-tall Victorian, guardian angel, Terry saw Maddie biting her lip.

"In here, in your room?" Terry asked, and after a moment's hesitation, she nodded.

The angel needed to be where she could easily see it, so he placed it on the dresser, then found a nearby outlet to plug the tall night-light in. He kept the angel turned off, but hoped at night, it might ease her night terrors and give her some comfort when she was alone and trying to be strong.

Terry knew what that was like.

He turned, saw Maddie staring at the angel.

"You can move it if you want."

She hugged herself as a man moved past her into the bedroom. "I like it there."

"Almost forgot your rabbit," the man said, and shoved a ceramic figurine with a sign that read "Home Sweet Home" into Terry's hand. "That's the last of it."
Passing the rabbit to Maddie, Terry went outside to sign some papers, then helped John put the doors back on their hinges.

It took some doing, but Maddie now had a home of her own.

* * * *

After a quick lunch in Terry's apartment, Terry loaded himself down with the blankets, towels, and things they had bought last night at the MegaMart, and headed next door to "Maddie's place."

It seemed too good to be true, but as Madison followed Terry through the front door of the new apartment, it was all still there. The pretty living room couch with the pink and red flowers, the solid table with the four chairs, and the big armchair by the window.

"Coming through," said a voice behind her, and she moved aside as John carried her new HDTV into the living room. "This goes on the TV cabinet, right, Terry?"

"Yeah, I'll call the cable people later."

"Cable, huh?"

"Well," Terry grinned before going into her room, "she has to watch something besides the local channels. Maddie, I'm going to set this stuff on your couch."

She ventured into her new room, saw the guardian angel and went to switch it on.

"You like that, don't you?" Terry grinned. "I'll carry in the things for your kitchen, but there's your bathroom towels, the bedsheets, the comforter for your bed. You can handle this, right? Do you need any help making your couch?"

"I can do it." She looked at the beautiful angel on her dresser. She'd placed the rabbit beside it, but it didn't look right next to an angel. She picked up the sweet bunny with the print dress, looked at the bookshelf and placed it carefully on the middle shelf. With that small adjustment, she began to feel herself at home, in a space that was hers and no one else's.

When Terry left, she took a deep breath and started to unstack the things he had piled on the bedroom couch.
Gathering all the pink towels, she crossed the room, opened her door, and moved to the bathroom at the end of the tiny hall. How had she seen Izzy do things in her own home? Madison tried to remember, then mimicked the way she’d seen the towels had been folded, the way they’d been arranged on the towel racks, then stepped back to check her work. The bathroom’s off-white walls, the sandstone tile, went well with her pink towels. Really, any color would go well, and she decided that was why Terry had the bathroom in those neutral shades.

He had to be terribly smart to think of that.

She went back to her room, took the sheets out of their packaging and shook them out. They weren't fitted for a mattress, they were large, and very pink, and very perfect for what she needed. The first sheet she spread over the couch, then tucked it into place so it nearly covered all the upholstery except for the armrests. She put the two new pillows into matching pillowcases, arranged them at the head of her makeshift bed, then spread the second sheet over that, tucking it in at the foot to keep it in place. A thin blanket came next, then the comforter—a white, quilted comforter with pink roses and sprays of baby’s breath against pale green leaves. She knew which flowers they were, for she’d seen them on TV.

Something told her the sheets should probably go through the wash, but they’d been in sealed plastic, so she hoped it was all right to use them like they were. There was a community laundry in the complex, but she didn’t feel brave enough to ask Terry how to use it yet.

"Here's more for you," Terry said, coming into the room and setting some bath supplies on her couch. "It looks good in here." He gave her couch a thumbs-up, then left while John ran a vacuum in the living room.

Terry had to be spending a lot of money to do this, she thought as she took the new hairdryer out of its box. He’d bought her hand lotion, cotton swabs, shampoo, bath soap, and toilet paper. The only thing he hadn't provided was trash to go into the empty wastebasket. Then again, there was always the box and shrink plastic to throw away.

She put the things in the bathroom, went into the living room as John moved about with the vacuum. She stepped over the cord, negotiated around the table and chairs and looked into the kitchen.

It was a long and narrow kitchen, but it was hers. Terry stood at the counter, placing a toaster beneath the cupboards. He looked up and smiled.

"This place is really coming together, Maddie. At this rate, you'll be able to sleep in your own room tonight."
She nodded, not really wanting to think what that would mean.

"You need to learn how to be on your own." Terry opened a cupboard, slid in some noisy pots and pans. "I know it won't be easy, but before I go, I'll show you how to work your cell phone. You'll be able to call me day or night, so even though it feels like you're alone, you won't be. Not really."

He glanced at her and she nodded like a stupid bobble-headed character on someone's dashboard. Her insides felt numb, and all she could do was nod and listen and try not to think too hard.

Terry was going to leave her here.

"Anytime you need me, I want you to call. Don't just keep nodding-- promise you'll call."

"I will."

"Day or night, Maddie. I mean it." Terry moved to the refrigerator. "Don't worry about the food. I'm going to stock your fridge and pantry, and make sure you have more than enough until I come visit you... let's say, this next Friday morning. After I leave tonight, that's about two full days for you to get a taste of being on your own. How's that?"

He looked at her, and she kept nodding.

"This will only be for a short time, Maddie. You're not being abandoned."

She swallowed hard, and started hugging herself.

"This will be good for you, you'll see."

He slid a stack of plates into another cupboard, opened a drawer and put in his own silverware. She recognized it, didn't want him to give up anything he still used, but couldn't find the words to say "thank you."

"You're going to be fine. The windows all have safety glass, there's a deadbolt on the door... it's a good one, I installed it myself." He glanced at her, and she saw him suck in a breath. "You'll be safe here."

She nodded.
"If you want, I'll sleep next door tonight, just so--" He didn't have time to finish, for she rushed into his arms.

Holding on tightly, she hid her face in Terry's shoulder, and felt his arms reluctantly come around her. She tried to soak in his comfort, enough to last until Friday.

"You're not in this alone, Maddie. I'm not walking away, just taking a few steps back so you can find your balance, and maybe even calm down."

"I understand." She didn't really understand the part about her calming down, but didn't ask Terry what he meant. When she sniffed back tears, he sighed deeply.

"You're not going to start crying, are you? Come on," he gently moved her out of his arms, "try not to cry. What would John think?"

"Someone say my name?" John asked, coming to the kitchen with an attachment from Terry's vacuum. "Should I take the vacuum back to your place, or should I leave it here? Hey, why's Madison crying?"

"See, I told you he'd notice." Terry gave a half laugh, stepped from Madison and went back to putting things away. "She's just getting used to her new apartment. Why don't you leave the vacuum in her living room closet? She's going to need it a while, and as the landlord, I wouldn't want my tenant turning this place into a slum."

John chuckled, and went to put the vacuum away.

"Izzy called," Terry told Madison as he placed dish soap under the sink, for this apartment didn't have a dishwasher. "With your permission, Izzy would like to bring dinner here and throw you a housewarming party. It'll be nothing fancy, just us and the triplets."

"Thank you, Terry."

"So that's a 'yes'?"

She nodded.

"Then I'll give her a call."

Leaving the kitchen to Terry, Madison went next door to his apartment to gather her clothes.
And that knife.

She had to return Terry's knife to the drawer in his kitchen. He wasn't around to see, so this was her chance to put it back.

In the upstairs bathroom, she located the knife hidden in the towel in one of her bags, took it out and headed downstairs. Her heart pounded when she rounded into the kitchen, and the front door opened at the same time.

"Hey, Maddie?" It was Terry's voice, and only Terry called her Maddie.

"In the kitchen," she called, her hands trembling as she opened the silverware drawer. It was empty. Terry had given her all his silverware, and his food utensils, and the drawer was empty.

"Izzy wants to know if she should bring your things from the house," Terry said, his voice coming closer to the kitchen.

Frantic, Madison searched for a hiding place, opened a cupboard and tossed in the knife.

A second later, Terry rounded into the kitchen with a cell phone in his hand. "Is that all right with you?" he asked.

Automatically, Madison nodded, not really following the conversation. Had he seen the knife? She didn't think he had. She'd managed to toss it away before he came in.

"It's okay," Terry said into the phone. "And Izzy, make sure you leave behind my old coat--"

"No," Madison went to him, and tugged at his arm. "It's mine. You gave it to me."

"Izzy, bring the coat." Terry gave Madison a wincing look, but left his apartment while he kept talking to Izzy on the phone.

Fatigue, and the near-call made Madison shiver. Her belly didn't hurt so much right now, but only because she was busy thinking about other things besides the pain. Opening the cupboard, she picked up the knife, and quickly went upstairs to hide it in her grocery bag. If Terry had given her his silverware, his food utensils, and the knives that had been kept in that drawer, then he had meant to give her this knife, as well. Better to take the knife, then to risk having him find it later and wonder why it wasn't with the others.
Her nerves were fraying, but she steadied herself, gathered her grocery bags of clothes, her purse, and all the things Terry had given her, and slowly carried them downstairs in one great armload. Now she felt her belly, and moved carefully so the wounds wouldn't open.

It didn't seem possible, but she was moving into a brand new place, to start a brand new life. A life that would NOT include cutting.

* * * *

True to her word, Izzy brought Madison's things from the house, a hot dinner, and three noisy little girls to fill Madison's apartment. The girls ate on the living room floor, while the grownups ate at the round table a few feet away. Since they hadn't needed to put in the two leaves to make more room, Terry had stowed the table leaves under the couch for safekeeping.

"This is good," John said, helping himself to more cheese casserole. "This sure hits the spot, Izumi."

"Maddie, see what I'm doing?" Terry tapped a button on her new cell phone. "See this list? These are the numbers I've entered... you're not watching."

"Yes, I am."

"Pay attention. This is important."

"Terry, she's had a long day." Izzy cleared away some of the dishes, got up to take them into the kitchen. "Maybe you could show her that phone some other time."

"I'm not leaving here until she knows how to make a call," Terry insisted. "See, Maddie? Just page through the list--"

"How many numbers did you give her?" John asked.

"Only a dozen or so," Terry shrugged.

"A dozen? She doesn't know that many people in Three Mile Bay."

"These are emergency numbers." Terry kept paging up and down. "The police, the fire department, the poison control center--"

"Thanks a lot," Izzy laughed as she came back for John's now empty plate.
John grinned. "I ate three helpings and I feel just fine."

"Maddie, pay attention." Terry placed the cell phone into Madison's hand. "Press that button. No, not that one-- here, let me get you back to the right screen."

"She needs an iPhone," John sighed. "Where'd you get that thing, anyway?"

"The MegaMart." Terry spoke without looking up. "Okay, let's try this again. Now press this button-- just once-- no, wait." Terry took the phone back, did something to it, then put it in Madison's hand. "Let's start from the top. This button scrolls up, this one down, and this one selects the number you want."

"Is your number in that phone?" John asked.

"Of course."

"Is ours?"

Terry looked up. "I don't want her calling you or Izzy."

"So our number isn't in there?"

"She's not your responsibility," Terry said, and took the phone to do something Madison didn't understand.

John leaned back in his chair. "So when she needs help, you're the only one who's going to come running? What about Izumi? What about me? We're her friends, too."

Terry looked across the small table at John. "Land line or cells?"

"Put in all of them," John nodded. "No reason why you should bear this on your own."

A look passed between the men.

"I'm not asking for your help. You've given enough, already."

"I know you're not, that's why I want her to have our numbers." John got up from the table, and moved to the couch on the other side of the living room.
After Terry spent five more minutes punching buttons, he was ready to try again.

"This time, I want you to call my cell phone," he told her. "Wait, no-- not that number--"

The cell phone in John's pocket sounded, and he pulled it out. "At least she knows how to place a call," John smiled, and answered Madison's confused "Hello."

"I'm leaving you leftovers in the fridge," Izzy said, coming from the kitchen. "You're all set, as far as food is concerned. Terry's stocked your pantry and refrigerator, so you definitely won't starve."

"Providing you actually eat," Terry added. "I won't be around to make sure you're eating regularly, but if you start losing weight, you're going to hear about it from me. You're thin enough, so eat."

Smiling, Madison nodded. She could listen to Terry forever. The way he spoke, the look in his eyes when he was saying something important, that extra long look when he noticed she was watching him. He was simply wonderful.

A groan came from John. Terry glanced at John, then returned his attention to the new phone.

"Girls, get on your shoes, it's time to go home," Izzy said, and started gathering her children. "Abby hasn't called any of us, so I'm hoping she at least left a message on our answering machine at home."

"Isn't Uncle Terry coming?" Ruthie protested when she noticed he didn't get up.

"Uncle Terry is sleeping at his apartment tonight," Izzy explained, "but you'll see him tomorrow. Come, get your things. Debbie, where's your other shoe?"

After Debbie's other shoe had been found, and good night's had been exchanged, the Johanneses left in the minivan, leaving Izzy's car for Terry to drive back the next day.

Closing the front door, Terry came back to the table and picked up the cell phone.

"I'd feel better if you kept this handy." He gave it to her. "After I leave, make sure you lock the door. That means the handle, the deadbolt, and the chain."

"I will, Terry."

"Don't open that door if you're not sure who's on the other side, and never tell a stranger you're here alone."
"I won't."

Terry looked about the apartment. "Have I told you how to recharge that phone?"

She nodded. "You set up the charger on my dresser, remember?"

"Yeah, okay." Terry pushed out a long, drawn out sigh. "You've got food, water, electricity, gas, a good phone. I'll have the cable people hook you up as soon as I can. Until then, you'll have to settle for the local networks. The TV is plugged in, and I programmed the channels. All you have to do is turn it on."

"I know, you showed me."

"I did? Oh, right. I did." Terry pushed in the chairs around the table. "When you want some exercise, get out and take a walk around the neighborhood. You don't want to get lost, so I wouldn't advise going too far, but the fresh air would do you good. Okay, then. You have all your clothes, so I guess you're set."

Hugging herself, she nodded.

"I'll be next door." Terry took a step back. "You'll hear noises overhead, but don't let it rattle you. The apartment above you is occupied by a nurse-- I forget her name-- but she's nice. If she stops by to say 'hello,' make sure you're polite."

Madison nodded.

"Okay, then." Terry moved toward the door. "Keep that cell phone handy. I'll call once in a while to see how you're doing."

"Thank you, Terry."

He opened the door. "Make sure you lock up after me. I gave you the keys to your apartment, didn't I?"

"They're on my dresser."

"Okay, then. I'll see you Friday morning." Terry hesitated, then with a sigh, turned and left, shutting the door behind him. "Lock up," she heard him say from the other side of the door, and she hurried to obey. She heard the handle rattle as he tested the lock, then silence.
She moved to the window, opened the blinds just enough to look out, but couldn't see Terry's door.

Closing the blinds, she looked about the snug apartment.

It felt empty without Terry, Izzy, John, and the triplets to fill the place with conversation and movement.

A noise came from the wall, and Madison realized she had just heard something from Terry's apartment. She climbed onto the couch, pressed an ear to the wall and closed her eyes.

It was as close to Terry as she could get.

Several minutes brought nothing but silence and a backache, so Madison climbed down, and went into her room and turned on the overhead light. She changed into pajamas, cleaned her wounds, brushed her teeth, then sat on the large couch that faced the guardian angel. It was still on, all lit up from the inside.

Needing comfort, she pulled out Terry's old Bible. He'd mentioned that her new one had come, but had forgotten to give it to her. It didn't matter. She liked this one best. It was his, had his handwriting all over it, and when she read, it was like Terry was with her.

A sound came from outside in the parking lot, and she scooted beneath the covers. She opened the Bible, found a place where Terry had made notes, and read the passage: "I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, LORD, only makest me dwell in safety."

The cell phone on the blanket beside her rang. A name lit up on its display-- Terry Davis-- and she couldn't flip open the phone fast enough.

"Terry? Is that you?"

"It's me," he chuckled. "I just realized I forgot to say 'good night.'"

She snuggled under the pretty comforter, hugged Terry's Bible and wished he would stay on the phone all night.

"Is your angel on?" he asked.

"Uh-huh."
"That's good. I heard from Izzy, and Abby and Jake are in Elk City, Oklahoma."

"Oh. Okay."

Madison had no idea what to say. From Terry's hopeful voice, she supposed that meant it was a good thing.

"Well," he sighed, "I guess this is good night. I'll be praying for you, but don't stay up too late watching TV."

"I won't. Good night, Terry."

"Okay," he said, and hung up.

She closed the phone, got up to turn off the overhead light so she could go to bed. If Terry called the next day, she wanted to be able to say she hadn't stayed up late. He would call tomorrow, wouldn't he? Please, God, let him call.

The moment the overhead light clicked off, she noticed the soft light from the glowing angel cast a warm hue over the room. The angel almost looked alive with its outstretched wings and shining face. Still clutching the cell phone, she climbed beneath the covers on the couch, then turned onto her side so she could see the angel.

Terry would pray for her.

The thought comforted her, and after a quiet prayer for God to bless Terry, she slipped into a warm, tired slumber.

* * * *

When Madison stirred the next morning, it felt odd to open her eyes and find herself in a brand new place. Then she saw the angel, smiled, and went back to sleep.

* * * *

Something kept ringing. What was it? She pulled an arm out, dug under the pillow and located the cell phone. Without remembering to look at the display, she opened it and put it to her ear.

"Hello?"

"This is Terry," said a wide-awake voice. "You sound like I interrupted a nap."
"No, I haven't gotten up yet."

"Maddie, it's almost lunchtime. Did you eat breakfast?"

"No," she yawned, "I was sleeping."

"Okay, get up. Go into the kitchen and find something to eat. Are you up?"

"I'm trying to be," she mumbled, still blinking the sleep from her eyes.

"Go eat something," Terry directed. "Don't make me come over there. Come on, show me you can do this."

"I will, Terry. I will."

"Okay," he sighed, and hung up.

She staggered into the kitchen, groped through the cupboards until she found cereal. Dumping some into a bowl, she ran water into it, then snagged a spoon from the drawer.

Oh, she was sleepy. It was only her in the apartment and it discouraged her from wanting to stay awake. What did it matter if she went back to the couch?

After finishing lunch, she did just that.

* * * *

The cell phone rang, but this time, it found her awake. She opened the phone and heard Terry's voice even before she placed it against her ear.

"Did you eat?"

"Yes."

"Are you still in bed?"

After a moment to think over her situation, she pushed off the covers, then got off the couch. "No, I'm not in bed."
"Did you just get up?"

"How did you know that?"

"Maddie, you can't stay there all day. It's nearly dinner, and you've spent the entire day in bed."

"Dinner?" she asked, beginning to notice how weak she felt. "What time is it?"

"Maddie, have you at least been watching TV? Tell me you haven't been staring at the walls all day long."

She didn't know how to answer that without lying.

A heavy sighed sounded in her ear. "Tell me what you ate for lunch."

"Cereal."

"And what else?"

"Just cereal."

"Are we talking two or more bowls?"

"No, not exactly."

Frustration nipped at his voice, but she could hear him fight for patience. "Okay, I want you to promise me to do two things. Are you following this?"

"Should I write this down?"

"No, don't write it down-- just do it. The moment I hang up, you hear? First, get out the leftovers from last night's dinner in the fridge. Second, turn on the TV-- I don't care what you watch so long as it doesn't hurt you, and sit down and start eating."

"But that's three or four things," she yawned.

"I don't care. Just do it. Promise?"

"I promise."
They hung up, and Madison wished she didn't have to eat. But since she'd promised Terry, she went into the kitchen to keep her word.

* * * *

The next time the phone rang, she was watching TV.

"Have you eaten dinner?" Terry asked.

"Yes."

"Is the TV on?"

"Uh-huh."

"Okay," he sighed. "I'll call you tomorrow."

This time, he didn't tell her to stay up late watching TV.

* * * *

The next day, she forced herself to eat breakfast, and when Terry called, she told him in complete honesty that she'd eaten. He seemed to take heart, and after he hung up, she went back to bed.

Lunch was the same way, as was dinner. Each time Terry called, she told him she'd already eaten.

It felt good to know he was encouraged with her progress.

* * * *

The next day-- Madison didn't know which, she'd lost track of time somewhere along the way--instead of her cell phone ringing, she heard a knock at the front door.

She went to the window, and saw Terry with a man she'd never seen before.

Putting on Terry's old coat, she opened the door and blinked at the sunlight.

The moment Terry saw her, he groaned.
"You're not dressed."

She looked at her pajamas and didn't know what to say. Was it Friday? Was that why Terry was here?

"This is Earl," Terry said, "and he's going to hook up your cable TV. Come on, you can stay at my place until he's done."

Sidestepping Earl, she moved into the bright sunlight of the outdoors.

"It's dark in here," Earl called as he stepped inside. "Mind if I open some windows?"

"Go ahead," Terry told him. "Maddie, let's get you something to eat. Have you had breakfast yet?"

She shook her head. She hadn't counted on him asking that question so early.

He took her by the arm and guided her into his apartment.

"You're going to have to do better than this, Maddie."

"I'm sorry."

"You look like you haven't brushed your hair in days. Have you showered at all?"

"I don't remember..."

"Okay, go upstairs and clean up while I fix you breakfast."

She looked at the staircase. Tears were threatening to come, her body felt sore and weak and the light hurt her eyes.

Terry came close, and when she leaned into him, his arms didn't hesitate to embrace her. It made her panic, but he eased back and let her bury her face against his shoulder. It felt so good to just stand there and be with Terry. The last few days were a blur, but this, this was real.

"I'm sorry." Terry breathed the words in a quiet hush. "I shouldn't have left you alone for so long. From what you told me, I thought you were doing better than this. Are you all right? Besides needing a shower, and some clean clothes, are you hurt?" He pulled her back and looked her over. "Those weren't lies, were they? You have been eating?"
"I've been eating," she nodded.

"You still look weak. Have you been doing any housework at all? You could have dressed and gone for a walk, maybe even visited Lauren. Okay, not Lauren, but you could have left the apartment anytime you wanted."

Still feeling disoriented, Madison fought to find her courage. During all that time alone, she'd crawled inside herself, and now she struggled to come out and rejoin the world.

Terry squeezed her shoulder. "You knew I hadn't abandoned you?"

"You kept calling," she smiled, "so I knew you hadn't forgotten me. What day is it?"

"What day? Why, it's Friday. I was going to visit you Friday morning, remember?" He shook his head. "I should have gotten you out of that apartment sooner. I thought this time on your own would help you make decisions for yourself, maybe even help you calm down where I was concerned. It was only a little over two days-- from Tuesday night to Friday morning."

"Two?" Her mind kept blurring, then coming into focus. "It felt longer."

"I'm sorry." He hugged her, but this time it smothered Madison and she fought to get free. "Hey, hey, easy. I'm backing off." He let go, blew out a breath and watched her closely. "I've been trying to get in touch with Dr. Jacoby. He's on vacation right now, and a colleague of his, Dr. Potter, is filling in for him. I told him I thought this could wait until Dr. Jacoby got back. You can wait, right? Until next week?"

"Terry, you're the one who wants me to see that man, not me. I don't need a psychiatrist."

"I beg to differ, especially after this, but I'm not looking for a fight. I'm just glad you're sounding like yourself again."

She frowned, but already her spirit felt lighter.

"AJ will be here tomorrow, so Brian is coming over to help power wash the graffiti off my apartment." Terry headed back to the kitchen and she followed. "If you don't want to see Brian, that's fine with me, but if you do come out and watch, I'd appreciate it if you showered and changed. You look like you've crawled out from under a rock." Terry poured her some cereal, let her start on that while he popped bread into the toaster.
Brian was coming. Okay. Terry could have said a dozen smiling Brian's were coming, and it wouldn't phase her in the slightest. She was with Terry again, and that was all that mattered in her Terry-centered world. Not even the impending arrival of three more strangers could take away her contentment.

With Terry, she had ground under her feet, solid ground where she could breathe and not stumble over her thoughts so much. Hope was a slender thread that kept threatening to break, but when Terry smiled, hope came easier, as did the motions of life. God had given her refuge, a safe place in Terry's friendship, and in Terry's smile, and she thanked God for that precious gift.

Just being with Terry again made her heart do backflips of joy, let alone listening to him talk about his family. Life began to pulse inside her once more, and she couldn't help but wonder about the people who were coming, what they were like, and how much they knew about her. Not that she would matter to anyone besides, hopefully, Terry, but she couldn't help wondering if they would like her. These people mattered to Terry, so they would matter to her.

Finishing off her cereal, Madison wondered what tomorrow would look like.

"Let me not be ashamed of my hope."

~ Psalm 119:116 ~
Chapter Nineteen
This Couldn't Be Love

"If thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise [from] obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday: And the LORD shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul..."
~ Isaiah 58:10, 11 ~

While Maddie ate her toast, Terry went next door on the pretext of checking Earl's progress. Not that Terry minded how long the cable guy took. Terry only wanted a chance to collect himself, to clear his mind of the sad sight of Maddie in those crumpled pajamas, her hair unwashed, her frame noticeably thinner than when he'd left her two days earlier.

Leaving Earl to do his job, Terry headed for the sidewalk instead of going back to Maddie. Two days. Terry had only left her alone for two days, and she hadn't been able to cope with being by herself. To be honest, she had coped, but not in the way Terry had hoped she would. He tried picturing himself chained to a bed, alone with the animal she called the Dragon, then truly alone for long stretches of time without a soul to talk to. Withdrawing into yourself would be so easy to do, possibly even necessary to preserve your sanity.

Terry had no way of knowing how much of her childhood, her adulthood, had been spent chained to a bed. She'd once told him that the abuse had started when she was eight or nine, and the math terrified him. He wanted to press for more, to ask how long Maddie had been chained, if Maddie had ever heard from her mother after the Dragon had adopted her-- things he wanted to know but was too afraid to ask.

Already knowing this much taxed his emotions, left him feeling drained and tired. Not tired of helping Maddie, but tired of fighting back his own memories. Pain similar to his own had a tendency to trigger memories, things he needed to avoid dwelling on before it sank him into even deeper sadness.

He came to a stop on the sidewalk and watched the cars zip past him. Oh, to be like everyone else, to not know that soul-piercing shame, the ugliness behind your abuser's smiling face, and to know that ugliness was all for you. What was it like to not know that? to live a normal, ordinary life with nothing but normal, ordinary problems? John's life came as close to seeing what normal looked like, but even there, John wasn't exactly normal. Not with having Terry for a best friend, and a brother.
God, help me help Maddie. My heart is so overwhelmed, and yet, not my will, but Thine be done.

A horn blasted, and Terry turned to see Brian's truck move past him on his way to the apartment.

Terry waved, but Brian had already disappeared around the block. Time to get back to the complex so he and Brian could start working.

Life kept moving, and so must he.

When Terry reached his apartment, he found Brian in the back of his truck, getting the power washer ready.

"Hey," Terry called to him, "thanks for coming down."

"Glad I could help out."

"I didn't know you had one of these." Terry reached out to help Brian lift the wheeled machine off the bed of the truck, and onto the asphalt.

Brian hopped down. "It's not mine."

"Oh?" Terry looked at his friend. "Is this a rental?"

"Yup."

"I thought John said you had one."

"No, I never said that." Brian picked up the manual. "I only said I could get my hands on one."

"But you didn't have to do this. That graffiti's my problem, not yours."

Grinning, Brian paged through the manual. "You've been helping out enough people, I figured I could at least do this much."

"You're not doing this because of Maddie, are you?"

"Why?" Brian looked up. "Is she here?"
Terry shook his head. "I already told you she wasn't interested."

"I know, I know." Brian kept grinning, and went back to his manual. "If it's meant to be, God will make it happen."

Groaning, Terry let his friend read the directions, while Terry went to make sure Maddie had finished her breakfast.

"Maddie?" Terry came through the front door, stopped when he saw her curled on the couch looking drowsy. "How can you sleep? Haven't you had enough?"

She pushed herself upright, blinked and said nothing.

"Okay." Terry took a deep breath. "I can do this. Just calm down."

"I am calm."

"I wasn't talking about you." Terry closed the door. "Why don't you go upstairs and take a shower? I'll get some clothes from your apartment."

Her eyes tracked to the stairs.

"Come on, Maddie, Brian's here. If he, or anyone we know, sees you looking like this, someone's going to worry."

It was enough to get her up. She started for the stairs, dragging one leg in a much more noticeable limp than usual.

"You've been doing that all morning. Why aren't you moving your leg?"

"My hip hurts."

"It's probably because you haven't been getting any exercise. Come on, start picking up your feet."

She edged closer to the bottom of the stairs, her leg still dragging behind her.

"Maddie--"

"I can't." Reaching for the banister, she moved the hip in question, gasped in pain and quickly stopped.
"Your painkiller." Terry snapped his fingers, went into the kitchen to find the bottle of acetaminophen. He’d bought her a new one and put it in her apartment, but the old one should still be here in the cupboard.

The doorbell sounded as he found the bottle. It was probably Brian.

Terry went back to Maddie just as the front door opened.

"Hey, Terry?" Brian looked inside, saw Maddie huddled by the banister while Terry tapped out pills onto her hand. "Sorry, I didn't mean to intrude."

"That's all right." Terry watched as Maddie tried to swallow the pills. "Hold on, you should be taking those with a glass of water."

"Is she okay?" Brian asked.

Terry didn't have time to explain. He jogged to the kitchen, came back with a full glass only to find she no longer needed it.

"Drink the glass anyway," he said, and gave her the water.

"Is she sick?" Brian stepped inside. "She's so pale."

"She's in pain." Terry hovered nearby, and accepted the empty glass when she had finished.

"Why is she in pain?"

"She has osteoarthritis of the hip." Terry looked up the flight of stairs. "You're not going to make it up there, are you?"

Maddie shook her head.

"Okay, let's get you back to your apartment. You can shower there."

Her eyes closed and he could see she was tiring.

"I never should have left you alone for so long." Terry set aside the glass. "I don't want to scare you, but I'm going to carry you next door. Maddie?" He bent to look into her downturned face.
"I feel better, Terry. Ever since you came, I've felt better-- honest, I have."

"I'm glad to hear that, but you certainly don't look it. Brace yourself, I'm going to pick you up."

It wasn't difficult to lift Maddie in his arms. She felt lighter than he liked to think.

Her eyes squeezed shut and she went rigid.

"Relax, I'm just taking you next door. Brian, would you get the door?"

"Yeah, sure." Brian moved aside, opened the door and watched as Terry carried her into the sunlight.

Maddie's front door still stood open, and Terry found Earl, the cable guy, still at work in the living room. The man looked up as Terry made his way with Maddie to the tiny hall.

Though Earl had to be curious, and maybe even a little concerned, Earl minded his own business and kept working.

Taking Maddie into the bathroom, Terry set her down, then pulled out his cell phone. Someone came into the bathroom behind them, and Terry turned to find Brian.

Terry punched the phone's display to bring up his address book. "I'm calling Izzy."

"Please don't." Maddie tugged at Terry's sleeve. "I can take care of myself."

"You need a shower, Maddie. You need help getting dressed."

"I can do it."

Hesitant, Terry put away the phone, watched as Maddie lifted her leg.

She swayed with pain, but sucked in a sharp breath, limped to the shower with her leg dragging behind. "If you could get my clothes..."

"I'll get them-- your closet, right?" Terry moved away and Brian followed. "Are you sure you don't want me to get Izzy?"

"I'm sure."
With a sigh, Terry pushed Brian from the bathroom, stepped around Brian and went into Maddie’s room.

"What’s wrong with her?" Brian asked. "Why does she look like that?"

Pulling a pair of jeans and a shirt from Maddie’s closet, Terry headed back to the still open bathroom door. "I left her alone for two days, and she fell behind on her personal hygiene. Maddie? Can I come in?"

"Yes."

Terry went inside, handed her the clothes.

"Are you sure about Izzy?"

"Oh, I feel better, much better than I have in days."

"That’s not encouraging to hear, Maddie."

He left the bathroom, made sure he closed the door, then went into the living room where Brian waited.

Brian looked more than concerned, he looked shaken. "Is she all right?"

Not knowing what to say, Terry nodded, turned to the man working near the TV and asked how he was doing.

Earl grunted. "Nearly done."

Brian looked to Terry. "Are you going to call Izumi?"

"Not unless Maddie needs me to." Terry went to the front door, looked outside at the power washer sitting in front of his apartment. "Are we ready out there?"

"Almost," Brian nodded. "The neighbors need to be warned not to come out while the machine's running, and we still have to hook up the water."

When the cable TV had been tried and given Earl's stamp of approval, Earl left without asking questions about the woman who lived there, the same woman who Terry had carried into the bathroom. What was he supposed to say? she looked unkempt and crazy?
Terry went to the bathroom, didn't hear water running and called to Maddie through the door.

"Can you hear me in there? We're going to power wash near your front door, so don't come outside, or open that door until we give the all-clear."

"Okay, Terry."

Resisting the urge to ask how her hip was feeling, Terry went out with Brian to warn the neighbors.

As Terry pulled out the long garden hose he kept reeled beside the building, Brian stood staring at Maddie's apartment. Without a word, Brian came to hook the hose into the pressure washer. As Brian tugged on a pair of safety glasses, Terry heard him sigh.

Seeing Maddie like that, hadn't been easy.

* * * *

She didn't know why Terry had looked so concerned when she was feeling better. Her hip was on fire, but aside from that, she felt wonderful.

Of course, she could only stand so much wonderful before her strength began to fade.

As Madison dressed in her clean clothes, then toweled off her hair, she wished Terry hadn't been so set on her taking a bath. It seemed like a terrible waste of energy. She’d rather go outside and watch the graffiti come off the wall.

The hot shower had felt good though, and even her hip felt better. She supposed the shower should have come first, after all, but now that she was awake, she didn't want to miss anything. The noise outside made her want to hurry, want to see what was happening, and be a part of it.

Hair still damp, she went to the living room window and peeked through the blinds.

Brian stood with a gun-like wand in his hands, aiming a thin blast of water at something she couldn't see. It was the wall of course, but she wanted to see more. Where was Terry? The noise lessened, and Terry came into view before disappearing again. Then Terry stepped back, moved off to the side while Brian blasted away with the machine.
Propping herself on the back of the large recliner in front of the window, Madison pulled the blinds completely open and watched them work. This was much better than TV. Each time she was forced to sit down, she got back up as soon as her hip felt better.

The moment the engine shut off entirely, she went back to the window. Terry had a bucket and a scrub brush, and by now she realized Terry had been scrubbing in between Brian's blasts of water. She went to her front door, opened it and heard Terry shout,

"Maddie! We didn't give the all-clear."

"Can't I come out?"

"No. Shut that door and keep it closed."

Biting her lip, she obeyed and went back to her post by the recliner. Terry noticed her watching from the window, and shook his head, but she took heart at the smile threatening his mouth.

She waved to him, and he waved back.

Then the engine started and Terry stopped noticing her.

For a long time, the men kept working, then the engine went silent and Madison heard a knock at her door.

"All clear," Terry told her, and she hurried on a coat to come outside.

Water drenched the pavement in front of Terry's apartment, ran beneath Brian's truck and Terry's jeep, formed a river down the gently sloping parking lot until it reached the sidewalk gutter. Terry and Brian went door to door, telling anyone who was home, that it was safe to come out. The curious came to look at the wall, and among them, was Lauren.

"My, my." Lauren moved in for a closer look. "The graffiti's gone."

"For a while, I thought it wasn't going to come off." Groaning, Terry rubbed his back. "Brian and I took turns with the power washer and the scrub brush, but it didn't come off easily."

Hugging her coat closed, Madison moved next to Terry.

Brian was watching her.
The people started back to their apartments, and Terry went to Brian, leaving Madison to go stand beside the jeep.

"I really appreciate this," Terry told him, shaking his hand. "I'm taking you to lunch, no arguments."

"I won't turn down free food." Brian flicked a glance at her, and started to clean up their equipment. "We washed the sealant off, so you'll need to get those bricks resealed before the rain causes any damage."

Terry nodded. "Starting tonight, there's rain in the forecast, but I'll get that done as soon as possible. I need to do a few other things too, like paint that new window." Terry studied the wall, then helped Brian clean up. "When you take this power washer back, I'll reimburse you."

Brian waved away the offer, and while the men debated, Madison searched for someplace to sit.

"Maddie?" Terry was looking straight at her. "You're not lifting your feet."

Afraid he might tell her to start using her leg, she edged toward her apartment.

"Have you been putting cold treatments on your hip yet?"

She shook her head.

"Why not? That's what the printouts your doctor gave you, said to do."

Deciding she'd stared at the brick wall long enough, Madison went back to her apartment. She watched the men from her window, saw them load the power washer into Brian's truck, then watched as Brian drove away.

Terry headed for her door, and before he had a chance to knock, she went to open it.

"Take off my coat, and sit on the couch," he told her, and went into her kitchen.

When he came back, he held a frozen bag of peas, then wrapped them with a kitchen hand towel.

"Put this against your hip." He handed it to her, and she went to the couch to obey. "If that doesn't work, let me know and I'll think of something else-- maybe a zip bag with ice cubes."
"Terry?"

"What?" He folded his arms and watched as she gentled the frozen peas against the hip of her jeans. "Does your family know you're helping me?"

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Abby and Jake-- do they know about me?"

"They will soon enough." Terry went back to the kitchen. "I'm taking Brian to lunch when he gets back. Do you want to come with us?"

"Oh, yes, please." She wanted to be with Terry, even if it meant being around Brian.

She heard noise in the kitchen, guessed Terry was looking for an alternative to peas and zip bags, something cold to take down the inflammation in her hip.

"I hope you're not worrying about AJ." Even though she sat on the living room couch, Terry didn't have to raise his voice from the kitchen because the apartment was so small. "What made you think to ask about Abby and Jake?"

"I don't know." Madison adjusted the cold pack. "You just seem kind of..." Terry appeared from the kitchen, waited for her to finish her thought, "a little nervous."

"I'm not nervous." He disappeared around the corner, then came back with a frown. "Abby and Jake are my family. I am not nervous."

Madison worried her bottom lip. "You don't want them to find out about me, do you?"

"Why on earth would you say a thing like that?" Terry came to her couch, squatted and looked her in the eye. "I'm not ashamed of my friends."

"I wouldn't blame you if you were, Terry. When you found out they would be here Saturday, you moved me into this apartment awfully fast."

"They had nothing to do with that." It seemed the moment he said it, he took it back, for he winced and looked away. "It had to do with them, but not because I'm ashamed of you, okay?"

She didn't understand, but nodded anyway.
Terry straightened. "Let me worry about AJ. You just concentrate on feeling better."

Though Madison didn't tell Terry, she would have felt better if her suspicion hadn't been so very much confirmed. Terry was nervous.

* * * *

When Brian came back and learned Maddie was coming with them for lunch, Terry noticed a more subdued reaction than the one he had expected.

"Will she be able to act normal in the restaurant?" Brian kept his hands in his pockets. "I mean, is she feeling well enough to go somewhere?"

Terry frowned. "She has yet to embarrass me in public."

"I didn't mean that."

Whether Brian had or not, the men changed the subject and when they went to pick up Maddie, no more was said about her problems, or that dramatic limp.

The only reason Terry wanted Maddie along, was so he could make sure she ate lunch.

She needed to eat.

They went to a fast food restaurant, took a booth by the window and let Maddie scoot beside Terry on the bench. Though Brian was polite to her, he seemed at a loss for words when it came to Maddie.

What had Brian expected? Terry had warned him she'd had a hard life, that she was a survivor of abuse. Before, Brian had only seen Maddie's reluctance to talk to him, to return his obvious interest. All he'd seen was that pretty face and all that attractive shyness. Now, he'd seen a glimpse of the realities that had resulted from that abuse, and Brian looked uncomfortable. Uneasy. Like he didn't know what to say or do.

In a way, Terry couldn't blame him. How many times had people acted that way with him, especially after his breakdown? People had talked about it, they had known he was going through a hard time, and it had shown in their faces.

Even Brian's.
Well, Terry thought as he paid for their meal, at least Maddie wasn't interested in Brian. There
would be no hurt feelings on either side, though it hurt Terry to see his friend backing away
from a sweet woman like Maddie.

She was damaged, and it had scared Brian.

In Terry's quiet thoughts, he wondered if that was the reason why women didn't seem to like
him very much. Because he was damaged. He'd wondered that before, but seeing Brian's reaction
to Maddie's wounds, it renewed the thought and depressed Terry.

After Brian dropped them off at the apartment complex, Terry again thanked him for his help.
Even though Terry suspected Brian had only volunteered because he'd hoped to see Maddie,
Terry was grateful for the help and told Brian so before the truck drove off.

Brian only smiled, returned the handshake, then got into his vehicle and left.

As they watched Brian drive away, Terry felt Maddie tug at his sleeve.

"What?"

"My hip is feeling better."

"That's good." Terry let out a breath, looked at the smile on her lovely face and knew Brian had
lost out on a sweet woman.

Not that Maddie had been interested.

A cold wind swept past them, and Maddie zipped up the brand new coat she'd worn to lunch.

"It's going to rain tonight and tomorrow," Terry told her, "so make sure you keep warm." He
walked her to her apartment, noticed she still wasn't lifting her feet but said nothing.

"Terry?"

"What?" He smiled at their familiar pattern, the way she had of starting a conversation by saying
his name.

"Do you want to watch TV? I have cable now."

He took Maddie's keys from her, unlocked her door before giving them back.
"Please, Terry?"

"I don't know." He opened the door, let her go inside while he remained on the doorstep. "I should probably stop by the store and see about getting something for your hip. I've heard you're not supposed to apply heat to an inflamed joint, but maybe I could get some pain gel."

"Please stay, Terry. I'll keep the frozen peas on my hip for as long as you want."

"Give me some time to run to the store, then we'll watch TV."

"Promise you'll come back?"

"This isn't a promise-worthy discussion, Maddie. Cable or not, it's only TV."

"But it won't be any fun without you."

"Well," he couldn't help smiling, "if you're going to put it that way..." He hesitated, then gave a consenting nod. "I promise. Go turn on the set, and find something for when I get back."

"I will, Terry. I will. Thank you so much!"

"Calm down, will you?" He stepped away from the front door, found his car keys in his pants pocket and started for his jeep. "You take things so seriously. Learn to lighten up a little, try to relax."

"I will."

He cocked an eyebrow and she giggled.

"Make the most of happiness whenever you find it, Maddie. No matter how small it might seem, it's a gift from God."

"Can I come with you?"

"No, sit and rest your hip."

They had evidently been talking loud enough to gain the curiosity of the woman next door. Terry waved to the elderly woman-- her name escaped him at the moment-- and she gave a frowning scowl before disappearing from the window.
"Happiness is a gift," Terry said quietly. He weighed the keys in his hand, realized Maddie was still listening, and shooed her inside.

"You're coming back?" she called before closing the door.

He held up his hands. "What more does the woman want? I promised, didn't I?"

She laughed, shut the door and he got into his jeep.

That girl. Maddie had a way of making him feel wanted, like she saw something in him that he couldn't see, himself. Sure, he was helping her, and yes, she was lonely. But she liked him, and Terry struggled not to admit the feeling was mutual.

* * * *

He was coming back. The promise hummed in her soul and she hurried to find something on TV that Terry might like.

Popcorn. Izzy had made popcorn when they watched Pride and Prejudice, so maybe Terry would like some, maybe even expect it when he watched TV.

Her hip wasn't as important as getting to the kitchen pantry. She trembled as she searched the shelves, and bit back a cry of disappointment when she found she didn't have any popcorn. She had tortilla chips, though. Maybe that would be good enough for Terry.

She tore open the bag, dumped it into a large bowl, then went to the fridge to see if she had anything special to drink. Something Terry would like.

Her hip felt warm, but she hunted through the fridge until finding two cans of soda pop behind a carton of milk. Grabbing the cans, she shut the fridge, then scooped up the bowl of chips to take them into the living room.

Was this good enough? Would Terry like it? He deserved so much more, but it was all she had.

If only she could make him happy, then he wouldn't mind spending time with her. He gave so much, and she had so little to give him in return, she was desperate to please him. To make him want to stay with her as long as possible.

That wasn't selfish, was it?
She prayed to God it wasn't. If she could give Terry something in return for his friendship, then it wouldn't be selfish. He'd get something, too.

The world blurred, and she palmed her eyes dry.

Please, God, let him come back.

Waiting on the couch, Madison kept looking for something to watch on TV. The remote wouldn't hold still, so she placed it on her lap to poke at the buttons. The soda and chips sat beside her, while channel after channel flicked past her eyes.

Careful. She had to be careful what she saw, or the memories would come back.

A show about how theme parks were made didn't interest her, but she left it there and watched the clock.

The minute number changed, and she counted to sixty slow enough to see it change again. For twenty excruciating minutes, she waited and watched.

Someone knocked on her door, she hurried to open it, and Terry came in with a grocery bag.

"Started the party without me?" he laughed, and quickly quieted when she rushed into his arms.

The grocery bag dropped to the floor, and his arms came around her. Warmth flooded her and she gulped in air until her head swam and she felt dizzy.

"Terry..." she couldn't finish her words, and her lips grazed his cheek as her mouth sought his.

Before she could taste his lips, Terry pushed her away, his eyes wide with shock.

"What are you trying to do?"

She tried to get nearer to him, but he backed away.

"Maddie, I don't understand you. Just when I think I do, you pull something like this."

"I only wanted to kiss." She bit her lip. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Maddie, I don't kiss anyone unless I'm married to her."
"But you're not married."

"My point exactly." He ran a hand over his head like someone trying to find their thoughts.

"You're shy?" She couldn't help smiling. "You've never been married before, so you've never kissed anyone."

His eyes narrowed. He opened his mouth as though about to say something, then shut it with a sigh.

"It's okay, I don't mind that you don't know how. You've never kissed anyone who really likes you, but I don't mind. Honest, I don't."

"Maddie, you're doing a good job of confusing the daylights out of me." Terry blew out a long, steady breath. "Sit down, would you?" His voice competed with the TV, so he grabbed the remote and muted the show. "I bought some pain gel for you. It's in the grocery bag."

"Thank you, Terry."

He frowned. "What are you trying to do to me? I thought you didn't like physical contact."

"It's mainly the sex I don't want. It'd kill me to do that again. I don't want it. Ever."

"But I assumed..." Terry rubbed his face with both hands. "Abby's husband, Jake, had a problem with physical intimacy, and he'd been abused, as well. I just assumed you--" Terry broke off. "I assumed you were like him."

"I don't know about Jake, but I don't want sex."

"Maddie, I'm sure you know kissing can lead to other things--"

"But it wouldn't-- not with you."

"Why are you so sure of that?"

"Because you've never been ugly before, so you're safe."

"Maddie, whether that's true or not, I've had sex. I'm not a virgin."
She backed away. "You're not?"

He gave a long, thoughtful stare. "There's a lot about me that you don't know, but I don't want to go into that right now. For now, I'd like to go home and forget this conversation ever took place."

"You've done it before?" Disappointment careened into Madison's soul. "I thought you were different, but you aren't. That's why you want Emily."

"Leave Emily out of this." Terry looked about the living room. "It's going to rain tonight, so make sure you turn the thermostat up. Keep warm, and use that pain gel. If it doesn't work, let me know, and we'll try something else." He pulled out his keys, and she saw the digital picture frame she'd given him.

"I thought you were different."

"I am different." He frowned. "If I weren't, you'd be freezing at the Old Mill Campground right now, and who knows what else."

Her arms wrapped around her torso. "I don't want sex, not ever."

"Then we understand each other." Terry backed to the door. "I don't want it, either-- not from you. Okay? Are we good?"

"I can't kiss you."

"That's right, you can't. Are we still friends?" His chest rose and fell like someone who'd just been running a marathon. "Maddie, please. I need you to say 'yes.'"

"I wish I could kiss you."

"So do I." Terry shut his eyes, hissed and reached for the door handle behind him. "I didn't mean that. What I meant was... I have to go."

He hurried out the door, and it fell shut with a gentle slam.

"Lock up," came from outside, and she struggled to put the chain on, twist the deadbolt, then lock the handle.
It rattled as Terry tried the door, then she went to the window to see him walk to his jeep. He saw her at the window, and stopped.

She needed this ugly feeling to disappear, to stop wanting something that would only drive her into despair. And sex would do that.

Too much emotion pushed at her, too many things tore her in separate directions until she wanted to scream.

Dropping the blinds shut, she fled the window, collapsed onto the couch but refused to cry. Bit by bit, she tucked into her mental shell, hiding like a turtle until it was safe to come out.

Curling on the couch, Madison numbly watched the muted TV.

* * * *

Instead of going straight home, Terry drove past the house, circled around Three Mile Bay and back into Chaumont so he had more time to sort things out. So many things sped through his mind, he had to force himself to slow down.

Whatever he'd thought before about Maddie being like Jake, he tried to adjust his thinking. She despised sex, but craved intimacy like someone who'd been sexually active for most of her life. Which she had. She wanted to kiss, but didn't want what might come after, and Terry wondered how similar that made her to Jake.

Maybe it was a mistake to compare them. They were different people, with different scars and different pasts. No matter how similar Terry thought they might be, Maddie was not Jake.

The soft scent of talc, the flowery fragrance of shampoo, the close, intimate warmth of her against him, drifted into Terry's thoughts. And those lips-- soft and searching, and wanting his mouth.

He let out the breath he realized he'd been holding.

Never in his life had he ever been so close, so very much alone with a woman, one who liked him. A lot.

And those gray eyes. They were the color of the water when a storm pushed through the Great Lakes. How many times had he looked out over the desolate beauty of Lake Ontario during the winter, and seen that very same color on the water? Liquid silver in the distance, so beautiful, so
arresting to the senses, and yet knowing it meant more snow, more icy wind to cut through your layers of warm clothing until you had to retreat and go inside.

It beckoned him-- those gray eyes-- and yet the body language, the stark fear he heard in that voice-- saw in that face, told him the depths of her confusion.

It had been a very long time since he'd needed sex. His teen years had been brutal. He'd been sexually active during his childhood, but the abuse had stopped before he'd turned thirteen and the absence of it had made being a teenager almost unendurable. With perseverance, he'd overcome his body, but the mind was much slower to forget.

If only those night terrors would go away, and stay away.

She had felt so good against him. He blew out a steady sigh, and forced his senses to think of something else.

They strayed back to her.

That smile, when he stepped into the apartment and she'd been so glad to see him-- he could think of that smile forever, and still wonder at her joy. Over him. It was just him. No one special, and yet she'd greeted him like he was somehow important. Someone to be wanted.

It made him want her. That, and a million other things about Maddie, made him want her.

Noticing the heavy black clouds, the fading sunlight, Terry turned on his headlights. He'd been driving around for longer than he'd thought, and somewhere along the way, he'd lost the afternoon. Knowing John and Izzy were probably growing concerned, Terry headed for home.

They weren't the only concerned ones. He felt growing alarm over his situation, as well.

He couldn't possibly do this to Maddie. He couldn't.

Please, God, for Maddie's sake, don't let this be love.

* * * *

"Terry, is that you?" John came into the living room as Terry took off his coat. "Where have you been? Why didn't you answer your cell phone?"
"I missed your call?" Fumbling in his pocket, Terry pulled out his phone, punched the button and saw he had three missed messages. All from John. "Sorry. Guess I wasn't paying attention."

"Izumi just put dinner on the table." John motioned to the kitchen, and Terry could hear the jabber of the girls as they talked over their food. "Did everything go all right with the power washer? Did you get the graffiti off?"

"What? Oh, that." Terry nodded. "It took some doing, but it's off."

Izumi called from the kitchen. "Terry, dinner's ready."

"Thanks, I'll be there in a minute." Terry started for the hallway. "I just need to put my coat away, and wash up."

"Okay."

Terry could feel John watching him as he disappeared into the bedroom, and wondered if it showed. He felt like he wore a bright neon sign on his chest, one that laid bare his heart for all to see. Something humiliating like, "Guess who's dumb enough to think he might be in love?"

Only this wasn't love.

If it were, he'd break into flowery poetry and overblown sentiments, he wouldn't feel this awful dread in his gut. And there was dread. Lots of it.

Love wasn't supposed to come with Maddie. It was supposed to happen with Emily, and might still happen, if he tried harder.

No, this couldn't be love.

After washing his hands, Terry came into the kitchen and was met with a noisy, mouth-full-of-food greeting from the triplets. Izzy told them to swallow first.

If Terry hadn't wanted to remind himself of Maddie, he should have skipped the meal.

They were having hot dogs.

"Daddy, can I stay up tonight?"

"Nope, you have to sleep like the rest of us."
"But if I stay up," Debbie sighed dramatically, "I'll be awake when Abby comes home."

"If you stay awake, the night will be longer."

"But can't I, anyway?"

"Eat your dinner." John glanced at Terry. "How's everything at the complex?"

"Fine." Terry treated the question as a general inquiry, not a literal translation of the facts. Still, he hated hiding things from his best friend. He usually told John everything, confided in him like the brother that he was, and the evasive reply bothered Terry. "Some things are better than others," he added, easing his conscience. "Nothing I can't handle, though."

Thunder rattled the kitchen window, followed by the long rumble of an invisible giant moving around heavenly furniture. A crack of lighting, then more booming made Terry think of a couch being dragged across a bumpy floor.

To the girls' delight, the overhead lights flickered.

"Do it again!" Ruthie cried.

The girls listened, but heard nothing.

"I'm not very hungry." Terry pushed away from the table. "I think I'll read a book before turning in."

"But it's only five thirty." John gave him a look that Terry tried to ignore. "Are you feeling sick or something?"

"Maybe." Terry shrugged, for it might be true. "Have you heard from AJ?"

"They should be here sometime tomorrow afternoon, evening at the latest." John's grin faded. "If you're not feeling well, there's Pepto in the master bathroom."

"Thanks." Terry left to the sound of Ruthie praying for the electricity to go out.

"Please, God, we won't mind."
As rain pelted the roof, Terry reached into his pocket for the cell phone. He fought the urge to call Maddie and see if she was all right. If she needed him, she would call.

But why did he hope she would call?

He went to his room, his mind working while his feet kept moving, and found himself pacing back to the hall. The rain grew heavier and so did his thoughts. He had no idea how fine a line there was between like and love, between necessity and longing--a finer line than he had ever imagined.

Thunder rolled overhead, and he gripped the cell phone. She would call. Instead of panicking and retreating into herself, she would call.

If he called her, she might think he'd changed his mind about the kiss. He hadn't, and he didn't think she would now anyway, but that was beside the point. The point was, he was getting too close to her. He had to back off.

Struggling with those thoughts, Terry went to his office and buried himself with paperwork, email--anything to keep busy and to stop from thinking about her.

Night came, and Terry went to bed with a book, hoping to distract himself from Maddie. She chased his thoughts no matter what he did, where he went to escape them. She kept tugging him back with those soft lips, the sound of her voice when she told him that she liked him. After nearly an hour of staring at the same page, Terry tossed the book aside and tried to sleep.

This couldn't possibly be love.

* * * *

Besides the perky woman on the morning news program, the only other thing that told Madison it was morning, was the dim light coming through the living room window. Okay, that, and the clock. She'd fallen asleep on the couch while the TV flickered to a muted broadcast, and hadn't cared enough to reach for the remote and turn on the sound.

She still wore yesterday's clothes, but she didn't care. She hadn't gotten up from the couch all night, except once to use the bathroom, and after that, her world had shrunk to the four walls around her and the silent images moving on the screen.

Her hip throbbed, but not as much as when she tried to move. She didn't bother with the acetaminophen. Pain gel sat unopened in the grocery bag on the floor, right where Terry had
dropped it. She thought of reaching for it, but if the pain went away, she knew she would cut herself.

No sense in doing that when pain was already so abundant.

She turned to face the ceiling, gasped as she moved her hip. Rain started to beat at the window again. The thermostat hadn’t been adjusted like Terry had told her to do, and she was vaguely aware of the cold.

The cell phone on the cushion beside her, began to ring.

"Please go away, Terry."

Squeezing her eyes shut, she jammed fingers into her ears so she couldn't hear. She counted to fifty, opened one ear and then the other, and found the ringing had stopped.

She turned onto her side and nearly screamed with the pain. Clamping her jaw shut, she again tried to force herself to sleep. The bad dreams-- the night terrors, Terry had called them-- made it hard to get much rest. They were worse than usual, and she didn't want to admit it was because of Terry.

Her sweet, wonderful Terry, the replacement for Mr. Darcy. Madison pictured the sitting room once more, tried to hear the hushed sounds of Mr. Bingley and Jane whispering about their engagement, struggled to see the chair by the window where Mr. Davis sat quiet and watching. He watched her-- Madison could almost feel it-- safely distant and smiling, happy in the knowledge that they would never kiss.

Needing more than a kiss, but not wanting to think about it, Madison retreated to the numbness of staring at the muted TV.

* * * *

When the children ran off to play, the adults remained at the breakfast table. Izzy had cleaned the house the day before, had even spent time at the little yellow house to do some last minute tidying. Now everything sat ready and waiting for AJ.

Nursing a cup of java, John looked over to Terry. "How'd you sleep last night?"

Terry took a sip from his smiley mug-- a present from the triplets to Terry, two birthdays back. "I've had better nights."
John nodded, turned his blue mug in a slow, thoughtful circle.

"Are you as ready for AJ, as Izzy seems to be?" Terry asked.

"Yup." John kept turning the mug. "Did the Pepto help?"

"The what?"

"The Pepto? You said you weren't feeling well last night."

Terry drained the last of his coffee, then set the mug on the table.

"I didn't need it."

The blue mug kept turning, John's face remaining quiet and thoughtful. To Terry's eternal gratitude, John didn't press him for discussion.

When Terry went back to his room, he tried Maddie's number again. She didn't answer, and he prayed it wasn't because he hadn't called sooner, that he hadn't tried to call her last night.

Please cause her to be all right, Terry prayed for the umpteenth time.

If he went to her apartment, he feared she might bring up the kissing subject again. Surely, he'd said enough to frighten that thought from her pretty head. But what if she was hurting and needed help?

She would call.

But what if she didn't?

Noon was fast approaching, and Terry didn't want to be out of the house when they were expecting AJ almost any moment.

The triplets were on high alert. Every car that passed their house caused a stampede of giggles and laughter.

"It's them, it's them!" Then a moment later, "It's not them."
Though every false alarm played with Terry's nerves, he paced his room, the hall, the living room, moved around the munchkins, then back through the hall and into his room. He held his cell phone, kept wondering if he should jump in his jeep and get Maddie to open her door. If she wasn't answering his calls, she probably wouldn't open the door, but he could always get the landlord's key from Lauren. If he wanted, Terry could force his way inside.

Her hip had been hurting yesterday, and he prayed it had died down since then. That she'd been using the pain gel and that it had done some real good. If it were possible, he would have exchanged his health for hers, gladly bearing the pain as long as she was happy.

The already dim light from the windows grew darker, and once more, it started to rain. They ate lunch in the living room, just in case AJ should happen to come while they were in the kitchen.

Lunch came and went, and still they waited.

"I wish Abby and Jake would get here." Izzy hovered by the living room window. "The roads aren't as safe when they're wet, and the rain's coming down harder."

Unable to take the strain, Terry retreated to his room, tugged out his Bible and prayed. He sent up prayers for AJ and their safe arrival, he prayed for Maddie, and he prayed for himself.

Lightning lit up his bedroom window, then thunder crashed through the afternoon rain. The storm rumbled, and he could hear the girls' laughter in the front of the house. Another boom, and John commented from the hall that the storm was picking up.

"They're here!" Sounded from the living room.

John knocked on Terry's open door, stuck his head in. "They're getting out of the truck."

"It's really them?"

The grin on John's face said that it was.

The men hurried to the living room as thunder pounded the rooftop. Through the window, Terry saw two adults, one holding a child, huddled under an umbrella before making a dash for the house.

John threw open the front door, and everyone cheered as Jake came in with Ricky. Abby quickly followed, and John shut the door as smiles and hugs were exchanged.
"Thank the Lord." Izzy went to Abby, gave her a huge hug while John lifted Ricky from Jake's arms. "You're home. Thank the Lord, you're home."

John gave Ricky a hug, and the boy coughed.

The triplets clamored for hugs, for attention, and poor Jake looked overwhelmed. Then Terry heard Jake cough as well, and noticed he looked pale.

"Mom, I think Ricky's coming down with something. It started yesterday afternoon." Abby went to check the boy John still held. "Ricky complained of a sore throat before lunch, and the coughing came this morning." Abby moved to Jake, took him over to the couch and fussed over him as he sat down. "Let's get this wet coat off you. Jake started to cough soon after, and I knew I couldn't waste any time getting home. I just kept driving."

"Daddy." Ricky looked about for Jake. "Where's Daddy?"

"He's over here," John said, and carried the boy to the young man coughing on the couch.

"Is he sick?" Lizzie asked.

Thunder beat the air, but Izzy pushed past them, and into the kitchen. "I'll make some hot tea," she called. "John, get dry clothes out of our closet for Abby and Jake. And find something for Ricky."

"Do we have a thermometer?" Abby asked, and Terry hurried to get the one in the master bathroom.

Terry came back, gave it to Abby and watched as she knelt to take the temperature of the little boy who had settled on Jake's lap.

"Why didn't you tell us they weren't feeling well?"

"I didn't want you guys to worry." Abby glanced up at Terry, paused to stand and give Terry a tight hug. "It's so good to be home." She kissed Terry's cheek, then knelt to retake Ricky's temperature. "A hundred and three."

"Izzy, Ricky has a fever."

"I'm coming," Izzy called. She hurried into the living room with a clear plastic, sippy cup of orange juice. "Does Jake have a fever?" she asked Abby.
Abby read the digital thermometer and nodded. "A hundred and two."

"I don't feel good." Ricky hugged his toy firefighter and looked up at Jake as Jake sneezed.

"That makes two of us." Jake accepted the Kleenex Terry offered. "It's great to see you again, Uncle Terry. It's nice to know I won't have to catch a plane back to San Diego. I feel like I'm only here for the advisory board."

Terry laughed. "Don't worry, you'll get used to it."

Jake coughed and closed his eyes. "I feel hot."

"That's because you have a fever," Izzy said, and fed Ricky a small serving of children's medicine, something to help the fever come down. Izzy placed the sippy cup in Ricky's hand, then went back to the kitchen to get something for Jake.

"I'm really sorry, Mom." Abby got up, went to the kitchen while the triplets moved closer to the couch to see Ricky. "We should have gone straight to our house, so the girls wouldn't come down with whatever Jake and Ricky have."

"Nonsense." Izzy came back with Abby, some acetaminophen and another glass of juice for Jake. "The girls were bound to come down with it, anyway. You couldn't keep it from them, if you tried. When one in the family gets sick, it won't leave until the bug has run its course with everyone."

Abby placed a hand on Jake's forehead. "Feeling any better now that we're home?"

"I will in a moment." Jake coughed, drank some orange juice, then leaned his head back. "Just don't go too far, Abby, and I'll be fine."

She stroked his cheek, and felt his forehead again, as though her touch was a better thermometer than the digital one she'd just used.

"Will these do?" John asked, and came into the living room with a small armload of clothes.

Abby sighed. "You didn't have to do that, Dad. We have clothes."

"Yes, but they're out in the truck." Izzy looked through the clothing. "This large pajama top will do for Ricky."
"Mom, we have pajamas."

Jake sneezed, then leaned forward to cough. Trying to help, Terry came forward and lifted Ricky from off Jake's lap.

"Hi, little guy. Remember me?" Terry gave the boy a hug, and laughed when Ricky offered him a drink from his sippy cup. "Thank you." Terry pretended to take a large gulp, smacked his lips and the boy gave a big smile that made him look very much like Jake. "I hear you're not feeling too good?"

Ricky shook his head, looked down at Debbie as she looked up at Ricky.

"What do we have here?" Terry gave the firefighter in Ricky's hand a playful tug, and Ricky swung his head around to see Lizzie looking up at him, as well.

"Is he sick?" Lizzie asked.

"I'm afraid so." Giving Ricky a hug, Terry set the tired little boy on the couch next to Jake. "Move back, girls, and give them room. Jake, I'm really glad you made it here in one piece."

"Me too." Jake smiled, coughed and reached for another tissue. "My throat's on fire."

Abby put a cup to his lips. "Drink some orange juice... that's right, you'll feel better soon. Mom, pillows and blankets? It's too early to sleep. Besides, we're going home tonight, we're not sleeping here."

"But your house is cold, it's raining, and Jake and Ricky are too sick to move in." Izzy gave a no-nonsense look. "In a few hours it'll be dark, so you'll stay here for the night. Change your clothes, Abby, and I'll start some chicken broth on the stove."

"You have chicken broth?"

"Of course." Izzy patted Abby's cheek, and made Abby smile despite being treated like a little girl. "I always have a few cans in the pantry during the cold and flu season. Have you had your flu shots, yet?"

"It's September, it's too soon for flu shots." Abby looked to Jake. "Isn't that right?"
"Don't look at me, I don't know." The young man coughed, and John lifted Ricky so Jake could lay down.

"I'll start the broth," Izzy said, and went back to the kitchen.

Ricky coughed into John's face, then Ricky ran a sleeve across his small, runny nose.

"Sorry, Dad." Abby gave her son a tissue, then accepted a transfer when Ricky reached for her. "He's still a little shy, but that will wear off. You remember Gramps, I know you do. They even visited a few months ago for Daddy's graduation."

The boy sneezed, and Abby wiped his nose.

"How long have they been this sick?" John asked.

"Only since this morning." Abby rocked Ricky, and stepped aside as Izzy moved past them into the hall. "I didn't want to worry you, so I left it out of our calls."

"We could have come-- I could have come, and helped you." John moved as Izzy went back to the kitchen. "You could have called."

"I didn't need to, Dad. Everything was under control." Ricky wanted to be somewhere else, and Abby set him down. The triplets surrounded Ricky, gave him Kleenex by the handful until Terry lifted the box out of their reach.

"I think he has enough, girls."

Ricky retreated to the couch, climbed up where Jake made room for him by moving onto his side. His hand still full of tissue, Ricky wiped Jake's face, and Jake smiled.

Just then, Abby sneezed, and concern came to Jake's eyes.

"It was just one sneeze," Abby said defensively. "Stay where you are, Jake. I'll be fine. Ricky, lay down with your daddy, while Mommy gets the suitcases."

"Oh no, you don't." Terry gestured to the window. "It's pouring cats and dogs right now, and you have dry clothes right here. Why don't you get changed, and I'll get Ricky into the oversized pajama top?"
"But we already have pajamas." Abby coughed, gave a groan and sat on the floor beside the couch. "Please, God. Not me, too."

Reaching down, Jake stroked Abby's hair. "Let them help, Baby."

With another cough, she nodded, and accepted the clothes John gave her. "Look at these-- Mom is so small."

"So are you," Jake smiled, and closed his eyes.

"I'll just change this guy into his new, second-hand pajamas," Terry said, and picked up Ricky. Everyone, it seemed, wanted to hold him, even though he was four years old and had perfectly good legs. "Just look at how big you've gotten when I wasn't looking. Try to slow down, Ricky, so I can enjoy you while you're still small."

The boy leaned against Terry, coughed and let John take the sippy cup from him.

Terry carried him to the master bedroom down the hall, and Ricky looked about as he hugged his firefighter even tighter. Terry placed the boy on the bed.

"You remember me, don't you? From your daddy's graduation?" Terry pulled off Ricky's shirt. "Arms up, please." Ricky raised them, and Terry slid the pajama top over his small hands. "We had a cake with your daddy's photo on it, do you remember? And you and your aunts got balloons."

A shy smile came to Ricky's face.

"Do you remember?"

The boy nodded.

"Sometime soon, would you like to go fishing?"

The question was met with an energetic nod, and Terry laughed, took off Ricky's pants, then caught the boy up in his arms and carried him back to the living room.

When Abby saw her son in the warm pajama top, she smiled. "That's so cute. He'll need training pants when he sleeps, though. Wait a moment, I have a pair in my purse."

Terry chuckled as Abby opened her purse to dig them out.
"Go ahead and laugh, but it pays to be prepared." She pulled out a road map, half a roll of breath mints, a bottle of kiddie vitamins, a yo-yo with its string tangled around a pen and a brush-- "Here it is." She gave Terry the pants. "We should probably keep them in the bathroom. It's too early to put them on."

His arms hidden beneath the large pajama top, Ricky climbed onto the couch to let his firefighter give Jake a hug.

"Thanks, I feel much better." Jake tugged the boy into a laughing hug, then had to let go when Jake broke into a fit of coughs.

Opening her purse again, Abby took out a cough drop and handed it to Jake.

"Is your truck locked?" John asked as Terry went to go find a sleeping bag for tonight.

Bracing himself against the rain, Terry zipped up his coat, left by the back kitchen door, and made a dash for the garage.

As he went inside the building, runoff poured from the roof and drenched his neck.

He closed the door behind him, the rain beating the roof, slamming against the walls in an eerie reverberation that echoed through the garage. It took a few minutes to locate a sleeping bag in the storage area, and another minute to find a waterproof bag so it wouldn't get wet on the run back.

As he left the garage, he saw the red pickup truck he'd given AJ, parked in front of the house. Remembering John's question if the vehicle was locked, Terry changed course, braved the heavy downpour to look through the truck windows, and make sure the moving trailer was secure.

"Terry?" He looked back, wiped the rain from his eyes and saw John filling the front door. John waved a hand, urging him inside, and Terry splashed through the water, past John, and into the living room where he dripped from head to foot.

"It's locked." Terry panted, and handed John the waterproof bag. "The truck is locked up, safe and sound."

"Oh, Uncle Terry," Abby came to him, "you didn't have to drench yourself. I already told Dad the truck was locked."
"You did?" Terry smiled. "Guess I didn't stick around for the conversation. I brought a sleeping bag in from the garage. You and Jake can take my room tonight, Ricky can have the couch, and I'll sleep on the floor."

With a sigh, Abby gave her soaking wet uncle a hug-- one he accepted gratefully.

"You're home. You're really home." Terry hugged his little fishing buddy, closed his eyes and prayed she would stay here forever. This was where her family was, and this was where they could look after her, Jake, and Ricky.

"Oh, Terry, just look at you." Izzy came into the living room, saw his dripping coat and pants, and shook her head.

"He brought in a sleeping bag, Mom."

"One of these days, Terry, your kindness will be the death of you. Get into some dry clothes, and I'll start an early dinner. Girls, leave Ricky alone; he doesn't feel good, so why don't you turn on the TV and find something he'll like?"

"I got the remote first," Debbie called out, and Ruthie and Lizzie raced her to the TV.

"Share, girls," Izzy said, and went back to the kitchen.

"I need to call Dick." Jake looked about, and John handed him a cell phone.

The TV came on, and Ricky slid to the floor, still clutching his firefighter.

"Let me try." Ruthie made a grab for the remote, but Debbie held on. "Mommy, Debbie's not sharing!"

"I'll handle it, Izumi." John stepped forward, and sorted out the triplets while Jake closed his eyes.

Izumi stuck her head into the living room. "Terry, would you please change before we have another sick person on our hands?"

"We're all going to get it anyway," he sniffed, then realized he was making a puddle on the floor. "I'll take a towel to this."

"After you change," Izzy said, disappearing into the kitchen.
Whatever she was fixing, it smelled wonderful.

"Go change, Uncle Terry. I'll mop up the puddle." Abby went to get some towels, and Terry made his way past the children.

The lights flickered.

"Did you see that?" John looked to Terry as the lights shut off, plunging the room into the semi darkness of a storm-tossed early evening.

"Daddy?" For all of the girls' hopes that the electricity would go out, Lizzie sounded scared.

"Everyone wait a moment." John patted Lizzie's head. "Give it a moment, the electricity might come back."

Izzy came from the kitchen, and Abby followed with some towels.

"It's probably the storm," John said, accidentally bumping into one of the girls as he moved to the living room window. "The house across the street is dark, too, so we're not the only ones. I'd better find the flashlights."

"Dick still has electricity," Jake reported from the cell phone on the couch. Since Dick lived almost a half hour away in Watertown, that wasn't a surprise. This probably only affected their general area.

Getting cold, Terry went to his room, pushed the curtains back on his window to give a little more light. It was still a few hours before nightfall, but the storm hung heavy over the bay and Terry had trouble seeing what he pulled out of his closet.

How much of Three Mile Bay was without power?

After dressing in jeans and what was probably a blue shirt, Terry tugged on dry socks, then reached for his cell phone. The room flashed with lightning, and he glanced at the window as he waited for the number to answer.

"Come on, Maddie. Pick up."

Nothing.
Shoving the phone into his pocket, he headed back to the living room.

"Uncle Terry, do you have a flashlight by your bed for tonight?" Abby was still mopping up the puddle by the door.

"I think I might have one." Terry tried to negotiate the floor where the girls sat on either side of Ricky, all four of them sharing a small LED, multi-color flashlight. A red beam cut across the room, danced across the ceiling, grazed a corner of the window and tagged John. The kids giggled until John asked that they point it somewhere else.

At least they were having a good time.

"Dick and Sara will come tomorrow," Jake said, the light on John's cell phone turning off. "Abby, Dick said to tell you 'welcome home.'"

"That was nice of him. How much longer will the electricity be off?" Abby wondered out loud. "It's getting darker outside, and soon we're going to be sitting in pitch black."

"We'll be all right," Jake said from the couch. He coughed, and Terry heard the crinkle of a cough drop wrapper. "Dad, there's room on the couch if you wanted to sit down."

"Thanks. Kids, point that light over here a moment, would you?" The flashlight aimed at John, and Terry had to chuckle when he saw his friend, this time, painted in a blue light. John found a place on the couch to sit down, and Terry used the momentary light to find the recliner without stepping on any small hands or feet.

"Dinner is almost ready," Izzy said from the kitchen. Lightning flashed and Terry saw Izzy standing beside Abby. "There's not enough room at the kitchen table for all of us, so why don't we eat in the living room?"

The theme song for "Bassin' the Weeds with Dennis" suddenly played, and Terry tugged out his cell phone.

"That's so sweet," Abby crooned in the darkness. "Who's phone is that-- Dad's or Uncle Terry's?"

"Your uncle's," John said.

A quick glance at the screen, and Terry sighed in relief. It was Maddie.
"Hey," he said, answering the phone while everyone in the room listened, "how are you holding up? Is the electricity out for you, too?"

"Terry?"

"I'm here. Is your electricity on?"

"No."

"Are you doing all right?"

No answer. Then, in a timid voice, she asked, "Are you all right?"

"I'm sitting in the dark with my family right now, but we're good. Abby and Jake are here, so the house is full." Terry waited a beat, knowing his side of the conversation was being followed by Abby. "Have you eaten dinner yet?"

"No, I'm not hungry. Terry?"

"I'm still here."

"I'm sorry I didn't answer the phone."

"That's all right, I understand. Is your front door locked?"

"I think so."

"Get up, and go make sure it's locked. I don't know when the power will come back on, and I want to know you're safe." Terry covered the phone. "John, the power's out at the apartment complex. Sounds like the whole area is without power."

"Wow." John sighed. "Probably has to do with all this lightning."

"Is the door locked?" Terry spoke into the phone.

"Yes." Her breath sounded heavy, and Terry heard her wince.

"Did you use the pain gel?"

"No."
"Why haven't you?" Terry paused to calm himself. Knowing Maddie the way he did, he shouldn't have been surprised. "Okay, here's what I want you to do..."

"Who's he talking to?" Abby asked.

"Find the pain gel, and put it on--"

"I can't. It's too dark."

"Where did you last see it?"

"On the floor. In the grocery bag."

"It's still on the floor?"

"Dad, who's Uncle Terry talking to?"

"A friend."

"Get down on your hands and knees if you have to, but feel around for the bag." Terry heard a slight cry of pain and gripped the phone. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. I found the bag."

"Take off the cap, and put some on your hip. I've already read the directions, it should be good for arthritis."

"Arthritis?" Abby laughed. "Now he's helping old people?"

"Are you putting on the pain gel?" Terry waited, trying not to say more than he had to in front of his audience.

"The gel's on," a tired voice finally answered. "It kind of stings."

"That's because it's working. Good. Now I want you to go find something to eat. Raid the pantry, find something you can take back to the couch. Are you still listening?"

"It's hard not to," Jake laughed with a cough.
"And take your acetaminophen." Terry pressed the phone to his ear as another rumble of thunder sounded in the distance. "Are you at the pantry yet?"

"Almost."

"Did you turn up the thermostat?"

"No."

"Maddie--" Terry blew out a breath. "Are you freezing? You are, aren't you. Forget the pantry-- go turn up the thermostat."

"Her name is Maddie?"

"Madison," John said.

"Have you turned up the thermostat? Use the display from your cell phone as a light."

"Okay, it's up."

"Now go back to the pantry. Find a bag of chips, a box of granola bars-- something you can take back to your couch and won't go bad if you leave it there until morning."

"There's a bowl of corn chips in the living room."

"There is? Then why haven't you been eating?" Terry groaned at her silence. "Get the bowl of chips, go to your room, climb under the comforter and get warm. Then eat. Keep the cell phone with you, and I'll call again in an hour. How much charge do you have left? what does the display on the phone say?"

"Eighty-two percent."

"That's good. I'm hanging up now, but I'll call in an hour and you had better be eating."

"I will, Terry."

"Okay. Bye." Terry punched off, and the screen on his phone went dark, as did his part of the room.

"Who's Madison?" Abby asked. "You talk to her like she's a helpless baby."
Before anyone answered, Izzy gave the call to dinner and everyone started to get up and make their way to the kitchen. A hurricane lamp glowed on the stove, casting a flickering, cozy light on the walls and ceiling. Abby’s question was repeated, but John shook his head and Abby let it drop. For now.

Ricky coughed, and so did Jake, and Abby went to get their food. The triplets took turns aiming their flashlight, clicking the button that changed the beam from white, to blue, to red, and then back to white.

"Bassin' the Weeds with Dennis" started again, and Terry hurried from the kitchen.

Abby groaned. "Tell her you have to eat dinner."

Taking his phone into the hall, Terry answered the caller.

"Terry?" Maddie’s voice trembled. "It’s getting darker. Except for when the phone’s on, it’s dark in here."

"Do you want me to call Lauren? She could bring over a flashlight."

"No, I want you."

"Do you want me to come?"

"No," Maddie sniffed. "The rain’s coming down too hard, and you could get hurt."

But she was scared-- Terry could hear it in her voice.

An approaching cough came behind Terry, and he moved aside for Jake.

"I just have to use the bathroom," Jake said, and lingered as Terry kept talking into the phone.

"Hold on until morning. The sun will come up, and even if it’s raining, you won’t be sitting in the dark."

"I wish I was normal, Terry. I wouldn’t be so scared. And I wish I could kiss you."

"I know." Terry steadied himself against the hallway wall. "I’m going to give you a verse, a prayer to ask God for help."
"I can't write it down."

"That's okay, you don't have to. O Lord, 'cause me to hear Thy lovingkindness in the morning; for in Thee do I trust..." Terry paused, and Maddie repeated the words after him. "'Cause me to know the way wherein I should walk; for I lift up my soul unto Thee."

"When will it be morning?"

"Not for a while, but when you need me, pick up the phone and I'll repeat the verse."

"I like you, Terry."

"I know." He blew out a sigh, leaned his head against the wall and noticed Jake. "Keep hanging on, Maddie. You're not alone."

"Do you know what I like about you?" Maddie's voice turned softly wistful. "You're really, really nice. Not just on the outside, Terry, but you're nice on the inside. When you smile, I know God hasn't forgotten me."

"I'm smiling." Terry held the cell phone close. "Hold on to that verse and expect to hear God's lovingkindness in the morning."

"I will." Terry heard a sniff, and she hung up.

Tapping the "End Call" button on the screen, Terry put his phone on standby.

"Is your friend okay?" Jake asked.

"She's--" Terry stopped to choose his words carefully. "The power's out and she's scared, but she'll be fine."

In the darkness, Jake lingered in the hall with Terry, even though he had to go use the bathroom.

"How have you been?" Jake asked.

The question held a lot of concern, more so when Terry remembered his breakdown had only been a little over six months ago. It was too soon for people to easily forget.
Putting the cell phone back into his pocket, Terry met the question as honestly as he could. "I'm hanging in there."

"Good." A strong hand squeezed Terry's shoulder. "Abby and I have been praying for you."

"Thanks." Growing self-conscious, Terry edged away. "I appreciate that, I really do."

"You can count on those prayers, Uncle Terry."

Terry smiled, remembering how Jake used to only call him by his first name. Now, Jake felt comfortable calling him "uncle," the same honorary title given him by Abby and the triplets. And even Ricky, when the boy forgot his shyness. Terry was no one's uncle, and yet he had four nieces and two nephews, all of whom loved him very much.

A bright blue beam of light bounced on the walls of the hallway, followed by the giggles of one of the triplets and Ricky's coughs. The family was settling down in the living room for dinner, and Terry went to go join them while Jake went to use the bathroom.

Outside, the rain poured, and the thunder kept following in the wake of the lightning. Inside the Johanneses' house, all crowded together in the dark living room with only an upturned flashlight, and the triplets' LED toy to give them light, Terry soaked in the comfort of his family, the knowledge that he was safe and wanted.

It was a feeling Terry felt confident that Jake shared, but it was a feeling of security that Maddie had never known. It reminded Terry of how blessed he was to be a part of this family.

He prayed Maddie didn't feel alone tonight, for she wasn't. She was with him, in his thoughts and prayers, just a phone call away, a gentle reminder of God's promise to never forsake her.

Maddie, if only you could have a family like this, people who bind themselves not just by blood, but by friendship, and by love. John was the beginning of that for me. If only I could be that to you, it would be a debt most gratefully paid.

Maddie. Hang in there.

"Cause me to hear Thy lovingkindness in the morning; for in Thee do I trust: cause me to know the way wherein I should walk; for I lift up my soul unto Thee... Teach me to do Thy will; for Thou art my God: Thy spirit is good... Quicken me, O LORD, for Thy name's sake: for Thy righteousness' sake bring my soul out of trouble."
~ Psalm 143:8, 10, 11 ~
Chapter Twenty
The Sweetheart

"The day is Thine, the night also is Thine: Thou [God] hast prepared the light and the sun."
~ Psalm 74:16 ~

In the darkness, she crunched a tortilla chip and didn't bother to catch the crumbs that fell into her shirt. Clutching the large bowl, she felt for another chip, bit into the salty crispness as white flashed behind the window blinds. Angry noise boomed in her ears, and she forced herself to keep eating. The chips made her thirsty, but she kept going, kept crunching as loud as she could to keep the thunder from filling her ears.

The angel on the dresser shone in a brilliant flash of lightning, and Madison prayed the electricity would come back.

The thunder rolled and pounded, then all she could hear was rain. It beat against her window with a rage that pushed her deeper into the comforter. One tortilla chip after another crunched in the darkness, until all she had left were crumbs and greasy fingers covered in salt.

The only thing worse than lightning, was no lightning at all. She lay in blackness, tucked beneath the warm comforter Terry had bought her. Despite the electricity, things had improved. The apartment no longer felt icy, her tummy didn't rumble with the thunder, and her hip didn't feel like bursting into flame. Of course, her bladder was full, and after all that salt, she craved water in the worst possible way; other than that, this was almost endurable. She could imagine herself like this for the rest of the night, holding out until morning, just the way she was right now.

Outside the safety of her blanket was the darkness. She couldn't see the hand in front of her face, let alone the door that would lead her to the bathroom.

She could hold it. She would hold it until morning.

Was it an hour yet? Terry had said he would call in an hour.

She reached for her cell phone, and felt only blanket.

Don't panic. It was here. Somewhere.
Her hand ran across the top of the comforter, then she felt below it, then the crevices of the sheet where it tucked into the cushions.

"Terry, where are you?"

She searched under her pillows, then hung off the side of the couch to run a hand over the carpet.

Okay, now it was time to panic.

She was alone, in the dark, and without a way to get to Terry. Her angel was out of reach, but her devil was not. In the dark, the Dragon came close, like he might touch her at any moment and remind her why it hurt to be alive.

The phone. She had to find that phone. Blind desperation bubbled into her soul. Layer by layer, she pulled apart her couch, ripping off blankets, thrusting her hands into the crevices of the sheet-covered cushions, hands feeling about for the slim hard object that meant she wasn't alone. Her lifeline to hope. Frenzy took hold as her hands found nothing.

She tore off pillowcases, the sheet covering the couch, then threw aside the cushions. She found the hard frame, the rough material of the underside of the couch, but no phone. Blood pounded in her ears, mixing with fear until her stomach rolled and pitched and she wanted to vomit.

It took so much energy to fight off insanity. She was crazy anyway, so how could it matter if she plunged even further? Why did she resist?

With a cry, she sank into the tangled heap on the floor. Oddly angled cushions jutted at her, collapsed under her weight, and partly buried her in a grave of cushioned madness. They padded the rooms of mad people, didn't they? The thought pushed at her hope while she weakly fought to untangle her legs from the blankets. She couldn't even see. Her senses overloaded, she stopped fighting and numbed herself to the world. Rain beat the windowpane with a vengeance, beating her back until she withdrew bit by bit. Until it didn't matter.

Until she didn't matter.

Something sounded nearby, muffled and distant but strangely familiar.

The phone. It was ringing.
Numbly, she wondered if it mattered whether or not Terry remembered her. Then cried in pain as she dug into the blankets with new hope. She didn't matter, but Terry did. Oh, he did.

"I'm coming! Don't stop, please don't stop!"

Digging between the cushions on the floor, her fingers found something hard. It was trapped beneath the thick comforter, and she tugged, searched for the edge of the blanket but struggled to find it in the dark.

The ringing stopped.

She froze.

Please, God, don't let me lose the phone again.

Yanking on the blanket did nothing, and she realized it was being held down by something heavy. Probably her. She fought to her feet, yanked and moved about until she had a hand under the blanket. The phone started to ring again, and a moment later, she had it in her hand and was flipping it open.

"Terry? Is that you?"

"It's me," came his wonderful, wonderful voice. "Why didn't you answer? I've been trying to reach you for the last few minutes. Are you all right?"

Hearing the labored sound of her own breathing, she gave herself a moment before answering.

"I'm... here."

"That's not what I asked, Maddie."

"What time is it?"

"It's an hour later than the last time I called, and you aren't answering my question. Are you all right?"

"I'm... I'm all right." She sat down in the mixed-up tumble that had been her bed. The patch of light from the phone's display calmed her, as did the sound of his voice. "I'm so thirsty, Terry. And I have to use the bathroom."
"Then why haven't you?"

"It's too dark..." Her voice trembled. "Will you stay with me if I use the bathroom?"

"I guess, if it's necessary." Terry paused. "Do whatever you have to, Maddie, but get through the night. I'd come over if I could, but-- hold on. Yeah? Thanks, but I'll be fine on the floor. It's no trouble. The little guy isn't feeling well, so he should have the couch."

Something sounded in the background-- a woman's voice-- though Madison couldn't make out what was being said.

"I'll turn in soon, don't worry. And don't worry about Ricky, I'll take care of him." A moment later, Terry came back on. "Maddie, are you still there?"

"Yes." Her voice sounded shaky. "I'm still here."

"Where was I? oh, the bathroom. Go on, I'll stay on the line until you come back."

Gripping the cell phone, Madison crawled from the twisted covers and heaped up couch cushions. She reached in front of her, found a wall and felt about for the door.

"You haven't set down the phone, have you? I can hear you breathing."

"It's so dark, Terry."

"Okay, take the phone with you, just get to the bathroom. Do you want more juice?"

"Yes, please."

"Sorry, I wasn't talking to you-- I meant Ricky. Let me know when you get thirsty again, okay?"

"Thirsty." Madison wet her lips, all those salty chips making her crave something to drink. Juice sounded wonderful.

Finding the door to her room, Madison wobbled to her feet, kept a hand out in front of her as she made her way across the tiny hall to the bathroom on the other side.

"Daddy and Mommy are in my room-- see, just over there, down the hall." Terry sounded so comforting, Madison wished he were talking to her. "Are you in the bathroom yet? Maddie? Are you doing okay?"
"My hip hurts."

"The pain gel isn't helping?"

Madison tried hard not to whimper. "Not very much." She set down the cell phone, and in the darkness, used the toilet. She flushed, went to the sink and washed her hands, then drank at least a gallon of water from the tap before coming back to her phone. "Terry?"

"Hold on a moment... Is your throat hurting? Do you want something to make it feel better? Okay, Maddie." Terry sounded on the move. "Have you used the bathroom yet? Go into the kitchen, and use the light from your phone to find the acetaminophen. You haven't taken any, have you? Izzy, where are the throat lozenges?"

Clinging to her cell phone, Madison listened as she made her way to the kitchen. The apartment didn't seem so scary, or so very dark, while listening to Terry.

She found the painkiller and swallowed two pills with more water. She was beginning to feel like a distended water balloon, she'd drank so much.

"Hold on," Terry's voice came through the cell phone. "I'll call again in a few minutes." When the dial tone sounded in Madison's ear, she sank to the kitchen linoleum to wait for his call.

* * * *

"Are you sure about this, Uncle Terry?" Abby spread the blankets out on the living room couch. "I could put Ricky in our room."

"And have them both keep you awake while they cough?" Terry shook his head. "Ricky and I can manage here."

"So." Abby shook out another blanket. "Who's Madison?"

"A friend."

The response got a raised eyebrow from Abby. "Would this be a friend from the hotline?"

"No. Not the hotline." Terry unrolled his sleeping bag beside the couch.

"Does she have a history?"
"History?" Terry asked.

"Come on, Uncle Terry, is this another of your hurting souls, another crusade to save someone from their tragic past?"

"I hate it when you refer to it that way." Terry dropped a pillow at the head of the sleeping bag. "I'm not Don Quixote fighting another windmill. These are people, Abby. People trying to get on with their lives as best they can."

"Then she has a history?"

"You could say that." Terry moved aside as Abby collected the cough drop wrappers from around the couch. "She's had a hard time, and I'm helping her out."

"How hard a time?"

"Hard enough." Terry glanced at the cell phone he'd left by the upturned flashlight on the end table.

"I hope you aren't letting this sob story run your life." Abby tossed the wrappers into the wastebasket. "I don't care how hard a life she's had, you don't owe everyone who comes to you for a handout."

"She didn't come to me for that." Terry paused as thunder rolled over their heads.

"Mommy?" Ricky came running from the hallway and Abby scooped him into her arms.

"It's just the thunder, Sweetheart."

Ricky looked up at the ceiling, as though what caused the noise was just on the other side of the roof.

Jake coughed his way into the living room. "No one's hurt, Ricky. It's only a storm, and it'll go away."

"When?" Ricky asked.

"I don't exactly know," Jake went to Abby and gave the boy a smile, "but it will go away. When God is done with the rain, it will go."
A blue light skimmed the ceiling, diverting Ricky's attention as one of the triplets came into the room in her PJs.

"Does Ricky want to sleep with the flashlight?" Lizzie asked.

"Do you?" Abby asked the boy in her arms.

Ricky nodded, and Lizzie handed the LED flashlight to Jake.

"What do you say?" Jake asked, as he gave it to Ricky.

"Thank you."

"They're not quite four months older than you, but the little aunts are looking after this sweet boy." Abby smiled as she hugged Ricky, then set him down on the couch. "Thanks, Lizzie."

"Are you really staying?" Lizzie asked.

"I really am."

"Are we going home to San Diego?" Ricky asked.

"Can we go fishing tomorrow?" Ruthie asked, coming into the room with the third triplet.

"What if the lights won't come back tomorrow?" Debbie asked. "What if we have to sleep in the dark forever?"

"Forever?" Lizzie asked, and Terry heard the eyes-wide-as-saucers astonishment in her voice. More thunder pummeled the air, and Lizzie moved close to Jake.

"We're safe." Jake patted Lizzie's shoulder as brilliance flashed in the curtained window.

Thunder followed, and Debbie and Ruthie crowded around Terry.

"Hey, hey, what's this?" Terry chuckled. "What happened to that prayer I heard today, the one about asking God to shut off the power? I thought you told Him you wouldn't mind?"

Ruthie sighed.
Terry picked her up as John came into the room with another flashlight.

"I turned the heat higher, but everyone stay warm tonight and cover up."

"Do you think the electricity will be back, tomorrow?" Abby asked.

"I don't know, Sweetheart, but I'm sure there's people working on it right now. They're probably in all this rain. Just wait it out and be glad you don't work for the electric company, tonight."

A tired, raspy cough came from Jake.

"You'd better lay down," John said, and Jake nodded.

"Are the girls wearing socks?" Izzy came into the room in her robe and slippers. "No bare feet, girls."

"I'm in socks," Debbie said.

Ricky whimpered. "I want to go home."

"This is home." Jake lifted the boy from Abby. "We're going to live here, remember?"

"Here?" Ricky asked.

"No, not here. In the house next to this one. Your mommy and I used to live there before you were born."

Ricky sneezed, leaned his head against Jake's shoulder and looked like he wanted to go to sleep.

"Can we have hot cocoa, Mommy?" Lizzie asked.

"Yes, can we?" the other two girls chimed in.

"It's bedtime, maybe tomorrow."

Terry set Ruthie down, and the girls stayed close as John bowed his head to pray.

They were together again, and John thanked God for getting Abby and Jake, and Ricky home safely. Then with coughs and good nights, the family started off to their bedrooms as rain continued to pour into Three Mile Bay.
While Abby tucked Ricky into bed on the couch, Terry picked up his cell phone and moved to the far side of the room. He couldn't wait any longer.

"Uncle Terry?" Abby gave him a look as she tucked the LED flashlight, and the toy firefighter, into bed beside Ricky. "You're calling your needy person, aren't you? Put your foot down. Be more assertive and say 'no.' Don't let them run your life."

Hitting Maddie's number, Terry took the phone into the kitchen. If Maddie hadn't been using the bathroom because of the dark, what else wasn't she doing? He checked the clock. It had been forty minutes since his last call.

"Terry, oh, thank you!" The relief in Maddie's voice sounded all too real. "I was afraid you'd forgotten. You said you'd call in a few minutes."

"I did? Sorry about that. We've got a full house right now, and some of the family are coming down with a cold. With the lights out, things are upside down. Are you in bed? Are you staying warm?"

"I'm not in bed."

"Oh? On the living room couch, then?"

"Not exactly."

He pressed the phone to his ear. "Where, exactly, are you?"

"On the kitchen floor."

"For pity's sake, why are you there?"

Someone came into the kitchen behind Terry, and he turned to find Abby.

"Maddie, why are you on the floor?"

"It's so dark, I don't want to move."

"But you'll move as long as I'm on the phone? Okay, get up, march back to your room."

Abby folded her arms, slumped against the counter and listened.
"Did you take your acetaminophen?"

"Yes. Two of them."

"Good." Terry paced, listened to the rain and the sound of Maddie's labored breathing. She was still in pain. Swiping a hand through his hair, he paused by the kitchen table. "Are you there yet?"

"Yes."

"Get into bed, cover up and stay warm. Are you sure you don't want me to call Lauren? She could run a flashlight over, and you wouldn't be so trapped."

"Uncle Terry."

Terry turned his back to Abby.

"Maddie, are you still there?"

"Yes. I can't get into bed."

"Why not?" He held perfectly still to be sure he heard every word.

"I lost the cell phone, and had to take the couch apart."

"You what? In the dark?" Terry reminded himself to breathe. "Maddie, I'm calling Lauren. You can't stay there. I'll ask her to let you sleep on her couch tonight."

"No, please not Lauren. I'll be all right, really, I will."

"Then here's what I want you to do: Get your comforter, a pillow if you can find it, and take it to the living room couch. Sleep there. Just promise me you won't sleep on the floor."

"Okay."

"Maddie, promise me."

"I promise."
'Find your blanket.' Terry glanced at Abby, and by the light of the flashlight on the table, saw Abby roll her eyes. Terry winced. Maddie was trying, she really was. "Do you have the blanket?"

No answer, then a shaky, "yes."

"Go into the living room. I'll stay with you."

"Thank you, Terry. Thank you."

Abby mouthed the words, "Hang up."

Terry shook his head, moved back into the darker living room and saw Ricky playing light games on the ceiling with his flashlight. At least someone was having a good time.

"I'm on the couch. When are the lights coming back?" Maddie sounded tired, and if Terry wasn't mistaken, there were tears in her voice, as well. "You have to hang up soon, don't you? Terry--"

"Maddie, don't panic. I forbid it. Do you hear me?"

Abby moved around Terry, went to check on Ricky and laughed when the boy painted her in a blue light.

"How much battery do you have left on your phone?"

"Fifty percent."

"That's good." He tried to keep calm even though he wanted to jump in his car and go to her. "You'll be fine. Just stay on the phone with me, and take a deep breath. What was that prayer I gave you-- 'Cause me to hear Thy lovingkindness in the morning'? Hang on to that. You're waiting for God's lovingkindness, all you have to do is hang on until morning."

"I'm hanging."

"Just listen to that rain." Terry forced an easy, conversational tone. "We're going to have a sopping wet Sunday, tomorrow, especially if the rain doesn't stop." He saw John and Izzy leave the girls' bedroom, saw the light on the carpet and knew the triplets had a flashlight to keep them company. "I've given my room to AJ, and Ricky-- their little boy-- has the living room couch. That means I'll be in a sleeping bag on the floor tonight."

"You said not to sleep on the floor."
"No, I said I didn't want you sleeping on the floor. There's a difference."

"Good night, Uncle Terry." Abby came forward, kissed his cheek, shot a look at his cell phone but said nothing.

"Good night, Abby."

Abby gave a pained smile, then waved to Ricky as the boy trained his light on her before twirling the beam on the ceiling.

John passed through the living room, checked the front door, the kitchen door, turned off the upturned flashlights they weren't using, then paused at the couch to give Ricky a good night hug.

"Bye, Grandpa." Ricky was settling in and feeling more at ease, and John grinned.

When John turned to Terry, and saw the cell phone in Terry's hand, the grin faded.

"Madison?" John asked, and Terry nodded. "How's she doing?"

"Terry, the phone says forty-five percent now."

"Okay, Maddie. Let's hang up for a while and try to get some sleep. Are you on the couch? Do you have a blanket?"

"Yes, I'm warm."

"Good. I'm hanging up, but I want you to keep that cell phone right next to you. Don't tear apart another couch-- that's the last one you've got. I'll keep this phone next to my pillow, and if you get scared, I want you to call me."

"Thank you, Terry."

"Please, stop thanking me." Terry pushed out a sigh, saw John move away with a good night wave, and Terry waved back. "Are you sure you don't want me to send Lauren over with a flashlight?"

"I'm sure. I'll be okay, Terry, honest I will."
"Okay then." Terry paused, listened a moment to the torrential downpour outside. "Get some sleep, but if you need me, don't be afraid to call. Good night, Maddie. God bless you."

"Good night, Terry."

He hung up, prayed she would be all right, then climbed into his sleeping bag. For some reason, the carpet felt harder than he thought it would.

"Uh-oh," Ricky called from the couch. "I have to go potty."

With a laugh, Terry got up to take his nephew to the bathroom.

* * * *

Tucking the cell phone into her jean's pocket, Madison lay on the couch, cozied under the warm comforter and listened to the rain. Poor Terry. He was sleeping on the floor so someone else could be comfortable. Wasn't he just the most wonderful person in the world?

The burn in her hip had eased with the acetaminophen, and all snuggled up in this blanket, where Terry had told her to be, she felt safe, almost to the point of being happy. Her hand touched the phone in her pocket, the reminder that she wasn't alone on this earth, not even in the dark all by herself. God had given her Terry, and she wasn't alone.

Yawning, she cuddled under the comforter and went to sleep.

* * * *

Though Madison woke to a room she could actually see, things were still dark, as if the sun had yet to make up its mind. It was morning, wasn't it? She picked up the TV remote, tried it and the set came to life. What had Terry said? Hold out until morning, and she would hear God's lovingkindness?

The morning news fell into the category of convenience, not lovingkindness, but maybe she was wrong. Maybe she had just been hoping for something more.

She clicked off the set and looked about the room. How did normal people go about life? Did they simply exist, and not even think about it, or did it take effort to put one foot in front of the other? To untangle yourself and try to smooth out the edges that were unraveling? Or did normal people never unravel?
How she wished she could exist, to just be, and not to have to think so hard about what came next. It took effort to push off that couch, to stand there and fight back the thoughts that wanted to jumble and confuse her.

It had been almost a week since she’d last cut herself, and when she raised her shirt, she saw the wounds were nearly healed. The scars would probably stay, but at least it was almost over. Her body was healing, and she would never, ever, cut again. She was done with being crazy.

She would become normal, or die trying.

Weakness pulled her back to the couch, and it was then she noticed the absence of something.

The rain. It had let up.

Was this the lovingkindness that Terry had told her to wait for?

All this wondering made her feel lost.

Normal people knew what to do, for they were born knowing. They acted like everyone else, because they were everyone else. They didn’t have to think. They just were.

Curling onto her side, she closed her eyes and went to sleep.

* * * *

After a night of coughing, Ricky’s throat was so sore he asked for cold juice the next morning. A few minutes after Terry filled the sippy cup, Abby came from the bedroom in Izzy’s PJs.

"The electricity’s back on," Terry said, as Abby made a beeline for Ricky.

"Great, isn’t it? How’s my baby boy?" Abby kissed Ricky’s forehead while the little guy drank from his cup.

"His throat’s worse, so I gave him more juice." Terry rolled up the sleeping bag. "His temperature’s a hundred and one now."

"Still a fever," Abby sighed, "but at least it’s coming down."

Eyes half open, Ricky turned onto his side, still grasping the sippy cup. "Ruthie said we could go fishing."
Abby smiled. "I'm afraid if anyone fishes today, it's not going to be us. Do you need your training pants changed?"

Ricky shook his head.

"I hate to say this, Uncle Terry, but I'm feeling warm."

"Oh?" Terry set aside his bedding, went to the kitchen to get the digital thermometer. He came back, and ran the scanner over her forehead. "A hundred and one."

"Same as me," Ricky grinned.

"You'd better get some rest today."

"But we have to move in." Abby groaned, and Terry glimpsed the teenage girl who would track mud into a clean house. "We can't stay here another night."

"Why not?" John asked, coming into the room in his flannel PJs. "Jake is in there coughing, and he doesn't look ready to go anywhere."

"He's awake?" Abby headed for the bedroom with the thermometer, and Terry followed. She left the door open, and Terry looked inside.

Jake lay on the bed, face up, and coughing so hard his face flushed.

Abby went to him, and Jake gave a faint smile.

"Sorry I kept you up, Abby."

"Don't worry about me, I had enough sleep." She touched a hand to his forehead. "How do you feel?"

"Like I have the flu, and not just a cold. Abby, I'm wiped out."

"Just rest."

"How's Ricky?"
"His temperature is down," Abby ran the thermometer across Jake's forehead, "which is more than I can say for you. Still a hundred and two."

Izzy joined Terry in the doorway.

"Mom--"

"I heard. Give him more fever reducer, and keep an eye on his temperature. How's he feeling?"

"Like he has the flu."

"Well then," Izzy shook her head. "If it's the flu, this won't be going away anytime soon. Make sure he has plenty of fluids. John?" Izzy turned to find him coming up the hall. "No one is going to church today. We won't do the congregation a favor by spreading the flu."

Abby coughed, and John leaned to look into the bedroom.

"I hate to admit it," Abby sighed, "but I have a hundred and one fever."

Jake pushed himself upright, coughed and refused the blanket Abby tried to cover him with. "Have you taken anything? Shouldn't you be resting?"

"It's not very high. Lay back down, Jake. Come on, lay down. Are you thirsty? Do you want some juice?"

"I gave you my flu." Jake groaned, flopped back on the bed and shut his eyes. "You were coughing yesterday, and now this. I'm sorry, Abby."

"Cut it out, Jake, or I'll force-feed you jello and orange juice, until it comes out your ears."

Jake laughed, doubled over onto his side with wracking coughs while Abby stroked his back.

"Just for the record, Baby," she hushed her voice, "you didn't give me anything but a full heart and a sweet little boy. The flu doesn't count."

Jake reached for her hand, and she grasped it in her own.

"Just rest," she whispered.

Three little girls ran past them, on their way to the living room.
"I'm making breakfast for anyone who feels up to eating," Izzy said, as John stepped away for a second to see what the kids were up to. "I know the old adage, feed a cold, starve a fever, but if you feel like eating, Jake, then it's okay. Would you like some pancakes?"

"No, thanks." Jake pulled Abby by the hand until she lay cuddled behind him. "I wouldn't mind some orange juice, though."

"Coming right up." Izzy moved past Terry and John. "Abby, Jake's right-- I want you to take it easy and get plenty of rest today."

Abby groaned, but Jake stroked the arm cuddled around him.

Seeing Abby and Jake together made a warm feeling come over Terry. For some reason, he thought of Maddie. He needed to check her, now that morning had come and the storm had eased. He could still hear a light rain, but no heavy downpour like the day before.

"Since we're not going to church," John said before leaving, "we'll have a Bible study later on. That is, if you two are feeling up to it."

"Thanks Dad." Jake closed his eyes, stroked Abby's arm in a scene of pure contentment. "We'll come."

The men smiled at each other, and John left the young couple while Terry went to his closet to get clothes for that day.

Busy thoughts swam through Terry as he headed into his bathroom to get changed. No church this morning, meant Maddie would be alone in her apartment all day. She'd already had a difficult night-- at least, from the part of the night he had spent with her on the phone-- and he feared the prospect of her facing the day by herself.

Dressing in slacks, a long sleeved button down shirt and a pullover sweater, Terry grabbed his coat and jeep keys and left AJ snuggling on the bed.

He pushed into the living room, found the kids had loaded one of their Bible story DVDs. Ricky lay on the couch still drinking from his sippy cup, while the triplets sat on the floor watching Daniel escape from the lion's den unharmed. Debbie looked up as Terry moved past them.

"Hey there, Munchkin." Terry was rewarded with a smile before ducking into the kitchen.
"Where are you headed?" John asked from the kitchen table. "Let me guess-- Madison?"

"I have to at least check on her," Terry said, zipping his coat. "I'll eat breakfast at her place, so don't make me any pancakes."

"Before you run out the door," Izzy said, moving to the stove, "why don't you bring Madison here? A hot breakfast might do her some good, and if I know you, you'll probably wind up staying there all morning because you hate to leave her by herself."

"Bring her to the Bible-study," John nodded. "If she doesn't mind a messy, crowded house, she's welcome to come. Of course, with flu in the family, she'll be taking a risk."

"That can't be helped. I have to see her and make sure she's all right, the flu or not."

"Then bring her over."

Terry hesitated. He wanted to bring her, but...

"It has to happen sooner or later." Izzy gave Terry a knowing look before pouring more batter onto the skillet. "You can't keep Madison from Abby for very long, not unless you intend to see less of Madison."

"Maddie needs me too much," Terry shook his head. "I'm all she has."

John glanced at Izzy, then leaned back in his chair. "She's welcome, if you're willing to bring her over."

"Thanks, I appreciate it-- I really do."

John raised his brows. "But?"

"But I can't. Not with Abby in the house."

"This is your home, too. If you want Maddie here, then bring her over. I'd rather have you here all day, than at Maddie's place."

"I have to check her."
"I know." John took a sip from his mug. "Be careful, though. Don't become too involved you can't see the forest for the trees."

It was a small warning, not given lightly. Terry could see it in John's face, those gray eyes that met his and then smiled.

"You're a good guy, Terry. And a good friend. I hope she appreciates that."

"She hasn't been taking advantage of me, if that's what you mean." Terry motioned to John. "She's not like that at all. She's really very sweet."

John nodded, looked down at his mug. "Okay."

That one word stilled the back and forth, though Terry could still feel the strain between them in the silence that followed.

"Should I make more pancakes?" Izzy asked. "I can heat them in the microwave when you come back. It'll be no trouble."

Terry looked to John, and John looked to his mug. "Do what you think is best."

"Thanks, Izzy, that sounds good."

Terry flicked another glance at John, and left the kitchen. He had to check Maddie.

* * * *

The doorbell sounded, forcing Madison off the living room couch. The familiar ache in her hip made the trip painful, but normal people answered the door if they were home. And she was going to be normal.

She opened the door... and squeaked with joy.

He took two quick steps back.

"Get a hold of yourself, and calm down. If you don't, I'll stay on the doorstep."

"I'm calm." She gulped in air, backed away and waited for Terry to come inside.
"You've been sleeping in your clothes again." He stepped into the apartment, then shut the door. "Do you have something against pajamas?"

She shook her head. "Mine smell."

"That's probably because you've been living in them." He took off his coat, set it, and his jeep keys on the couch beside her blanket. "Did you get any sleep? Are you all right?"

"Yes, I slept."

"You probably noticed the electricity's back on."

She smiled.

"I suppose I should take you to the community laundry, and show you how the machines work." Terry started to fold her blanket. "Since it's Sunday, I'd rather not do it today."

"Thank you, Terry."

"For what?"

"For coming. I didn't think you would."

"Yeah, well..." He set aside her blanket, shoved his hands into his pockets.

"You said God would show His lovingkindness in the morning, and you were right. Oh, Terry, you were right."

"Okay," he said slowly. "How so?"

She hugged herself and smiled. "You came."

"I wish you'd cut it out." Terry rubbed the back of his head. "I'm not special, Maddie. I'm just me."

"Oh, no, don't say that." She hugged herself tighter, backed away from him and began to tremble. She wanted to kiss him, but Terry had been ugly, he'd had sex before, and she moved behind the armchair until she felt safe. "You're wonderful, Terry. You're so special." Her elbow knocked the window blinds, and they swung with a clatter.
He squeezed his eyes shut. "If I'm so wonderful, why are you hiding from me?"

Gulping, she couldn't form an answer, but oh, how she wanted to kiss him.

With a sigh, he disappeared into the tiny hall.

"Oh, Maddie, you poor kid." He came back holding a couch cushion. "It's a mess in there. Do you need help cleaning up?"

She stared at the cushion, wishing very hard she could get hold of the kitchen knife.

"You're not feeling well, are you?" Terry sighed. "Okay, I know when I'm beat. Go get changed." He tossed aside the cushion, moved out of the way so she could get past him safely. "I can't leave you here by yourself-- you'd crawl so far into your shell, I'd have a hard time getting you out again." He picked up his coat, pocketed his keys. "I'd stay, but... you still want to be kissed, don't you? I can't stay."

"Don't leave. Please, don't."

He gestured to her room. "Put on some clean clothes. You have another pair of jeans, don't you? Well, put them on, brush your hair, and get your new coat."

She hid behind the armchair and blinked.

"Do you want an engraved invitation? You're coming with me."

"Oh, Terry..."

"Don't oh-Terry me. Just get changed."

She stumbled past him, moved as fast as she could to her room to find those jeans.

"And get your Bible," he called. "What am I saying? That's my Bible, you still have my old one."

Dressed in a clean pair of jeans and a T-shirt, she grabbed his Bible, found her coat and shoes, and made her way to the living room.

"Are you sure you've had sex before, Terry? Are you sure you're not safe?"
"Man." He glanced around, as though afraid someone had overheard. "I never know what's going
to come out of your mouth next. Would you be more careful? What if someone had heard you?"

"Terry?"

"I heard you the first time, Maddie." His hands jammed into the pockets of his slacks. "I've had
sex, but I wish you wouldn't talk about it so freely. You always unnerve me. I never know
whether to hide from you, or hug you."

"Please, hug me."

"No." He backed away. "Next thing, you'll want to kiss."

"Kissing isn't so bad. Not if that's all we do, and I couldn't bear to do anything else. I'd die if I had
to have sex again."

"Then let's not risk death, and keep our lips to ourselves." He moved out of the way so she could
reach the front door. "Come on, Izzy's making breakfast."

The reference to his family froze Madison in her tracks.

"What now?" Terry opened the door when she didn't. "Come on, we don't have all morning."

"Are they still there?" Madison backed away from the door. "I think I'll stay home."

"Maddie. Come." He groaned. "Now I sound like I'm talking to a disobedient puppy."

"Terry, please, couldn't you stay here? We could watch TV."

"Thanks, but we've already tried that. Come on, Maddie." He held open the door. "I'm not
leaving you here alone."

Biting her lip, she obeyed.

The shock of cold air surprised her, and she realized just how warm and cozy her apartment had
been.

Without a word, Terry locked her door, opened the passenger door of his jeep and watched her
climb inside.
"Why are you so nervous about meeting AJ?" he asked.

She looked up at him. "Aren't you?"

He frowned, shut the door and rounded the hood.

"They're just family," he said, getting behind the wheel. "It's no big deal."

She wanted to ask, "Then why does it feel like a big deal?" but stopped short. She'd already disturbed him enough that morning, and didn't want to chance making him worse.

* * * *

It was a big deal. Terry didn't want to admit it to himself, but what Abby and Jake thought of Maddie, the opinion they would form when they met her, was a very big deal. Mostly because she was a part of Terry's life, and secondly, because he liked her and wanted them to like her as well.

Considering his track record, that might be too much to ask, but Terry was going to ask it anyway. He had little choice.

She didn't say a word on the way home, and when he came to a stop in front of the house, she just sat there, looking straight ahead through the windshield at the nearby trees.

"Do me a favor, would you?" Terry pulled the keys from the ignition. "Don't tell them you like me, or that I'm not safe, or that you want to kiss me. I'd prefer you never said those things at all, but especially-- especially-- not in front of my family. Abby in particular. Believe me, she wouldn't understand." Terry climbed out of the jeep. "I'm not Abby, and I don't understand."

He rounded the vehicle, then opened the passenger door for Maddie.

"Please, watch that mouth of yours. I have to live with these people."

She climbed out, and looked at the house with something akin to fear.

"Why are you so nervous?" he asked again.

She swatted his arm. "Because you are."
He shut the jeep door, walked to the house with Maddie trailing behind him. He hated it when she made sense.

Stepping into the house, Terry found the children eating in front of the TV, watching another Bible story. They looked up, their chins sticky with syrup.

Ruthie smiled. "Hi, Madison."

"Terry, Izumi has breakfast on the table," John called from the kitchen.

"Thanks." Terry took Maddie's coat, and put it with his own on the back of the couch. If only she didn't look so scared, he was sure the knots in his stomach would go away.

From the sounds coming from the kitchen, Terry knew Abby was in there. He could hear talking, but couldn't make out the words until he came closer.

"At least he's helping the elderly," Abby said. "It's harder to get into trouble when you're helping someone cross the street."

"No, you still don't understand--" John stopped when Terry and Maddie came into the kitchen.

"What?" Abby asked. She followed John's gaze, and her mouth fell open.

"Wow. That's the arthritic, needy person you're helping? That's some old woman."

"Abby," John gave his daughter a look, "I never said she was old."

"You never said she wasn't."

Maddie tried to slip away, but Terry gently grabbed her by the arm and led her to the table.

"Before you scare away my guest," Terry said, helping Maddie into a chair, "I'd like to introduce you to Madison Crawford. She's going to be staying in Three Mile Bay, and I'd like you to make her feel welcome. Maddie, this is Abby, my well-meaning niece."

"Uncle Terry, where did she come from?"

Frantic, Maddie struggled to her feet, and Terry didn't have the heart to force her to stay.

"Watch TV with the kids, and I'll bring your breakfast in a few minutes."
Head down, Maddie limped into the next room. Terry waited a moment, straining to hear if the front door opened. When it didn't, he stuck his head in to find her curled up on the far end of the couch, eyes wide and frightened.

"That's not how we treat guests in this house," John said, looking at Abby when he spoke. "That poor woman--" he hushed his voice to a whisper-- "is fragile enough, without your astute observations."

"Dad, you didn't give me any warning."

"I tried to. I told you we were having a guest, and I told you it was one of Uncle Terry's friends. I hadn't thought I needed to say more, but apparently, I was wrong. Terry, is she okay?"

"I think I needed more information." Abby looked dazed. "Since when did any of Uncle Terry's needy people ever look like that?"

"Is she all right?" John asked.

"She'll calm down," Terry nodded, and went to the counter where Izzy took out the pancakes she'd been warming in the microwave. "She's probably frightened, that's all."

"Oh, Abby." Izzy stacked some pancakes onto two plates, then gave them to Terry. "When will you learn to be more gentle? I thought living with Jake would have been enough of a lesson."

"Is she from the hotline?" Abby asked in a loud whisper.

"No." Terry added a fork to Maddie's plate. "She had no place to stay, so I gave her an apartment."

"She's homeless?" Abby's eyes went wide. "You took in a woman off the street?"

It hadn't been so much a question, as an accusation, and Terry took the opportunity to leave the kitchen.

The children paused their DVD, and watched as he came to the living room couch.

"Here's your breakfast." Terry handed the warm plate to Maddie, gave her a napkin and waited while she silently prayed over her food.

"Uncle Terry," Ruthie got up and came to him, "why is Madison crying?"
Terry turned to Maddie, saw her head still bowed and patted Ruthie's arm.

"Watch TV. She'll be okay."

"Terry, your breakfast is getting cold," Izzy called.

He waited, but Maddie did not finish her prayer, so Terry went back to the kitchen, pulled out a chair and sat down.

"Let me get this straight." Abby pushed back her empty plate. "You've given this woman an apartment, even all the trouble you've had with the others? Who was your last needy person? Victor something-or-other, wasn't it? He trashed your place, and still makes the occasional heckling call. That guy was trouble, and Uncle Terry, you did good to get off so light. At least he hasn't made any repeat appearances. With this one, who knows what she'll try?"

"Not too long ago, Victor made an appearance," Izzy admitted, "though we haven't had a call from him in weeks."

Terry winced. He really didn't want Abby to know about the graffiti.

"Maddie's a nice person." Terry cut into a stack of pancakes before jabbing it with his fork. "She's nothing like Victor."

"Does she have a disturbed past?" Abby waited, and Terry had to nod, "yes." "How disturbed?"

"She's been abused. From what I've been able to gather, it happened over a period of several years."

"When you say abused, are we talking battered wife, incest-- what?"

Though it sickened him to talk about it, Terry forced himself to answer. "Her adopted father raped her."

Abby sat up straight. "She became homeless, didn't call your infamous hotline, and you found her anyway? What are you, a pain magnet?"

"I know, but he's always just trying to help, and he always suffers. How can you let this happen again? You know he'll get hurt. He always does."

"Abby, I'm not that helpless." Terry took a gulp from his coffee mug, gasped when the hot liquid scalded his tongue. John passed him a cup of cold juice, and Terry drank it down.

"I can't believe you're letting this happen again."

John gave Abby a parental, silencing look. "That's enough. Madison is in the next room."

Shaking her head, Abby sipped from her mug and said nothing more.

Thank God, she said nothing more.

Tongue stinging, Terry pushed aside his unfinished breakfast and went into the living room.

On the couch, Maddie held the plate with both hands, her food untouched and her head still bowed.

Terry sat next to her and she didn't look up.

"She didn't mean to hurt your feelings, Maddie."

Maddie sniffed and kept staring at the plate.

The children sat on the carpet watching their DVD, though Ruthie kept turning to look at the couch.

A tear rolled down Maddie's cheek.

"Please, don't cry." Terry watched as she smeared the tear away.

What a morning. Stress tugged at the seams of his determination, and he willed himself to stay calm. He looked at Maddie and saw her tremble.

He pulled off his sweater. "Here, put this on. It's too cold to be wearing a T-shirt."

"She didn't like me." Maddie let him take her plate, obeyed and raised her arms. "Please, can't I go home?"
Just then, Abby came into the room. Terry pulled the sweater over Maddie’s head, tugged it down around her waist and saw it was yards too big. But at least she would stay warm.

He turned to see Abby shaking her head.

"Ricky, come on." Abby helped her son to his feet. "Time to get dressed for church."

* * * *

His throat was a three-alarm fire, and the last of the orange juice had been finished off an hour ago. If it hadn't been an hour, it sure felt like one. He prayed Abby would come back and offer him more, but the minutes ticked by and she didn't return.

Coughing, he pushed himself up on the bed, tried to sit up and swayed at the weakness tugging him back down. Why did God have to give him the flu now? just when he wanted to enjoy being back in Three Mile Bay.

"Abby?" His voice sounded hoarse, and he coughed until it hurt. Steadying himself against the night table, Jake pushed to his feet. As long as he was up, he had to use the toilet. Maybe instead of trying to make it to the kitchen, he could hang his head under the bathroom faucet. It wasn't OJ, but at least it'd be cold. He felt flushed, a slight hot sensation burning the surface of his skin. It wasn't very noticeable, but it gave him trouble whenever he stayed beneath the covers for very long.

He guessed it was the fever, and wished once more he had something cold for his throat.

Using the bed as a prop for as long as he could, Jake made his way to Terry's bathroom. What a time to get sick.

As he reached the all-important room, Abby came in with Ricky. She shut the bedroom door behind her and groaned.

"You are not going to believe what happened."

Closing his eyes a moment, Jake leaned against the bathroom door to regain some strength.

"Uncle Terry brought his friend over for breakfast and church."

Feeling nauseous, Jake turned into the bathroom before he threw up on the carpet.
"She's not old like we thought," Abby followed him inside, "and get this-- she's homeless. Uncle Terry took in a homeless woman, who for all we know, is a drug addict or something."

Jake flipped up the toilet seat, got down on his knees and waited for the sickness to take its course.

"Oh no." Abby knelt beside him, touched a hand to his forehead. Her skin felt cool, and he smiled in spite of himself.

He doubled over the toilet and tried to throw up. Nothing came, and he was caught in a wave of dry heaves. A hand massaged his back, and when he struggled to his feet, Abby was there to help him stand.

"Orange juice," he asked, and she nodded.

"After I get you back into bed. This flu is hitting you harder than Ricky. He's not feeling well, but at least he was able to eat some breakfast."

The thought of food made his stomach turn.

"What about Uncle Terry's friend?" Jake wanted to get his mind off the flu, and he climbed into bed as Ricky crawled to him over the mattress. "Is this the one he kept calling last night? Wasn't her name Madison?"

"That's the one." Abby pulled a blanket over Jake and he weakly fought it off.

"Too hot."

"I'm taking your temperature again."

"Abby, the juice?"

She gave him the thermometer, left the room while Ricky settled beside Jake.

"Having a good time?" Jake asked.

The boy shook his head.

"You will, you'll see." Jake turned on the thermometer, ran it across his warm forehead then glanced at the reading. He couldn't remember what it was before, but he still had a fever.
Abby came back with her mother.

"Let's get you sitting up," Mom said, and came around to fluff the pillows at Jake's back. "Abby, give him the juice before he passes out. He looks weak."

"I feel weak." He coughed, took the cold cup in his hands and drank a swallow. The cold stung, but it felt good.

Mom looked to Abby. "Do you want help dressing Ricky?"

"Thanks, it's only yesterday's clothes--" Abby nodded to the pile in the corner of the room. "We haven't unpacked yet, and most of our things are still in the truck."

"I'll get him dressed." Mom sorted through the clothes, then took Ricky out of the bedroom.

Abby went to close the door.

"Not as though it made much of a difference, but at least she's not from the hotline."

"Who? Mom?"

"No, Madison." Abby came back to the bed, rearranged the pillows behind his back. "She's another needy person, and from all appearances, she makes the others look normal. Jake, what are we going to do?"

Drowning his throat in another long drink, Jake leaned his head back and thanked God for orange juice.

* * * *

The sweater felt good on her bare arms, and Madison cuddled in its warmth. Her world had gone sideways, but she hadn't been forced to leave the house, and even better, Terry stayed with her on the couch.

The petite woman with the striking face and beautiful black hair, had not liked her. Maybe it wasn't so very bad as Madison had feared. Her world had righted itself, and though it had cost her some tears, Terry remained her friend. He'd even given her his sweater, and she nestled in the smell of him, the body warmth that had come from him but still clung to the sweater.
He looked so nice in long sleeves, like he belonged somewhere important, or like he owned his own business-- which he did, with John. That probably made Terry a co-owner, or co-something important.

"Abby will warm up to you," Terry nodded. "You'll see."

Pulling her knees against her chest, Madison watched the world from the safety of Terry's side. Except for the little boy who kept coughing, the children ran around in sweaters and dresses, their high octane breakfast of pancakes fueling their energy.

"She has a tendency to be blunt, sometimes." Terry rubbed his hands together, and spoke in a quiet hush. "I wish she'd be more gentle when it came to others, not just with Jake."

Wanting to keep her hands busy, Madison pulled out Terry's old Bible and felt the worn edges.

He glanced at her. "Try not to cry?"

She nodded.

"You can kill me with tears," he said quietly. "I have to hang on and be strong, so please try not to cry."

"I'm sorry, Terry."

A faint smile came to his mouth. "You're a sweetheart. God love you, you're such a sweetheart." He rubbed his hands together, saw her thumbing the old Bible on her lap. "Are you ready to give that back to me?"

She shook her head.

"Keep it a while longer then." He took the plate of cold pancakes from off the armrest. "So much for a hot breakfast. When lunch comes around, promise me you'll eat."

Before she could promise, John came into the room.

"The dishes are nearly done," John said, taking the plate from Terry. "Izumi has the kids dressed, so all we need are the adults before we can start a Bible study." John saw Madison and smiled. "You look warm and comfortable. Terry give you his sweater?"

She nodded.
A look passed between John and Terry, and John shook his head with a chuckle.

"Dad, can Jake have the recliner?" Abby came down the hallway with a man who leaned on her, though from the patient look on his face, Madison guessed he didn't need quite so much help as Abby was trying to give. "Jake threw up, but insists he's well enough to get out of bed."

"It's only the flu, Abby." Jake coughed, eased into the recliner and leaned his head back. The sweatpants he wore looked as though he'd slept in them, as did the dark pullover with the long sleeves. "At least I didn't get sick during finals. I can always be grateful for that." Jake noticed Madison on the couch and smiled.

"Jake," Terry spoke up, "I'd like you to meet Madison Crawford. Maddie, this is Abby's husband, Jake Murphy."

At first, when Jake Murphy's dark eyes looked at her, Madison wanted to crawl into a corner and hide. But those eyes held no aggression, no male stare that said he wanted something. What those eyes did show, however, was surprise.

"You're Terry's friend?"

Unsure why that should be surprising, Madison nodded.

Jake said nothing, though she felt those eyes watching her every now and again. She crowded against Terry's side, and kept her head down.

Izumi and Abby took seats on the couch, on Terry's other side, and John brought a chair from the kitchen table. The girls sat on the floor, and the boy tried to climb onto Jake's lap before Abby offered him hers.

"That's Ricky," Terry told Madison with a smile. "Cute, isn't he?"

Madison nodded. She felt like a bobble-head again, but speech was out of the question. Abby was watching her, Jake pretended not to, and it made Madison cling to Terry's side all the harder.

Terry patted her hand, took the Bible from her, but opened it on his lap where she could still follow the words.
The others must have brought Bibles as well, but she was too timid to look. She heard Abby
coughing, and guessed the pretty young woman was soon going to feel as poorly as her husband.
Madison tried not to be happy about that.

With all the coughing going around, John said they wouldn't sing, and instead John read from
the Bible. How much the children understood, Madison had no way of knowing, but every once
in a while a small hand would go up and the adults would have to explain something. They
seemed very patient, though Madison refused to raise her hand like the children and admit she
didn't understand the words being read.

From the little she understood, she agreed.

Why did Jake keep looking at her like that? It wasn't in the same way other men looked at her, it
didn't invade her privacy. It just made her feel watched, as though she might jump up and flap
her arms, or something else unexpected. Abby's gaze didn't feel as soft as Jake's, and Madison
tried hard not to notice either of them.

After a while, Izzy got up and brought out some paper, scissors and glue for the children, and
Ricky scooted off Abby's lap to play with the girls. They formed shapes out of construction
paper, snipped and glued, and in general made a mess, but the adults didn't seem to mind.

Then the adults prayed, and when Jake broke into several hacking coughs, John said the Bible
study was over.

"You should lay down." Abby went to Jake's recliner. "Do you want more to drink?"

He nodded "yes," and John kicked out the footrest so Jake could rest where he was.

"Sit down, Abby." Izzy got to her feet. "I'll get Jake something to drink."

As Abby sat down, Terry took his Bible and left the couch, and Madison suddenly found herself
separated from Abby by only a few empty cushions.

The two women stared at each other. Abby picked up the TV remote and clicked on the set to
avoid talking to her.

Ricky climbed up, settled between Abby and Madison, and proceeded to show Madison what
he had made during church.
"It's a helmet," the boy explained, unfolding a red piece of paper and trying to place it on his head. "I'm a firefighter. See?" Ricky held up a toy fireman, moved a plastic arm and made some childish noises that must have meant something big and terrible was happening. "Stan fights the fire with water!" Ricky announced, and made a gushing noise to imitate a fire hose. At least that's what she thought the boy was trying to do.

Ricky looked up at her and smiled, and she smiled back.

"Want to hold Stan?" Ricky offered.

Before she could say "no," the heroic firefighter was in her hand.

"Are you going to be one of these when you grow up?" Madison asked.

The boy nodded. "That, or a policeman, or a airplane pilot, or a carpenter, or..." Ricky gave a thoughtful look. He'd run out. He took back his firefighter, tried to straighten his helmet and went back to the floor with the triplets. They were his aunts, weren't they? If the triplets were Abby's sisters, and the little boy was Abby's son, then those little girls were really little aunts.

"Thanks for letting him play with you." Abby spoke from across the couch. "I guess Ricky's getting over his shyness."

Madison didn't know what to say, and curled up even tighter in Terry's sweater. With her legs folded under her, she made herself as small as she could and only started to relax when Terry came back and reclaimed his seat.

* * * *

Thank the Lord, Abby had said something nice to Maddie. Terry counted it a victory, though he wished Maddie didn't hide so close to him. She needed to smile more, to act a little more spontaneous, and not so much like a frightened puppy. He wanted to put his arm around her, coax her to enjoy the people around her, the sounds of laughter, even the coughing. This was what it meant to have a family.

Maddie didn't seem to know what to do with all these people, and she gave a good impression of a besieged castle. So far today, it seemed only Ricky had been able to get through those defenses—Ricky, and Terry had to admit, himself.

Terry could get smiles out of her when he gave her attention, and that had to mean something good. What it meant exactly, he had no idea, but at least she wasn't crying.
"Dad?" Abby leaned forward on the couch as John started clearing away the paper on the floor. "Does Mom want my help in the kitchen?"

"No. Rest," came from the kitchen and Abby laughed.

"Guess you have your answer," John said, as Ruthie picked out something from John's trash pile. "Girls, help me clean this up."

"What about Ricky?" Debbie asked. "He helped make the mess, too."

"Ricky is sick." John lifted the little guy onto the couch beside Abby. "Get sick, and you'll have privileges, too."

"Don't forget the Doyles are dropping by today." Abby turned to another channel. "Jake, do you know what time they'll come?"

"Sorry," Jake coughed. "I forgot to ask."

"As long as they don't show up unannounced for lunch," John said, "we'll manage.

"Lunch." Terry sat up straight. Something about that word alarmed him. "John, this is Sunday, right?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"I don't know." Terry leaned back. "I have a nagging feeling I'm forgetting something."

"If it's important, ask God to bring it to mind. Otherwise, let it go." John tossed a multi-colored wad of paper into the wastebasket, and went to get out the vacuum.

"Daddy, can we play with the computer?"

"Go on," John said, and excused the triplets to the Mac in their bedroom.

Ricky looked up at Abby.

"Go on," she smiled, and Ricky climbed down to join the girls.

"Give Ricky a turn," John called after them.
The feeling dogged Terry. They sat in the living room, watching a nature program about the wonders of the Amazon Forest while Izzy made lunch, and all the while, Terry kept wondering. Dental appointment? business meeting? a conference call? No, never on a Sunday. Then it hit. Like a ton of bricks from a twelve story building, it hit him.

He groaned out loud, and everyone turned to stare. "Emily. I was supposed to have lunch with her this afternoon."

"Emily?" Abby's brows raised. "You mean our next door neighbor?"

"She's probably already made lunch, and I can't come." Terry got to his feet. "She'll never speak to me again."

"Why can't you go?" John asked.

Izzy came from the kitchen wearing her apron. "Emily won't want her father exposed to the flu."

"She's going to be so disappointed." Terry groaned as he reached into his pocket for the cell phone. "I should have remembered sooner. She'll have gone to all that trouble for nothing."

"You're having lunch with Emily McCall?" Abby stared at him as though he were growing four arms and two heads. "As in seeing her? As in dating?"

The way Abby said the last word, anyone would have thought Terry had contracted some kind of weird illness.

"No way." Abby shook her head. "I must've heard wrong."

"Hey," Terry gave Abby a look, "a lot has changed since you've been away."

"Yeah, but not that much. Come on, you'll never get me to believe this 'date,'" she said, making air quotes, "is nothing but a cute little lunch between long-time neighbors. You've never dated in your entire life, and it's too late to start now."

"Thanks a lot." Terry moved into the kitchen to make his call.

"She'll understand, Terry." Izzy paused chopping the vegetables on her cutting board. "Chances are, she heard from our pastor that we're sick. John called and explained why we weren't attending church this morning."
"But that doesn't mean the pastor announced it to the congregation." Terry rubbed the back of his neck, waited for the number to answer. "Hi, Emily? It's Terry."

"I was just about to call you," Emily said with a smile in her voice. A smile. That was good. "I heard AJ came home, and brought a surprise with them. How are you and the sick ones doing? I would've stopped by and said 'hello,' but I can't risk Daddy getting the flu."

"No, of course not." Terry breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm really sorry about lunch. I should have called sooner."

"Oh, good," she laughed, "then you remembered, after all. I've been worrying that you'd forgotten. I understand you can't come, but I was so scared you didn't remember me... Never mind, I'm just thankful you called. I can rest easier knowing you remembered our date."

Terry swallowed hard. She'd said the word-- date-- and hadn't even missed a beat. But that's what they were doing, right? Dating?

"Maybe some other time?" Terry asked. "I'd suggest next Sunday, but this flu won't be over by then. If it really is the flu. It could be a cold."

"Well, flu or cold, we can't risk giving it to Daddy. Maybe we could have a phone date, instead?"

"Excuse me?"

Emily laughed. "I make a living over the phone, giving out tech support, and it's surprising how much you can get done without being face to face. How about after lunch, let's say, three o'clock this afternoon?"

"Okay." Terry hoped the bale of hay struggling to get down his throat, wasn't audible over the phone. "I'll call you around three, and we'll just... talk?"

"Sounds exciting, doesn't it?" Again, Emily laughed and Terry had the sinking suspicion Emily was just as nervous as he was. "I'll look forward to hearing from you later."

Terry hung up, blew out a loud sigh and Izzy looked at him.

"We're going to have a date after lunch-- over the phone."

"That's sweet," Izzy smiled.
It was? If it was so sweet, why had that fact slipped past him? It had come off as slightly desperate to Terry, but then, what did he know? He’d never dated anyone in his entire life.

And now that he thought about it, how had Abby known that? Ah, John must have told her. Oh well, no big deal. So he’d never dated, it probably hadn’t come as a shock to Abby or Jake, or to anyone else, for that matter.

He was Uncle Terry, the nice guy women habitually stayed away from. Like the plague.

With a sigh, Terry went back to the living room.

"Well?" Abby asked.

Even Jake smiled and waited.

"We’re going to have a phone date after lunch."

"Oh, that’s so cute!" Abby gave a girly squeal, and Jake tried not to laugh. From his rapid-fire coughing, Terry knew Jake tried.

Terry resumed his seat on the couch, let out a sigh as Abby kept giggling. "You see, this is why I wasn’t eager to tell you about Emily. I knew this was coming." Terry looked to John. "I knew it was coming, didn’t I?"

"Abby, knock it off. Don’t give your uncle a hard time."

Sitting up, Abby inhaled deeply. "I can hear it now, ’Oh Emmy-pie’--"

"Abby," John kicked her foot and she laughed.

"Dad, if I can’t tease Uncle Terry over this, then what can I? This is major news. Our Uncle Terry is seeing someone."

"Get over it," John said, and went into the kitchen.

"I still can’t believe this." Abby turned up the volume. "Have you proposed yet, Uncle Terry?" There was a teasing lilt to the question that gave Terry the impression Abby wasn’t taking any of this seriously.
"When I do," Terry said, folding his arms, "you'll be among the first to know."

Abby shook her head, smiled, and listened as the TV host explained the delicate life cycle of the Peruvian something-or-other; Terry didn't know what, because he wasn't paying attention. It was probably some bird.

His only thought, (besides the bird), was what on earth would he talk about during this phone date? Did it have to be a full hour, or would Emily be mad if it lasted less than fifteen minutes? Would he get less points if it only lasted ten? Would Emily keep count? And if she did, should he?

Terry noticed Maddie sitting next to him, all quiet and still, and remembered how difficult the morning had been for her. He wasn't the only one going through turmoil right now, and he offered her a smile.

It had been quite a day, and it wasn't even over.

"Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths."
~ Proverbs 3:5, 6 ~
The program about the wonders of the Amazon Forest couldn't hold her attention. She had blinked, and things were changing around her that she couldn't stop. First, Uncle Terry running himself ragged for a total stranger, and now this? He was seeing Emily McCall? It stunned her, kind of like hearing one of your parents was thinking of leaving and breaking up the family. Only not as bad, since Uncle Terry wasn't married into this family; he was just forever and always a permanent part of it.

Abby rubbed the dull ache forming between her eyes. She didn't usually get headaches, but today was proving to be different. Maybe it was because of the flu.

"Sweetheart?" Mom came to the kitchen doorway with an apron cinched about her waist. "Would you get your coat? Your father would like you to step outside."

The tone, coupled with the words, put a grim knot in Abby's stomach. She had more than a little hunch she was in trouble. Not like she really needed a summons to know it. The look on Dad's face when he'd left the living room had been enough.

Getting up, Abby went to Uncle Terry's room to get her coat and shoes. She spotted the umbrella next to the dresser and took it with her, just in case the weather changed its mind and decided to dish out something heavier than a drizzle. Though this was the rainy season for Upstate New York, God seemed to be overdoing it with all the wet and gloom. Abby caught herself complaining, and moved down the hall into the living room. God never did anything by accident. Everything had a reason, even the times when it felt like there wasn't one. She'd been taught that as a child, and even now, as she put on her coat and saw Jake watching her from the recliner, she knew something good was trying to happen.

Jake nodded to the couch where Uncle Terry and Madison were watching TV, and Abby followed his gaze.

The woman was leggy in an understated, elegant kind of way, like a high-fashion runway model with beauty to spare. High cheekbones, glossy blonde hair, and translucent skin that gave her an almost regal appearance. Though she hardly acted that way. Then Abby saw what Jake must have
wanted her to notice: small tears slid down that soft, delicate face and landed on Uncle Terry's sweater—the one Uncle Terry had put on Madison.

It put a lump in Abby's throat. She remembered how gentle and kind Madison had been with Ricky, when Ricky had showed Madison his firefighter. Despite Abby's determination not to like Uncle Terry's needy person, it had touched Abby more than she cared to admit.

And now this.

Madison was crying, and deep down Abby knew why. Because she'd been impatient in her rushed judgment, not slowing down to consider the feelings of anyone besides her Uncle Terry—not even for someone who was very likely in desperate need of help. Abby figured she probably deserved whatever Dad was waiting outside to say.

Scratch that probably. She deserved it.

Earlier, Abby had wondered if she'd caught Madison crying, but hadn't been sure. This time, there was no mistaking it. Those were tears, and Abby had no doubt they were because of her.

"Abby," Mom called from the kitchen, "your father's waiting."

"I know." Abby zipped up her coat, thought about what she should do and went over to the couch. "Madison?"

When the woman looked at her, Abby was quietly taken aback by those startled gray eyes. They held no anger, but there was so much pain, it stunned Abby. She'd done that?

"I'd like to apologize," Abby managed to get out the words while Uncle Terry watched. "I didn't mean to hurt you... maybe that's not exactly true. If you were going to turn out like Victor, then I did want you to suffer. At least a little." Abby took a deep breath and prayed Madison wouldn't keep crying. "I'm in a tough spot, and I guess, so are you. I love Uncle Terry, and before God, I'd do anything in my power to stop him from getting crushed like last time. But just because all the others wiped their feet on Uncle Terry, doesn't mean you will, too. You're here, in this house with my sisters, when none of the others got through the front door. Dad and Mom are careful, so if you've made it this far, I should have given you the benefit of the doubt."

To Abby's dismay, the tears kept coming and now Uncle Terry was noticing them, too.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Terry. This is all my fault."
“Maddie?” He touched Madison’s shoulder, and she looked away.

“Me and my big mouth.” Not wanting to make things worse, Abby took a few steps back so Madison wouldn’t feel threatened. “If she can’t forgive me, I’ll understand.”

When Madison continued to cry, Abby retreated to her Mom. The conversation must not have carried into the kitchen, for Mom kept working without looking up. “He’s outside,” Mom said from the stove. “Don’t stay out too long, and keep warm. Your cough is bad enough, as it is.”

Quietly going out the back door, Abby opened the umbrella when she was greeted by a light rain drizzling over the bay. Dad stood by the garage, and when he saw her, he opened the garage door.

“I didn’t want to speak in front of everyone else, and I don’t want you to get wet, so we’ll do our talking in there.”

“Dad, I apologized to Madison.”

“Glad to hear it. But she’s not the only reason we’re out here.”

Folding away the umbrella, Abby went into the garage, waited as Dad came inside and shut the door.

“What’s come over you?” Dad turned to her, folded his arms, and Abby hoped she was too old to be spanked. “You weren’t raised to hurt other people’s feelings. You know better than that.”

“I apologized to Madison.” The words came out in a weak defense, and Dad only shook his head.

“How could you tease your uncle like that? And in front of his guest?”

The question caught Abby off guard.

“I didn’t think I was teasing him that hard.”

“You were, and it hurt his feelings. I wasn’t the one trying to work up the courage to propose to Emily, and you hurt mine.”

“Propose?”
Dad took a step closer. "This means a lot to your Uncle Terry. Except for this family, he's been alone all his life and he wants to get married. Is that too hard to understand?"

More regret flooded Abby's heart.

"And as for Madison..." Dad sighed deeply. "I should have told you about her, sooner. I shouldn't have put it off until the last moment. I should have picked up the phone and called you while you were still in San Diego, so we could talk about it and make sure you were prepared. I knew this was going to be hard for you to accept."

"Dad, I need to know-- this woman-- Madison-- she's not like Victor, is she?"

"No, she's not like him at all." Dad blew out a sigh, and it made Abby feel even worse than she already did. "Of all the people Terry's ever tried to help, this one is different. She's more helpless, certainly, but it's more than that. She's genuine, and has a lot of respect for Terry. I hope..." Dad paused, and seemed to think over his words. "I have every reason to believe Madison would rather cut off an arm, than hurt your uncle. I've seen the way she is around him, and I'm not worried that she'll hurt him on purpose."

"But you think she will? Dad, please level with me."

Staring at the cement floor, Dad paused as though choosing his words carefully. "I won't pretend that I'm not deeply concerned about Madison. I've warned him as gently as I could without hurting his feelings, and am praying with everything I have that this will turn out well." Dad met Abby's eyes. "That doesn't mean, however, I'm going to run his life and tell him what to do. Like I've told your mom, Terry is a grown man and he's making the best decisions he can, under the circumstances."

"But what if he breaks down again?"

"Abby, I have to give it to the Lord. There's not a lot I can do. Your uncle needs to know we stand behind him come what may, that he isn't alone, and that we love him. He's trying to do a good thing. Just like you did with Jake, except their relationship is different. This hasn't been an easy time for him, especially after that breakdown six months ago, and he's trying very hard to be strong. To do what's needed for Madison, and to not collapse emotionally and be a burden to this family."

"He could never be a burden."

"I know. It's the way he's thinking, though."
"Has he had any night terrors lately?"

John nodded. "But he's been holding it together. I've been proud of him, and the way he's been handling the ups and downs with Madison. Now that he's getting serious about Emily, I don't want to ruin it for him. I'm praying Emily will be good for him, that she'll give him a stable foundation, a sturdy shoulder to cry on when he's too embarrassed to cry on mine."

"I'm sorry, Dad."

"Part of this is my fault." Dad's mouth firmed in self-reproach. "In the back of my mind, I had been hoping that living with Jake these past four years had made you more sensitive to the feelings of others. You're so good around him, so tender and gentle."

"I'm so gentle, because I love him and that's what he needs." Abby sighed. "There's no one else like Jake. He's one of a kind."

"Don't be so sure about that, Abby. She reminds me of him, at times. And I say that with a great deal of affection for Jake."

"I'm not offended. If that's true, then it's a compliment to Madison, because Jake is such a teddybear," Abby smiled at the thought of Jake clutching her while he slept, a habit he did nearly every night. "Thanks for treating me like a grownup and leveling with me." The silent tears came before Abby, and she closed her eyes in horror. "Oh, Dad. I made her cry."

* * * *

He didn't want to intrude, but Jake couldn't help watching from the recliner. Terry had taken a handkerchief from his pocket, and kept drying Madison's tears as they fell.

"You promised me that you'd try not to cry." Terry patted the wet cheeks, had to lean forward to look into that downturned face, a face that kept looking away from Terry's. Her eyes wouldn't meet his, and every time they did, Madison would break into fresh tears.

"Please, don't cry." Terry placed a hand over hers but it did little to stop the weeping. "I hope you can forgive Abby. I know my niece, and when she apologizes for something, it's because she means it."

Jake wanted to agree out loud, but he kept coughing, and feared if he moved to the couch to try and help settle the crying woman, he'd only succeed in giving her the flu.
"Please, Maddie." Terry was nearing tears, himself—Jake could see the wetness gathering in Terry's eyes. "Please, tell me what to do so it'll be all right. I can't bear to see you like this."

The heartfelt plea made her look up. She gazed at Terry with such intensely ardent passion, Terry gave an awkward smile and she burst into more tears. At least, that was the way it looked to Jake. Jake was beginning to think this had little to do with Abby, and more to do with a certain phone date that would take place later that day. Come to think of it, Madison hadn't started crying until Terry had announced he was still keeping his afternoon date with Emily.

It was a small observation, and Jake had only noticed because the scene was playing out right in front of him. It was hard not to notice. He had a good view of the couch and those on it, and his heart went out to Madison. Jake didn't know her, but something about her felt familiar. He might have been standing in front of a mirror, looking at himself, even though the reflection looked nothing like his own. Their sameness came from the inside. A similar heart as his own, beat in that slight frame, and Jake had a feeling it was very familiar with pain.

"Please, don't cry." Terry placed the handkerchief in her hand, but she kept her head bowed and her face turned from Terry. "This is killing me, Maddie. Please don't cry."

It was just as well the children were in the triplets' room playing with their computer. This would frighten them, as it seemed to frighten Mom when she came to see if she could help.

"Maybe she's hungry." Mom brushed the long blonde hair from Madison's eyes. "John said she didn't touch her pancakes, so she has to be hungry."

Beginning to look tired, Madison leaned against the armrest of the couch, kept herself curled tightly in a fetal position, and every now and then, another tear would slip down her cheek. Jake could tell Madison tried to keep the sadness to herself, but too many were noticing, and it only made it worse.

Jake coughed, and the coughs kept coming until Mom came to check his forehead. Why did people keep checking him? His fever couldn't have changed all that much since the last time he'd been checked. He still had it.

The back door sounded with a thump, and a moment later Abby and Dad came into the living room. Their attention fixed on the woman curled at the end of the couch, and on Terry as he did everything but sing to her to stop the tears from falling. As Mom went to go check on the children, Abby took a seat next to Terry.
"Can you forgive me?"

Madison was too busy crying to hear Abby, and Jake wanted to go over there and tell them all to leave her alone. She wasn't angry-- she was heartbroken. And perhaps even jealous of Emily. It seemed reasonable enough.

Dad looked pained to do something to help, but all he could do was stand by and watch.

Since Terry had tried everything else and it hadn't worked, he tried rubbing Madison's shoulder, and the sobs began to lessen. The contact helped. Though she didn't look calmer, it did distract her from crying. She closed her eyes and her knuckles turned bone white from gripping his handkerchief so hard.

Abby looked to Dad, then to Jake, for help.

How could Jake tell Abby that these tears weren't for her, without embarrassing Madison even further? Jake clamped his mouth shut, then had to open it to cough. Oh, this flu.

"Lunch will be in a few minutes," Mom said, passing through the living room on her way to the kitchen. "Madison, I could use your help with the stir-fry."

To everyone's surprise, the long legs unfolded, and Madison climbed off the couch.

That poor woman. She was in love. Jake wondered if she was even aware of it, she seemed so uncertain of everything around her, like the world was a constant mystery to be figured out. It was a feeling Jake knew very well, and he recognized it in Madison.

This was all very personal, and all very out in the open despite the unsaid words. Or so Jake thought. Everyone around him didn't seem to see what he did, and he began to wonder if the cough syrup had gone to his head. Problem was, he hadn't taken any that morning. Maybe the fever was to blame. Or maybe he'd coughed himself into a concussion and was seeing things that didn't exist.

It had to be the coughing.

His face full of concern, Terry watched as Madison went to help Mom. Terry got off the couch, stood in the kitchen doorway and watched while the women worked. With a lopsided grin, Terry looked back at the people in the living room.
Shaking the thought from his head before he had a chance to get it fully formed, Jake tried to reason away what he was seeing. Terry had a phone date with Emily after lunch, so that had to be concern shining in Terry’s eyes, nothing more. It just had to be.

Rubbing his aching forehead, Jake got up from the recliner. What in the world had he and Abby walked into? While Three Mile Bay wasn’t much different than before, some things were plunging toward big change. It was too much for Jake’s poor fevered mind to take in, and he left the living room to go stretch out on the bed and get some rest. He wondered why God had given them the flu, then trapped them in the same house with Terry, at a time like this.

Surely, they would only get in the way.

* * * *

"Turn the fire down."

Izzy had a lot of calm in her, and Madison wished she could follow her example.

"Add the seasoning like I showed you."

The bottles were lined up on the counter, and it took Madison a few moments to sort out which ones went with the stir-fry, and which were meant for the chicken casserole Izzy had baking in the oven. The motions of fixing lunch, mixing in the seasoning, made the trembling in Madison’s hands to stop. Madison looked over her shoulder, saw Terry standing in the doorway and quickly turned back to the stove.

Looking at him only made her want to cry.

Was it too much to hope that he’d never marry, and just go on being her friend? Did things have to change? Did he have to change? Couldn’t he rise above being ugly, and just stay single?

Pain shot into her hand. She jerked away from the frying pan, sucked her burnt finger while Terry hurried to the fridge. He pulled out some butter, and the touch of his hand when it took hers, made the sting of the burn go away even before she felt the butter.

He was so wonderful, she couldn’t bear to look at him.

"Does it hurt?"

She nodded.
"About Abby--"

"It's all right, Terry. I forgive her." Madison pulled her hand away before she looked at him and started to cry again.

"Thank you, Maddie, that means a lot to me. Is it all right if I tell her? I know she's beating herself up right now."

"She doesn't have to. It's no big deal." Even though she said the words, Madison knew it wasn't quite true. Abby had apologized, and that meant Abby might still like her one day. Maybe.

Quiet and thoughtful, Terry put the butter away while Izzy washed something in the sink. Even though Izzy wasn't watching the people behind her back, Madison had a feeling she was following every word.

"Does your finger feel better?" Terry waited for a response, so Madison nodded, "yes."

It felt better, though the ache in her chest was still there. Would butter help that, too? She saw the knife on the counter and wished she could steal it and hide in the bathroom. Instead, she focused on the burned finger and went back to work.

After a minute of saying nothing, Terry returned to the living room.

Numbness seeped into Madison's soul, and she worked hard to let it wash over the hurts in her insides, the ones Terry could never see.

"Time to turn off the fire." Izzy moved around her, and took something from a cupboard. "Switch the pan to a cool burner, then finish slicing the tomatoes on the cutting board."

Being this close to a knife wouldn't help, but Madison felt nothing when she picked it up. All she felt was numbness, a wide sea spreading inside of her that drowned anything that tried to stay afloat. Everything sank to the bottom, even hope.

"When you've finished the tomatoes, start on the bell peppers, please." Izzy moved around Madison, gave her a smile and Madison remembered that Jesus could walk on water. Nothing could sink Jesus, and if He couldn't drown, then He could keep her head above the water. Hope took faith. You couldn't just tell yourself something, and let it go, you had to hang on and remind yourself that it was true. And believe it.
Today, it took more to hang on than usual. She was losing her best friend to that woman.

To Emily.

The chicken was taken from the oven, and the smells lured the children away from their games. They drifted into the kitchen to gawk at the food and get in the way.

"When's lunch?" Debbie asked in a hopeful voice.

Ruthie sighed. "Mommy hasn't set the table, so we can't eat now."

"Can I set the table?" Lizzie asked. "I know how."

"I'm getting awfully hungry," Debbie said, and Ruthie nodded her head with dramatic emphasis.

Behind the girls, all cute and hopeful, Ricky stood with his firefighter and tried to see the food as it was placed onto the pot holders on the counter.

"Abby, come help the girls set the table." Izzy wiped her hands on the apron and nodded to Madison to finish with the bell peppers.

"I thought I was supposed to be resting," Abby said, coming into the kitchen with a laugh. She paused by the cutting board. The smile she gave Madison was apologetic, and grateful.

Feeling shy, Madison returned the gesture with a timid smile, then went back to concentrating on the small even slices it took to make the peppers come out looking nice.

Abby looked over her progress. "Don't cut your fingers."

"Abby, the plates," Ruthie said, tugging her older sister to the cupboard.

"Aren't you afraid I'll pass the flu to everyone by handling the dishes?"

"They're going to get it anyway," came Izzy's practical reply. "But wash your hands first."

The sisters were a noisy, mixed up jumble when they were all together, and Madison couldn't help watching. Abby pulled things from the cupboard, and the triplets clamored to take turns putting them on the table. Coming closer, Ricky looked on as the table was set with plates and silverware, then came the napkins and glasses. The boy looked hungry and Madison thought it was a healthy sign that his fever was lifting.
"Since we have so many in the house," Abby directed, "you three and Ricky can eat in the living room."

"Can we watch TV?" Ruthie asked.

"I guess so."

Debbie hopped down from the chair. "We're done, Mommy."

"Thank you, girls." Izzy moved through the sea of children to get to the fridge. "Tell the men it's lunchtime, please."

"Lunch!" Debbie yelled, and ran from the kitchen with two small girls at her heels. The triplets spread the word all over the house, so that even Jake finally showed up, though he didn't look very hungry.

"It's getting crowded in here." Jake hesitated before sitting at the table. "Maybe I should eat with the kids."

"Nah." John pulled out a chair and sat down. "We have enough room."

Before the plates were filled, everyone joined hands and Madison's insides trembled when Terry took hers. His hand lightly held hers, as though he were afraid of hurting her somehow. They bowed their heads while John prayed over the meal, but Madison had trouble paying attention to the words. It was a strong hand, yet it held hers so gently, she wanted to kiss Terry.

So much for staying numb. Life pulsed in her blood until the prayer ended, and Terry let go.

"As usual, Little Dove, the food looks good." John picked up a serving fork and started helping Izzy and Abby fill the plates for the children.

Moving past her, Terry pulled out a chair. He looked to Madison, waited, and she realized he wanted her to sit down. When she did, she found herself next to Jake.

"Maddie, have you taken any painkiller this morning?"

She shook her head, and Terry went off to get the acetaminophen. Feeling timid, she chanced a glance at the young man beside her, and Jake smiled. Not knowing what else to do, she bowed her head and tried not to attract attention.
When the children had been served, the remaining adults sat down and the food started to pass around the table.

"Do you happen to fly fish?" Jake asked.

Oh no. He was talking to her. Madison shook her head and tried not to look at Jake in the hopes he'd stop.

"Me either." Jake passed her the jello salad. "Terry and Abby, though, can't get enough of it."

The jello looked so good, and she was so hungry, Madison helped herself to more than she really wanted.

"They can spend hours out there, just fishing."

She glanced at Jake. There was something about him-- a weary sort of hard-won confidence that made him seem different than everyone else. He looked young, and yet sounded old, like he had seen a lot in life and didn't really want to remember it. Then she recalled Terry had once told her that Jake had been abused.

The thought flicked through her mind as Jake kept talking to her.

"Sometimes I envy them. They look so at peace with themselves and the world, just standing there, flicking that line back and forth. Have you ever seen Terry fish?"

Madison nodded.

"Quite a sight, isn't it?" Jake took a hot roll from the bread basket, split it open, then smeared on butter. "I like to sit and watch them, maybe get a sketch done, while I'm at it."

Terry smiled. "Jake's an artist."

"I'm not much of one, I'm afraid." Jake bit into the roll while Abby put a generous helping of chicken on Jake's plate. "I still have so much to learn, it's sometimes discouraging. Just when you think you know something, you find out you're still a rookie."

"Don't listen to him, Madison. You should see the painting he did of the family-- it's brilliant."

"So says my wife."
"So says everyone who sees it." Abby looked indignant. "Dad, where's it hanging? I don't remember seeing it in the living room."

"We moved it to the master bedroom." John loaded his fork with tomato and lettuce, dabbed it in some ranch dressing. "When your mom started remodeling, we moved it so it wouldn't get damaged when the walls were repainted."

"Why didn't you move it back when you were done?"

A wry smile spread over Jake's mouth. "Abby's my protector. Whenever an art critic doesn't happen to like my work, she's in there, swinging."

Terry paused eating. "Someone didn't like your work?"

"Just some art critic who doesn't know what he's talking about." Abby made a face. "He was no judge of talent, that's for sure."

Jake gave Abby a look. "He was fair."

"He was not. He said you couldn't paint, that you wasted time and money getting your degree. The guy was nuts."

Jake remained silent.

When the others looked to Abby for an explanation, she shook her head. "It's nothing important. One of Jake's professors had a friend who was supposed to own a prestigious art gallery. He took one look at Jake's work and called it 'old fashioned.'"

"I am, Abby."

"Just because you paint realistic wildlife and nature, doesn't make you old-fashioned. And what did Mr. Fancy-Pants think of that guy who did the canvas covered in red and black stripes? He called it 'a bold expression of individuality.'"

"I'll admit," Jake shrugged, "it wasn't much to look at."

"Do you know what Jake showed him?" Abby smiled and Madison found herself doing the same. "Jake showed him a large canvas with two cactus cuddling together like sweethearts. For something covered with sharp spines, it's an incredibly moving painting. Jake made them look so
real, and yet you felt like they were truly cuddling, that they'd grown that way, hugging each other over the years, on purpose."

"I'd like to see that sometime," Terry grinned.

"It's in the trailer." Abby added some baked potato to Jake's plate. "When Jake can finish enough paintings, we're going to find a gallery who will take them on consignment."

"That's going to take time, Abby, not to mention willingness for someone to take a chance on a nobody." Jake gave his wife a hesitant look, kept toying with his fork and not eating. "Are you sure you don't want me to use my master's degree and do something else? Something with a steady paycheck?"

"We've already gone over this a hundred times." Abby sighed, reached for the bottle of salad dressing. "We can live on my salary until your career gets started."

"Your career would have been better off if we'd stayed in San Diego."

"Jake, really-- we've already talked this out. There's nothing more to say."

He shook his head, and glanced at John. "She only came back because of me."

"Okay, this conversation is getting way off topic. I thought we were talking about art?"

"Abby--"

"Please, Jake. We'll talk about this later."

Jake sighed, and it started a fit of coughing. He excused himself from the table, and Abby went after him.

They could hear AJ talk from the next room, though they kept their voices quiet enough Madison couldn't overhear what was being said. Like hope, marriage evidently took work.

"Well, whatever their reason for coming home--" John leaned back in his chair with a napkin-- "I'm just grateful they came."

"Do you think they have enough money?" Terry asked in a hushed tone. "Can they get by on her salary alone?"
"If they can't, we'll help them out so Jake can work on his art career." John gave an affirming nod. "I think they'll have enough, though. They can both work from home-- Jake on his painting, and Abby can long distance with Dennis in San Diego. She's done it before."

Terry agreed, then nudged Madison with an elbow.

"You're not eating."

While Madison attacked the jello, Jake coughed in the next room. By the time Abby returned, Madison had started in on the chicken.

"He'll be all right." Abby sat down, and scooted in her chair. "I want to stop talking about this because it's Sunday, but just for the record: Jake and I don't need money. I could hear what you guys were saying, and we're doing just fine on our own."

John nodded. "It's duly noted."

The answer seemed to satisfy Abby, and she gave her father a smile that he returned without hesitation. This family was close-knit, and they fought for each other however they could. The fact had been impressed on Madison that morning, and she felt a strong tug of jealousy. Emily would belong here, while Madison would not. That would be true, wouldn't it? For why should Emily let Terry spend so much time with another woman?

Oh, why did Terry have to chase after sex? Because he was a man, that's why. He was only doing what other men did. If he wanted to be ugly, better he did it with Emily, than with her. If that was the way Terry wanted to be, then Emily could have him. Madison would not care.

Tears spilled down Madison's cheeks, and she hurried to brush them away before Terry noticed.

"It's almost time." Terry glanced at the kitchen clock, then hurried to finish the rest of his meal.

"If I were you, I'd use the office." John helped himself to more potatoes. "Unless you don't mind an audience, I'd also close the door."

"The house is so full, I'll take all the privacy I can get."

A subdued look crossed Abby's face and she reached out to touch Terry's arm. "I'm sorry I teased you earlier. I think it's great you and Emily are getting together."

"So you've decided to believe me?"
Abby nodded. "You deserve to be happy."

A wonderful lopsided smile showed Terry didn't hold any grudges, and he reached up and gave Abby's hand a squeeze.

Somewhere inside of her, Madison felt something break. Maybe it was her heart.

Finishing off the last of her food, Abby scooted away from the table. "Would you guys keep an eye on Ricky for me? I'm going to spend some time alone with Jake, before the Doyle's get here. I think he needs me."

"Run along," Izzy said with a smile.

"That was a very good meal. My compliments to the chefs." Terry stood up from his chair while Madison did her best to hurry. Chef or not, she wanted to go with him. "If Dick and Sara arrive while I'm in the office, tell them I said hello."

"I'll do that," John said.

"And if you would, don't tell them I'm on the phone with Emily."

John nodded, and didn't make Terry feel anymore self-conscious than Terry must have already felt by making the request.

To Madison's joy, Terry turned to her. "When you're finished, you can watch TV with the kids, or maybe get out your notebook, if it's here. I'm afraid I'll be busy, so you'll be on your own."

"I'll look after her," Izzy said.

For a long moment, Terry stood there and looked at Madison, and Madison felt her face grow warm.

Terry bowed his head, and left.

"Madison, would you help me gather the children's dishes?" Izzy got up from the table and started to clean the kitchen.

By the time Madison returned with the empty plates, John had gone into the living room and Madison found herself alone with Izzy. It was comforting to be with her, for Izzy had a way of
making Madison feel safe and comforted. Maybe it was because Izzy was a mother, and mothering someone besides her own children came easily to her. Whatever the reason, Izzy was good at it. Madison was grateful for the long stretches of silence punctuated with gentle remarks about how to store leftovers in the fridge, the best way to keep water spots off silverware. You dried them with a towel of course, but for several minutes, Madison could think about housework instead of Terry.

Then she followed Izzy into the living room to watch TV with John and the children. How she wished she could be someone else, someone who was normal and could give Terry all the things that she couldn't. Emily was normal, and she wasn't.

Sick with discouragement, Madison tried not to care.

* * * *

He'd fallen asleep, but the feel of someone moving on the bed woke him. For a second, he forgot he wasn't in prison, and panic welled in his chest. Then the soft touch of Abby's hand chased away the fear, and Jake closed his eyes a moment to thank God. He was safe, and he was with Abby.

"Sorry I woke you." She whispered the words against his ear. "Would you like some company?"

He smiled, raised an arm and let Abby cuddle against his shoulder. He wrapped his other arm around her, and hugged her until she winced with pain.

"Sorry."

"Don't ever be sorry for loving me too hard." Abby kissed his sweatshirt. "How's your throat doing?"

"Did you see her?" Jake stared at the ceiling and pictured the couch. "The way she looked at him."

"You mean, Uncle Terry?"

Jake nodded.

"I guess I didn't notice. How did she look?"

"Like she was seeing her first smallmouth bass."
Abby raised her head. "You're joking."

"I'm only trying to put it into context for you."

"Gut hooked?"

"I don't know yet. Maybe."

"You have to be wrong. She's probably just grateful, since he's been helping her out so much. Besides, he's interested in Emily."

"And if he's not?"

For a long, long moment Abby was silent.

"I want him to be happy. Whoever will make Uncle Terry happy, I'll count her as a blessing."

Massaging Abby's back, Jake kept turning the scene in his mind. Maybe he was wrong, but maybe, just maybe, he was right. Something in his gut said he hadn't been mistaken. If he wasn't, Terry would have a lot on his hands, for Madison was a deeply wounded person.

"I just want him to be happy, Jake. If he marries... when he marries, I just want him to be happy with the one he's chosen."

"I know." Jake massaged in small circles and smiled as Abby relaxed against him. "Part of me hopes he'll choose Madison because I know she probably needs him. But the other part of me thinks he'll be better off with Emily. I can't decide."

Abby patted Jake's sweatshirt. "Uncle Terry is going to have to do that for himself."

"Are you ever sorry how you decided, Abby?"

"What do you think?"

Jake grinned. "Please, say it anyway?"

"I've never, ever, been sorry I married you." Abby toyed with the edge of Jake's shirt. "You're a hardworking, God-fearing man. A good daddy, and a good husband. And I'll add to that, a very dear friend."
Jake lifted his head to see those sea-blue eyes looking back at him.

"I love you with all my heart, Jake. If Uncle Terry can love his wife even half as much as I love you, then he'll never be sorry for his choice."

Though Jake wanted to kiss Abby, the flu interrupted, and a cough fought its way up Jake's throat. He dropped back, turned his head so he wouldn't cough on Abby, and hacked away until he was able to make it stop. Leaning over the edge of the bed, Abby snagged a tissue from the night table.

"I love you, Abby. I love you so much, my throat hurts."

"Love isn't making your throat hurt." She laughed, gave him the tissue and was about to pull away when Jake tugged her back. "What is it?"

"I know coming here wasn't the best choice for your career. I talked to Dennis-- don't get mad, Abby, I made him give me his honest opinion. Except for reruns, you won't be on TV anymore and it'll slow your momentum. Say the word, and we'll go back."

"No." Abby's mouth firmed. "We're not going back."

"You're only saying that because of me."

"Jake, I meant it when I said that what isn't good for you, isn't good for me. That's the only way I'll ever see it. We're in this together. Besides--" Abby's fingers ran through Jake's hair and he fought to not let it weaken his resistance--"I want Ricky to grow up around Mom, Dad, and Uncle Terry. I want him to grow up loving this place as much as I did, and be able to step out the door and fly fish whenever the weather and the season permit."

Jake smiled. "Fly fishing is very important."

"Yes," Abby grinned, "it is."

"Promise me something, Abby. Promise me you won't be kind and only tell me what you think I want to hear. I need to know you're being honest with me."

"You've made this request, before."

"And you didn't promise."
A smile hinted around the corners of her mouth, and Jake felt his heart bump with happiness.

"I'll be as honest as I can, without hurting you."

"Don't be afraid of hurting me."

She said nothing, but returned to his arms and let him squeeze her as tightly as he wanted. Though he needed her close, he had to let himself relax so Abby wouldn't bruise again. The fever must have been going down, for he didn't feel over-warm with her snuggled against him.

Tired but happy, Jake closed his eyes and let himself drift to sleep.

* * * *

Steady breathing was key to success. Breathe too fast, and he'd hyperventilate, and that was no good. Terry needed to sound confident over the phone, but not scared or on the brink of a nervous breakdown. Even though he felt both.

The office door was shut, and Terry resisted the urge to lock it. He was alone, no one could possibly overhear unless they had their ear pressed to the door. Even so, he got up from his chair, opened the door and found the hallway empty. Not as though he'd expected anyone to willingly eavesdrop. The triplets could've been camping at his door though, waiting for him to come out, just like they did in the mornings.

Enough. They were playing with Ricky, so stop stalling.

Terry glanced at the time. He'd figured on calling at the top of the hour, but maybe Emily wasn't ready. He'd wait a few more minutes so he wouldn't come off as anxious or too eager.

Closing the door, he went back to his desk.

Hopefully, at least Madison was having a good time. It had been good to see her helping out in the kitchen. She'd needed the activity, a distraction to help stop those tears from falling while they softly broke his heart. Thank God, things were good again. Abby had apologized, Maddie had forgiven her, and now the family was back to normal. Or as normal as this crazy household ever got.

Man, he was tired. It wasn't a good day for a phone date with Emily, but they needed to talk and spend time together. This needed to get done. And the longer it took for him to pick up the
phone, the harder it got. He wasn't getting any younger, and neither was Emily. Time to bite the bullet, to dig down deep and do what almost every other man his age had already done.

Time to get serious.

The cell phone on his desk rang.

Oh, man. It was Emily. He answered the call and tried to sound casual, but when he leaned back in the chair, it gave a loud squeak that made Emily pause.

Terry decided to plunge ahead. "Believe it or not, I was just about to call you."

"You were?" Emily laughed. "I just put Dad to bed and wanted to take advantage of a quiet house. Not that Dad is noisy, but..."

"But you didn't want to talk in front of him."

She laughed. "Am I that silly?"

"No, not at all." Terry glanced at the door. "I'm in the office, and just made sure no one was listening in the hall. Not that anyone here would eavesdrop."

"Oh, listen to us." Emily sighed. "Anyone hearing us would think we didn't know each other. For pity's sake, we've been next door neighbors for six years. Talking to each other is certainly nothing new."

"Uh-huh."

Silence stretched out over the line.

"So--" Terry reached for something else to say besides "uh-huh." "How's everything going at your house? Did you ever get the Kool-Aid stain off the carpet?"

"No, I'm afraid we didn't. Mitch tried, but it simply would not come out. I told Dad we could throw a rug over it, but then I'm afraid he might trip."

For a moment, Terry wondered who Mitch was, then remembered the young man in the scrubs-- one of the aides who helped to take care of her father.

"I like rugs." Terry cleared his throat. "I've thought about putting one in the office."
"That would be nice." Emily paused, and Terry could hear her preparing to say something. "I was wondering... have you given any thought about our outing to Jersey City?"

"Pardon?"

"Our trip to Jersey City. So Dad can visit with Aunt Martha?"

"Oh, that. I can't say I have. There's been so much going on, lately."

"Yes, of course. AJ has just come back, so of course you've been busy. Still, I've been thinking..."

"Oh? About what?"

"About what a Providential opportunity this trip gives us." Emily paused, and Terry sensed she was gathering her courage. Why that scared him, he had no idea, only that it did. "I was thinking, since we're going into Jersey City anyway, why not combine it with a special occasion?"

"Like what? Is your birthday coming up?"

"No, not that." Emily blew out a deep sigh. "This was so much easier when I rehearsed it with myself, this morning. I could control both sides of the conversation, and I always had the right thing to say that could make you laugh."

"Am I supposed to be laughing?" he asked.

While she laughed, Terry swallowed hard. She had rehearsed something?

"I realize this is awkward," she pressed on after catching her breath, "but we know each other. We've been neighbors for years, we go to the same church, we have many of the same friends, and I believe we both want the same thing. We want a family. This is enough to build a future on, don't you think? I don't see why we have to drag things out, when we could settle it over the phone."

By now, Terry's mouth had gone dry. His tongue wouldn't work, and when it finally did, his voice squeaked louder than the chair.

"Settle what?"
"Terry, why don't we get married? We could use the trip as a honeymoon, and it wouldn't inconvenience Dad because he'd get to see Aunt Martha. They could visit each other, and we'd have most of the time to ourselves."

The world began to spin about Terry. He couldn't keep up.

"Of course, if you'd rather go someplace else, I'll understand. It's just that I can't afford to be away from Dad for very long."

Terry was quiet.

"I hope I'm right in thinking you want to get married. I would wait for a proposal, but if we know what we want, why should we wait?"

"Yes, I--" Terry rethought his words. Saying "yes" to anything right now, was risky.

Not unless he was accepting Emily's proposal. And that was what she was doing right now--proposing. It made sense to accept, especially since he'd been wanting all along to get it over and done with. And now he wouldn't have to dread getting down on one knee. Emily was doing it for him.

"What you say makes sense. I just... this is a little sudden."

"I understand. This is a big decision, so pray about it and think it over."

"Yes-- I-- I mean, I'll do that." Terry tried to breathe, but air wasn't getting to his brain.

"I'm just glad I was able to get the words out." Emily took a deep breath. "I've been dreading this proposal all morning, and it feels good to actually say the words and get them out in the open."

He should say something, but had no clue what to take a chance on. "Oh yes, if I had been you, I would have been dreading it, too?" Or, "I guess I should be glad I'm not you?" Neither sounded good to his dazed mind.

"Well, I'd better let you go. The house needs to be tidied before Dad wakes, and I still need to figure out what we're having for dinner. If I know him, he's going to ask, and there aren't any leftovers in the fridge."
"Oh. I'm sorry." It seemed a stupid thing to say, but she didn't have any leftovers. Was he supposed to be glad? Emily had to think through dinner, and he had to think through the rest of his life. But maybe she could fix sandwiches.

"I hope you're not angry with me. I felt the need to get things started before--" Emily stopped. "I didn't think it best to wait."

"Okay." Terry was grateful he hadn't used "yes," when "okay" would do just fine. He had to hang up. His thoughts were crashing into each other, and what came out wasn't making any sense. "I'll call you back."

"Thank you for understanding. I'll hear from you later, then."

They hung up, and Terry put his head between his knees before he passed out.

Sadness swallowed him alive, knocking the breath from his chest in a stunning blow. Why did he feel this need to cry? He should be celebrating, but instead of joy, he felt like his heart was snapping in two. He wanted a wife, didn't he? A family of his own?

Here was his chance to be normal.

Pushing off the chair, Terry sprawled out on the floor. Tears came to his eyes and he was glad the door was closed.

God wanted this, or someone as nice as Emily would never have proposed. He'd been praying for a day like this, and now God was answering that prayer. He could be a husband, one day be a father, and have a family that he could take care of and love. He wouldn't be alone. For someone who suffered chronic shyness around women, here was a golden opportunity to make it happen. This was Providence.

The tears wouldn't stop, and Terry wept as quietly as he could without drawing attention. All he needed right now was for John to rush in thinking he was having another breakdown. But maybe he was. Maybe he needed John.

"God, please help me."

Covering his mouth, Terry sobbed into his hands. The sadness overwhelmed him. He struggled to find an end to it, but all he found was more heartache. He should be happy. He wanted to get married, he wasn't giving up any freedoms he cared about, so why was he crying?
He must find a way to stop.

He moved to his knees, struggled to catch his breath, but they kept getting caught on sobs. He fought even harder for control. He had to conquer this, or it would conquer him.

Drying his face on the arm of his white, long sleeved shirt, he got to his feet and braced himself against the desk. He had to collect himself before John or any of the others saw him. Especially Maddie. She'd panic if she saw his tears, and think something was wrong.

He would be strong for Maddie.

Thankful for the half bath attached to the office, Terry went inside and splashed water on his face. It felt so good, he spent several minutes washing and calming down. His shirt got wet in the process, but he felt better. Like he could speak and not break into tears.

As Terry dried his face, he stared at the reflection in the mirror. He'd better give himself a few more minutes to regain his composure. For Maddie's sake, and for the sake of his family, he had to stay strong.

* * * *

When the children began nodding off, Izumi took the girls to their room for an afternoon nap. John carried Ricky into the master bedroom, and pulled out a blanket and pillow to let the little guy sleep off his full tummy. Nestled in a warm "blankie," Ricky easily fell asleep before John had even left the room. Taking a moment to watch the boy sleep, John felt a warm feeling sweep through him. That was his grandson. The thought made him smile as he closed the bedroom door.

He loved being a grandparent, even though the word suggested he was getting old. He had three little girls close in age to Ricky, so he couldn't be that old. Forty-seven didn't make him falling apart old, just older than what he'd been the year before. That was all.

He was the same age as Terry, and Terry was on the brink of getting married and starting a family of his own. John's smile wouldn't stop. If Terry started having sons right away, their children could marry each other and they wouldn't have far to travel for family reunions. There would be an age difference, but their family could stay all in one place, so what did that matter? John caught himself daydreaming, and went back to the living room.

Madison was still curled at the end of the couch, looking listless and a bit green around the gills. Maybe she was coming down with the flu, but surely it was too soon for that. Even flu viruses
needed more time to infect and make someone sick. The TV had no sound, and even though her eyes were on the set, John had the impression Madison wasn't watching. She was probably missing Terry. John took the recliner, picked up the remote and unmuted the program. Any sound at all was better than all this silence.

"Are you doing okay over there?" John looked at the couch and saw Madison nod her head. "If you need anything, speak up."

Those gray eyes didn't move from the TV, but still that blank, empty look. It was a bit unsettling.

Coming down the hall with a small blanket, Izumi went to the couch and covered Madison's legs. "I don't know if the damp weather is making the arthritis in your hip worse, but this should make you more comfortable. If you want to take a nap, you go right ahead, okay?"

A car door slammed out front. John got up to check the window, fully expecting to find the Doyles' car.

"It's Agatha," John called out, and Izumi hurried to answer the doorbell.

"This is a pleasant surprise." Izumi let Agatha into the house while a cold wind blew in around them. The rain may have stopped for the most part, but it was still a wet, windy day. "I hope you were warned at church. There may be flu in the house."

"Which is why I wanted to bring over this chicken soup." Agatha hefted a large dutch oven by its handles. "I know you probably have some broth on hand, but nothing is quite like homemade. Oh, hello, Madison. How are you, dear?"

Agatha couldn't wait for a response, for she needed to put down the pot, and Izumi took her into the kitchen.

The doorbell sounded, and for a moment, John thought maybe Agatha's husband had been left waiting in the car. When John opened the door, however, Dick and Sara Doyle greeted him with big smiles and even bigger hugs.

"How are they doing?" Dick asked as John showed them inside. "Is it really the flu?"

"I brought some homemade cookies," Sara said, showing John a colorful tin with a Christmas landscape printed on its lid. "I baked them only yesterday."
John took their coats as the women came from the kitchen, and Sara was thanked for the thoughtfulness of the food.

"I wanted to bring soup," Sara explained, "but Dick said we didn't have enough time to run by the store. It was Sunday after all, and I thought maybe this would be a good treat for the kids." The three women chatted, and went into the kitchen.

All the talk must have gotten AJ's attention, for Jake and Abby came down the hall.

"There they are!" Dick moved forward to give Jake a great big hug. "I can see your face, so I won't ask how you're feeling."

"I'm all right." Jake smiled, and sat down on the opposite end of the couch as Madison. "I warned you we weren't feeling very good, so if you and Sara get sick, it's not on my head."

"We were warned," Dick laughed, and gave Abby a hug. "It's so good to have you back in the area. You belong here, not in San Diego."

"Thanks for coming by," Abby smiled.

"Wild horses wouldn't have been able to keep me away." Dick laughed, and sat down next to Jake while Sara came into the room and welcomed AJ. Abby and Jake collected another hug, then Sara took a seat on the couch between Dick and Madison. "Where's my namesake?" Dick asked.

"Taking a nap in the master bedroom," John said, pulling out three dining chairs from under a cover by the wall. "He has a cough and a slight fever, but he had a good afternoon."

"The poor guy." Dick shook his head. "I suppose the welcome home party will have to wait."

"I'm afraid so," Jake said between coughs.

"Well, it can't be helped. You just pay attention on getting better, that's the important thing." Dick waited as Abby, Izumi, and Agatha took the chairs John had set out.

Reluctantly, John claimed the recliner. It was his usual place, but he wished one of the women had taken it, instead.

"Did you guys notice anything different when you went home?" Dick asked.
"We haven't even been through the front door yet." Abby gave a tired laugh. "Mom and Dad have been keeping us hostage."

The twinkle in Dick's eyes remained, but he said nothing more. John realized Dick was saving his surprise for later and let Dick change the subject.

"Where's Terry?" Dick asked.

"He's on the phone in the office." John kept the tone casual. "He probably won't be much longer, though."

"Speaking of Terry." Agatha gave a small sigh. "I wanted to let you all know what happened in church, this morning. Lauren Moore came today-- you know, the one Terry hired to be his superintendent? In front of everyone, Lauren assured Emily that none of the gossip about Terry is true. That in spite of everything, Emily should have no reason to doubt Terry's heart."

Izumi's mouth dropped open. "She didn't."

"Oh, she did. And in front of the entire congregation. I wanted to warn you all, in case someone says something that doesn't make any sense. I just covered my mouth and didn't say a word. There's no need to add to the gossip."

A groan rumbled in John's chest. Lauren Moore was a busybody, stirring up trouble where there was none-- even if it was under the pretense of being well-intentioned. He tried not to stare at Madison and realized everyone else in the room was doing the same. No one looked directly at her, and thankfully, not even Abby asked what Agatha had meant. Though Abby had to be wondering.

Poor Madison said nothing and kept her eyes downturned.

Once more, Dick made the effort and changed the subject, and none too soon. John heard movement coming from the hall as Terry came into the living room. Like a magnet, it drew Madison's attention away from the floor.

Smiling, Dick stood to shake Terry's hand. "I hear there's flu in the house, but don't let these young people give it to you. Outsmart them, and stay healthy."

"I intend to try," Terry smiled. John stood up, offered Terry the recliner, but Terry went and brought out another dining chair, and placed it next to Izumi's. "Have you told them about the you-know-what, yet?"
Dick looked puzzled.

"You know, your present?"

"Oh, that." Dick laughed. "I'll let them notice for themselves."

Abby leaned forward. "What are you talking about?"

"How about this weather?" Dick asked. "It's something, isn't it? Anymore rain like that, and we'll need a boat to get around, instead of a car."

Abby looked to Jake, and Jake shook his head.

"Okay. I won't ask."

"It's probably, good, Abby. If Dick is smiling..."

"He is." Abby looked about the room. "And so is everyone else. I have a sudden urge to go next door and see what this is about."

"I'll go with you."

Looking delighted, Dick stayed on the couch as AJ got up to put on their coats.

"Aren't you coming?" Jake asked when Dick remained where he was.

Dick only laughed. "Let me know if you notice anything different."

"Dad?" Abby looked a bit worried. "He didn't repaint the house, did he? It's still yellow, isn't it?"

"I meant, a change smaller than that," Dick laughed.

As Abby and Jake left, John noticed the splashes on Terry's shirt. The marks were mostly dry, and yet wet enough to betray what Terry probably didn't want John to know. It made John take a good, long look at his friend. Those red rimmed eyes, the pinker than usual nose, the way Terry kept sniffing-- they were tell-tale signs Terry couldn't keep hidden from John.

"How long will it take before they notice?" Agatha asked.
"I give them five minutes, tops." Dick grinned and folded his arms in perfect confidence. "You can't hide something like that, for long. It's big enough to be noticed."

A handkerchief pulled from Terry's pocket. He blew his nose, and for an uncomfortable moment, everyone looked at Terry.

"It was good of you to do that for AJ." John spoke up, and the center of attention moved back to Abby and Jake. "I know they'll appreciate it."

A few minutes later, the front door opened and John turned to see the young couple come inside.

"Well?" Dick asked. "Any changes?"

"The house was clean." Abby spoke with a straight face. "In fact, I think it might be cleaner now, than when we left."

This prompted a raised brow from Jake, and Abby burst into a smile.

"The new washer and dryer are amazing! I never thought I'd get emotional about household appliances, but Mom-- you should try those front loading doors. They're so solid, I had to pinch myself."

"German engineering will do it every time," John smiled. "Those are quality machines."

"Dick, you really didn't have to do that." Jake stepped forward, and Dick got up from the couch to accept the offered hug. "The washer and dryer must have been expensive."

"It's not much, compared to what you two deserve." Sara stood as Abby made her way to the couch to thank her. "After all you and Jake have sacrificed, we wanted to do something to show our appreciation."

"You didn't have to."

"Yes, we did." Sara squeezed Abby before letting her go. "I keep hearing how much Jake has been a blessing to the advisory board, and I know it hasn't been easy for you to let him attend those meetings. I know they sometimes get difficult, but you've been so brave. Both of you have. What you're doing is important, and might help others from suffering the way Jake did."

Jake shook his head. "We're just trying to do the right thing, that's all."
"But that's exactly why I admire you," Dick turned to the young man. "You've suffered for doing the right thing, and I'm proud to call you a friend. I couldn't be more pleased, if you were my own son."

Tears were in Dick and Jake's eyes when they embraced. The bond between those two men ran deep, and John was grateful his son-in-law had an influential man like Richard Doyle for a friend.

John saw Terry wipe a stray tear from his cheek, but had a feeling it wasn't because of the touching moment before them. Terry was here in body, but his spirit was far off. John knew something had happened in the office to make Terry cry, and even though Terry had been talking to Emily, something in John's heart knew this had to do with Madison.

While Dick and Jake visited, John got up on the pretext of needing to stretch his legs.

"Care to join me outside, Terry?"

When Terry left to get his coat, John asked Izumi to look after things, and Izumi gave an understanding nod. John wanted her to look after Madison while he and Terry were gone.

As they left the house, it amazed John that Terry didn't think to question the sudden desire to stretch his legs, or that he had asked Terry to go with him. It meant one thing: Terry had a lot on his mind.

* * * *

It was the second time John had stepped outside with someone that day, and Terry vaguely wondered if John was getting tired. Terry knew he sure was. Sadness had a way of stripping him of all energy, of sapping hope from his body. Why did his life feel like it was over, when by all rights, it was only beginning?

"So." John slid his hands into his coat pockets, and let Terry automatically head toward the water like they usually did when going fishing. "How did the phone date go?"

Terry couldn't answer.

When John didn't press for an explanation, Terry could no longer hold it in.

"I had a talk with Emily."
"That was the point of the phone date, wasn't it? To talk?"

"She did that, and then some." Terry paused to look out over the water. "I should be happy. I should be on my knees before God, thanking Him for this miracle. I've been dreaming of this day for so long, and now it's actually here."

"Terry, what happened?"

He shook his head in a dazed kind of sadness. "Emily proposed."

"She did?" John whistled. "That's kind of sudden, isn't it? What triggered her to ask now?"

"Emily said since we both wanted a family, and since we knew each other, it didn't make sense to drag things out. Don't quote me on it, but that was upshot. She also said something about not being able to afford to wait. Whatever that meant."

"Oh no." John shook his head, and turned his back to the house. "Agatha said Lauren was in church today, and that Lauren told Emily she shouldn't worry about all the gossip, and that Emily had no reason to doubt your heart."

It fit. Feeling numb, Terry kept walking. "I guess that would explain Emily's timing. Did Maddie hear any of this?"

"I'm afraid she did."

Terry punched the air, squeezed his eyes shut and forced his breath to calm.

"It sounds like Emily is getting scared, Terry."

"Yeah. That's the way it's looking."

"Does Emily have a reason to be?"

Terry didn't answer.

"How about this question?" John paused a moment as if in thought. "Did Emily say anything at all to you about love?"

"No, not one word."
"Do you think she loves you?"

"I have no idea." Terry gave a wild, helpless shrug. "I'm beginning to think I wouldn't recognize love, if it bit me on the nose."

"Do you love Emily?"

"I know I don't."

"But you're still considering the proposal?"

"Why shouldn't I?" Terry jammed his hands into the pockets of his coat. "God is answering my prayer. I wanted to get married, and now here's my chance."

"But you don't love her."

"Do I have to? Is love an essential part of a successful marriage, or an appendage you can just as easily do without?"

"If you don't love Emily, then don't marry her."

"Why shouldn't I? We've been neighbors for the past six years, haven't we? She's not married, and neither am I, so why not?"

"Listen to yourself, Terry. You're talking madness."

"No, I'm not. I'm so sane it hurts." Terry paced toward the water. "Other people make a loveless marriage work, so why couldn't I?"

"You can't be serious."

"But I am." Terry turned and pinned John with a look. "Love isn't mandatory, and I can't afford to be too picky. For whatever reason, Emily wants to marry me. She even suggested we use the trip to Jersey City as our honeymoon."

"The one with Stan and Aunt Martha? That trip?"
"Hey, who's side are you on? This is my chance, and I'm going to take it." Terry hadn't known he would until now. Hearing himself say the words out loud, depressed him; they held desperation, a ragged, frantic quality that frightened Terry.

"Then I suppose you think it's Emily, or no one?" John asked finally.

Terry nodded.

"What about Madison?"

"What about her?"

"Do you think she would marry you?"

"No." The desperation in Terry's heart deepened. "She said she likes me, and I have no doubt that she does, but Madison doesn't love me. Emily doesn't either, but at least she's willing to marry me. That counts for something, doesn't it?"

Terry could see the cogs in John's brain kick into overdrive. He was probably going through the church roster for a different alternative, a single woman who would fall in love with a chronically single bachelor.

"John, I have to do this."

"No, you don't."

"That's easy for you to say. You have a wife, four daughters, a son-in-law, and a grandson. I'm forty-seven years old with no other prospects in the foreseeable future. I'm old. I'm old and no one wants me."

"Terry, don't slip into despair."

"No one wants me, John."

"How do you know? We haven't approached anyone else. Izumi can still ask someone else over to dinner."

Terry smiled grimly. He had been right-- that was what John was doing. "Okay, who?"

"Calm down, Terry."
Terry glanced away, gritted his teeth and started down the shoreline by himself.

Francesca? Terry thought to himself. Doreen? How about that redhead-- what was her name? She was always giggling, but maybe she would like him. Maybe she would stop giggling long enough to fall in love.

John caught up, but Terry shrugged him away.

"Don't try to talk me out of it."

"Terry, I have one more question." John matched his pace with Terry's. "Do you love Madison?" It was the one thing John hadn't asked during this talk, and it forced Terry to a full stop. "It's a simple question. Do you have any feelings for Madison?"

"The answer is anything but simple."

"Terry. Do you love her?"

"I can't--"

"Yes, you could. Don't tell me what you think you should say-- just say the truth."

"But she's my responsibility. I couldn't do that to her."

"Just tell me the truth." John stood there and waited. "Just say it. If that's what you feel, then say it. You're making some huge decisions, and now isn't the time to be shy about your feelings."

A huge swallow pushed its way down Terry's throat.

"I don't know."

"I think you do. I think Emily's proposal wouldn't be so hard to accept, if something else wasn't getting in the way. Tell me I'm wrong."

Terry's chest tightened. His feelings for Maddie had been growing stronger with each passing day. He wanted to deny it, but found he could not.

"I love her."
The words had a quieting effect on Terry. He stood for a full minute without saying a word, then tried it again:

"I love her."

It came easier the second time.

"I have no idea what to do about it, but God help me-- I love Maddie." Terry fistèd a hand, and pounded it against his forehead. "She'll kiss me if I let her, and maybe she'll even hug me, but nothing more."

"You could ask her to marry you, Terry. She might say 'yes.'"

"No, she wouldn't." Terry was sure of himself on that point. "She'd hate me for saying the words, and I'd only hate myself for asking. John, what am I going to do about Emily?" Terry moaned when he realized he already knew. "It's either Madison, or no one. My heart won't let me do anything else."

The answer made John visibly wince, but John said nothing.

"If you didn't want me to say that, then why did you press me so hard?"

"Because it had to be said." Strong emotion came to John's eyes. "I don't want you to marry someone you don't love, not when you're feeling so much for someone else. I see you two together, and it's obvious you feel something for her. Until now, I hadn't been sure it was love."

"What if I'm wrong, and it isn't? I've never been in love before, so maybe I'm wrong."

John shook his head. "By loving Madison, you're giving up Emily. Like you just said, your heart has already chosen." John's voice sounded of resolve. "I want you to know that whatever happens, this family will stand behind you all the way."

"I can't tell her, John."

John gave a helpless shrug. "I don't know what else to say except that we love you, and you aren't in this alone."

"Thank you. Thank you for being such a good friend."
He hugged John, and John returned the embrace. Even though Terry’s head knew he had exchanged one heartache for another, his heart felt strangely lighter. He was in love-- it was official. The air held secret music, and electricity thumped through his veins in a wild dance that scared Terry. The future suddenly held an uncertainty he couldn’t even begin to untangle.

All he knew was the happiness of the truth in his heart. Terry loves Maddie. His pulse bumped to the happy music-- Terry loves Maddie-- over and over again, until the tune drummed deep into his brain. He didn’t know if he should tell Maddie, or what this might mean to her, but at least he knew what answer to give Emily.

Terry loves Maddie. Oh, that filled him with a joy like nothing else.

It would be a wonderful world if Maddie could only feel that way about him.

"Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water; but a man of understanding will draw it out."
~ Proverbs 20:5 ~
Chapter Twenty-two
Love Finds Terry

"LORD, who shall abide in Thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in Thy holy hill? He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaketh the truth in his heart."
~ Psalm 15:1 ~

Okay, she could survive this. It was possible. She could sit and smile at the Doyles whenever they tried to include her in the conversation, she could even nod or shake her head to "yes" or "no" questions without falling apart. People were still gossiping about them, but it wouldn't matter to Emily. Emily would know Terry didn't kiss anyone without being married to them, so it didn't matter if people talked. Before John had gone outside with Terry, John hadn't made any faces at Madison for getting Terry mixed up in gossip, and neither had Izzy. No one had yelled at her, and the world had kept spinning. It kept spinning, going round and round and making Madison dizzy with sadness. She wanted off. Or at least to hide in the bathroom with a knife until she would be dizzy with pain, instead of this cutting grief.

Since Terry hadn't kissed Madison, it only stood to reason he hadn't kissed Emily, either. Not yet. It was the lone ray of sunshine in Madison's storm-tossed, hurting heart. Though you couldn't hurt what you didn't have. The Dragon had sliced out her heart long ago, had taken what she'd never given, and had left a great big bloody hole that would never be filled.

Inch by inch, she was dying inside, but it didn't matter. She would survive. She would go on living and breathing and wishing she could be someone else, and Terry would marry the perfect Emily, and that would be that. This Mr. Darcy was marrying someone else, and no amount of wishing would make it any different.

Breathe, Madison. Just breathe and pretend it doesn't matter.

"And how about you?" The conversation must have swung back in Madison's direction, for Sara Doyle was looking at her with a smile. "I hope you haven't caught the flu, yet?"

Madison shook her head.

"That's good. Just because it's going around, doesn't mean you have to come down with it, too. Last year, Dick brought home a nasty cold, so I doubled up on my ginseng and Vitamin C, and sailed through without a sniffle."

Having no idea what to say to that, Madison nodded, and hoped it would be enough.
The front door opened, and John came inside with Terry. Oh, Terry. She watched Terry carefully and noticed he kept his eyes from her side of the couch.

"Is it still raining?" Dick asked.

"No, thankfully, the sun's coming out." John took off his coat as Agatha got up to leave.

The women hugged and parted with goodbye talk, and all the while, Terry looked to John, then Dick, then at the carpet before finally casting a sidelong glance at Madison.

Oh, how she wished Terry would kiss her, instead of Emily.

He glanced away, turned and went down the hall.

Terry. Her insides tugged after him, and she pushed aside the blanket covering her legs.

She came to the hall and found the office door standing open. She moved closer to see inside. Beside a solid looking desk, Terry pulled off his coat and slung it on the back of a chair. She couldn't know what he was thinking, but whatever it was, it consumed him entirely. He stared at the floor, not noticing her, and not making any move to sit down. Just that long, studied look at the carpet.

With an inward sigh, Madison leaned her head against the doorjamb and soaked in his presence. His cropped brown hair had been tousled from the walk outside, and she found herself envying the wind.

As he pulled out his cell phone, she could see the outline of a white T-shirt under his long sleeved white shirt. His muscles were thick, and she wished he didn't work out so much. A strong hand rubbed the back of his neck, then ruffled his hair before pulling out the chair and falling into the seat.

Someone in the living room made a loud noise. Terry looked up. And caught her watching him from the doorway.

For the longest time, Terry didn't move. He looked at her and kept breathing, even though her own breath had come to a crashing stop. She grew warm at the touch of his gaze, those deep brown eyes that held her so gently. His mouth opened. He looked away, moaned softly and said nothing.
"Terry?"

"What?" he asked, not looking up.

"I like you, Terry."

He blew out a long shaky breath.

"Terry?"

This time he didn't answer.

"I really like you a lot." Her words made him close his eyes. "Please..." her voice trembled to a stop when he opened them and looked at her. "Please, Terry."

"Please, what?"

She sucked in a breath and held it.

He sighed, and started to punch in some numbers on his cell phone.

"Terry, please?" She took a step into the office and saw his hand pause. "Please, do you really need her that much?"

When those direct brown eyes turned on Madison, she almost keeled over from the impact.

"Do you mean Emily?" He blinked hard. "What do you want me to say?"

"Say you don't need her."

Pain reached his eyes. He gripped the phone and looked away. For the longest time, he kept silent and stared holes into the carpet. "If I told you who I needed, you'd run from this office as fast as your legs could carry you, and you'd never even think to look back."

"Please don't marry her."

A slow breath moved through Terry's chest. She saw it rise and fall before he turned and cast his gaze on her. "I want a family, Maddie. I want a wife."

"But," Madison felt her insides tremble, "does it have to be Emily?"
"Do you have someone else in mind?"

She shook her head.

Terry met her gaze until she had to turn and look at the wall. She felt the weight of him looking at her, and reached to steady herself against the doorjamb.

"Maddie, you will always have my friendship. I will keep on giving you all the help I can-- that will never change. No matter what happens, that will never go away. Do you understand? Even if you say something that might make me sad, I won't leave you alone. Can you believe that?"

She nodded, bit her lip and looked at Terry. He was so pretty with that softly tousled hair, her eyes ached just looking at him. She turned to leave, but he said her name-- "Maddie"-- and her breath slammed into her chest and she couldn't move.

"Please stay." He spoke quietly, as though his words were for her, and her alone. "Close the door and please stay."

Voices came down the hall, and Madison hurried to shut the door. Whoever it was didn't come inside, but moved away in silence.

She stayed well against the wall, hugged herself with both arms and looked at Terry as he drew a deep breath.

"I'm afraid you're going to run away if I speak my heart." Terry stood and tugged off his necktie. "You're going to hate me."

"I won't."

"Yes, you will." He looked at her. "I know you. I know that anger you save for men who want you, and I know the look you're going to give me when I say the words."

"Just say you don't want Emily."

"I don't. Want. Emily." The way he spoke, the decided look in his eyes made her back towards the door. "Please don't run. Maddie, please--" His breath came so hard she could hear. "I have feelings for you."

"No." Madison felt behind her back for the doorknob.
"Please, I'm begging you. Don't run."

Helplessness sounded in his voice and it made her stop. Her chin hugged tight against her shoulder. She couldn't leave, and she couldn't look at Terry.

"Maddie, surely you already know what I want to say."

She shook her head.

He moved until she saw the toes of his shoes, his slacks and the faint scent of the bay. She could almost feel him.

"You know I can't marry Emily."

Heat stung her eyes, and Terry lightly tugged at her hand. Unable to look up, she leaned into his shoulder, and his arms came around her. He felt so good, and he wasn't going to marry Emily. Like a dream becoming real, she didn't know if she could trust it.

"Oh, Maddie." A shudder moved through Terry and she backed out of his arms. He looked at her with something she couldn't name, only that she felt gentleness as his hand came up to caress her hair. "I have feelings for you."

She blinked.

"These feelings go beyond friendship."

She pulled away even more.

"Maddie, I won't be angry. Whatever happens, you'll still have my help. Do you understand?"

She nodded, shook her head, and kept searching for the door behind her back.

"Please don't run." He took a deliberate step back and she gasped for breath. "Okay, I'm backing off. I won't say anything more. It can wait." He moved to the desk, watched as she tried to steady herself against the wall.

"You won't... marry her?" Madison forced out between breaths.

Terry shook his head.
That was all Madison wanted to hear. Groping for the door handle, she swung it open with a wild thud. She lurched into the hall, blood pounding in her ears as she went into the living room and fought for breath. She stumbled past Jake and the Doyles on the couch, the dining chairs with Izzy and Abby, the recliner with John, and fought her way to the front door.

Her fingers felt numb, and for a moment, she thought the door wouldn't budge. It flung open and she rushed into the cold, crisp air. She hurried around the house, toward the bay and tried to let the wide open expanse overwhelm the ache in her chest. Something hurt, but it wasn't her heart. She didn't have one.

Sinking to her knees, Madison forced herself to breathe. The world felt like it was spinning out of control, but she hung onto the ground with fisted hands and dug her fingers into the cold wet sand.

Someone touched her shoulder. She startled, blinked up at the sky and saw Izzy above her.

"It's all right." Izzy knelt beside her on the ground. "You're all right. No one's going to hurt you."

Tears blinded Madison. Izzy opened her arms and gave her a hug.

"It's all right, Sweetheart."

"He-- he said he had feelings for me!"

"Who did? Terry?"

Madison nodded and wept into Izzy's hug. The sobs were frantic, but Izzy didn't push her away and tell her she was stupid. The embrace didn't let up, and Madison clung to her as hard as she could.

"There, there." Izzy's voice gentled with each word. "Sometimes, things don't turn out the way we think they will, but God knows what we need. It's up to us to make the best of what we're given."

"But-- feelings!"

Izzy stroked her hair with such a comforting touch, Madison wished with every fiber that Izzy had been her mother.

"Terry has such a big heart, Madison, it appears it's grown to include you."
"It can't."

"Oh, I don't know about that." Izzy moved back a little, but her arms still embraced Madison in a fiercely protective hug. "I've been wondering who would be blessed enough to earn Terry's affection, and I'm happy to find it's to a sweet girl like you."

"But-- but feelings," Madison couldn't get the words out without stumbling over her own sobs.

Izzy looked at her and brushed the hair from her face. "It had to have taken Terry a lot of courage to tell you that."

"But..."

"If you feel anything, anything for him at all--" Izzy's voice broke-- "then please be kind. His heart breaks so easily."

Through her tears, Madison saw a figure half hidden behind the corner of the house. She saw the white shirt and knew it was Terry. He wasn't going to marry Emily, but he had feelings. Feelings for her. It didn't seem possible, and in a strange sort of way it seemed wonderful.

John came out to stand beside Terry, and Terry bowed his head.

"No." Madison struggled to her knees, and Izzy's arm helped her to her feet. "Is he crying? He's not crying, is he?" She prayed to God he wasn't. She sensed rather than saw Izzy at her side, felt the gentle hand when she stumbled and regained her balance. She struggled across the sand to Terry.

The pain in his eyes was real, as real as the sobs that choked the air and made it hard for her to suck in that next breath.

"Don't cry." She swallowed hard, reached up, and lightly touched his cheek. "Please, don't cry."

Terry moved his lips to her palm and pressed a kiss against her fingers.

She drew back but he looked at her with brown eyes misting with tears and she couldn't run away. What was happening to them? She didn't want the question answered, and even though her mind refused to think, something deep inside her drew her to Terry and wanted to ease his pain.
Izzy hugged an arm around her and Madison felt strength pump back into her system.

"I'm sorry, Maddie." Terry's voice had a husky tone, like he was holding back tears with his bare hands and about to fail. "I'm so sorry. I tried not to feel more. I fought it off for as long as I could."

Oh, he looked good, and she wanted to make it all right. She wanted his lopsided grin and the easy way he had of enjoying life without having to fight for every second of happiness. He deserved to be happy, and even though her insides screamed to bolt and run, she moved into his arms and let him embrace her.

"Oh, Maddie." Terry pressed a kiss against her hair. "Thank you. Thank you for this."

Madison squeezed her eyes shut and kept her arms at her sides. She wanted to leave, but he needed to be comforted. She knew what else he needed her for, but this was Terry and they weren't married so he wouldn't do anything to her. She struggled against the building panic. She owed him so much, the least she could do was let him hold her. She'd wanted a hug from him for so long, but now that he wanted her, all she could think of were ways to get free.

His arms eased away, but he kept pressing kisses to her hair. She raised her chin, hoping for an all-out kiss, but he moved back.

They weren't married, and the thought made her weak.

"Maddie." He sounded so desperate, she couldn't step away. "I'm sorry."

She nodded, leaned her head against his shoulder and let him stroke her hair. His touch was so gentle, it broke her already trembling heart. It was hurting, it was feeling, and it was awake and alive, and beating wildly in her chest. She did have one. She wasn't a monster, after all, a messed up freak without a heart. Emotion crowded the air until her last bit of oxygen had been used up and she had to back away. She tried a step backward and watched to see if it would make Terry cry.

"Do you still like me?" he asked.

Wiping away the tears, she nodded.

"Thank you for that. God bless you, Maddie." Terry sighed, and John put a protective arm around Terry. Though Terry looked calmer, his eyes were still pained when they met hers. "What are we going to do?"
How would she know? Madison had no answers, after all, she hadn’t been the one to feel so much she needed to confess anything. It wasn’t her problem. Terry looked so alone, even with John’s arm slung around him, she stepped back into Terry’s reach and let him pull her against his chest. Maybe it was her problem, after all.

"I like you so much, Terry, it hurts inside."

"I don't want you to hurt." The arms fell away, and Terry braced to stand by himself. She could see it in the way he tried to lean against the house, instead of John. "I'm all right. I just don't want you to hurt."

"I don't want you to hurt, either."

The words made Terry helpless. He shook his head and looked dazed, like he'd just been run over by a semi tractor trailer in a head-on collision. In a crash like this, there could be no survivors. "I never thought today would turn out like this." Terry wiped his face against the sleeve of his shirt. "I haven't told Emily." Terry looked to John. "I haven't called her yet. I was about to, when Maddie found me. One look at Maddie, and I had to tell her something. I tried-- I just couldn't-- I tried to tell her more." Terry stopped short and John nodded knowingly.

Though Maddie didn't want to guess what had been left out, she felt the air around her tingle; it held little bursts of electricity that zinged across her skin. Excitement filled the space between her and Terry, and it scared her to no end.

"Is Emily waiting for another call?" Izzy asked in a puzzled voice.

"Oh, yes. She's expecting it. I feel like a jerk, though. She proposed to me, and I go and spill my guts to someone else."

"She proposed?" A wave of fresh alarm coursed through Madison. "But you said you wouldn't marry her."

"I know, and I won't." A grin formed around Terry's mouth. "You don't have anything to be jealous of, I'm not marrying her."

"I'm not jealous." Confused, Madison moved closer to Izzy.

"She proposed." Izumi put a hand to her mouth and looked sad for Emily.
"You'd better call Emily and explain things," John said, giving Terry a squeeze around the shoulders before letting go. "If you'd rather, I'll make the call. Maybe the news wouldn't be so hard if it came from me."

"No," Terry shook his head. "It should come from me, I should be the one to tell her. Wow, I can't believe the mess I've gotten myself into."

"Terry?" She waited until Terry looked at her expectantly. "I like you."

Terry smiled.

"You didn't get into this mess all by yourself. I've liked you a whole bunch for a long time."

Thankfully, Terry's smile came easier now, and she let herself relax. He knew enough not to marry Emily, and that was enough. She had a heart, but that didn't mean she had to tell him about it.

"We're going to need a lot of help, Maddie. When I call Dr. Jacoby this week, it's going to be for the both of us. Is that okay with you? Do I have your permission?"

"A psychiatrist won't help. Nothing will."

"Please, let me try."

After the upheaval of the day, it was easy to nod "yes" to Terry. It seemed almost effortless, after all the tears that had been shed. If Terry wanted to try, and if it would make him happy, then she would let him. Nothing would come of it. The effort was pointless, but then, so was what she felt for Terry. She backed away from him, but he felt brave enough to smile.

She thanked God dearly for that smile.

"I'm calling Emily." Terry turned toward the house, looked behind him and gave a half chuckle. "I'd already made up my mind what to tell her, even before you found me, Maddie. But now I know this is right. I know it is."

Madison stared at him, then had to look at the ground when she realized she was glaring. She didn't feel anything of the sort, other than this powerful, all-consuming, joyful relief that he wouldn't be marrying someone else. That, and a stab of anger that he was acting like a man, instead of her sweet, harmless Terry.
When Terry went inside, Madison realized her socks were wet. She had rushed out of the house without her shoes, and after kneeling in the rain-soaked sand, even her jeans were damp. Instead of being screamed at, Izzy gave her a hug.

"Are you ready to go inside?"

Madison shook her head. She lacked the courage to face the others, especially a woman bursting through the living room like a woman who'd been set on fire.

"I'll get your shoes and coat, and we'll go for a walk. How's that sound?" Izzy was being so nice, Madison felt she couldn't possibly fit her gratitude into words. "You just stay put, and I'll be back in a moment." Izzy went into the house, leaving Madison to stand beside John.

Instead of a hug, John offered her a handkerchief. She used it to wipe her eyes.

A minute or two later, Izzy came out with coats for everyone, shoes, and a pair of thick, dry socks. Going to the picnic table, Madison sat on the wet bench and hurried into the socks and shoes. After they put on their coats, the three of them took a slow walk down the beach to help Madison calm down before going inside. And it was hard to calm down. Right now, Terry was calling Emily to let her know he couldn't possibly accept her marriage proposal.

For once in her life, Madison felt a twinge of sympathy for Emily. Anyone stupid enough to say "I do" to a man, got what she deserved, but for all of Emily's willingness to be claimed by a man, she wouldn't be getting this one. Emily might not be smart enough to be happy about it, but Emily was safe.

Which was more than Madison could say for herself.

* * * *

Gentleness would be key. He didn't want to come off as abrupt or unfeeling, especially when he owed Emily so much. If she hadn't proposed, he never would have gotten up the courage to blurt his feelings to Maddie. And Maddie had feelings for him, too-- even though she didn't seem to be able to get past the "like" stage. But love had to start somewhere, didn't it?

Terry shut the office door and tried to forget the bewildered looks he'd gotten from the people in the living room. They had known something was going on, but Terry didn't have the time to explain anything. In one afternoon, he'd been proposed to, had confessed his love for another woman, had admitted to strong affection to said woman, and now needed to find a way to get out of the previous situation with the first woman. For a man who'd never had much success
with the fairer sex, to be wanted by two women at the same time was unbelievable. It did something for his confidence, a slight boost to his male ego that didn't last when he remembered Maddie's sharp glare as he'd walked away to make this call.

For all of her trembling, she'd still had it in her to give the glare, that icy go-away look she so often gave men.

That look would've been enough to turn a polar bear chilly, let alone a hopeful man in the fresh bloom of love. Terry had better start praying the cold snap would soon break, or start wearing warmer clothing.

He moved to the desk and picked up the cell phone.

Please, God. Let Emily understand. At least in his desperation he hadn't said "yes" to her. At least he hadn't given his word. He'd never done anything like this in his life, and pleaded with Heaven that he wouldn't botch it with insincere sounding words.

He dialed Emily's number.

She answered on the first ring, and Terry fought to keep his composure.

"Hi, Emily. It's me." He hoped that wasn't as lame as it sounded. "I wanted to get back to you as soon as I had my decision. I hope now isn't a bad time."

"No, please go ahead. I want to get this settled."

"Good. That's the way I feel, too." Terry took a deep breath and prayed for wisdom. He dearly needed it. "I've been doing a lot of thinking, and I fully realize you weren't the one who started all this. I was the one who asked Izzy to speak in my place, when she told you about my wanting to find a wife. I feel so badly, because this isn't your fault. I take the entire blame for it on myself."

"I think I know what you're about to say."

"Emily, I'm deeply grateful that you would ask me, but I just can't accept. My heart won't allow it."

Silence. And then, "Is it Madison?"

"I'm afraid it is. I love her. I didn't know it myself until this afternoon, after your call, but it's strong enough I can't ignore what I'm feeling. I don't know how to explain it, it's like having the
wind knocked from your lungs, and yet you're stunned with joy at the same time. No air is going
to my brain, and I wouldn't be surprised if I dropped over and died. It's... it's kind of troubling,
really. I'm not sure what to do about it yet, but I feel happy. I think that's a good sign."

"It's good." Emily sighed and Terry prayed he wasn't breaking her heart. "I had a feeling this was
coming."

"I'm so sorry."

"Please, you don't have to be. You fell in love. It's just the way things are. There's no reason to
settle for a loveless marriage, when you can share those feelings with someone else. You're
blessed, Terry. I-- I'm happy for you."

"I can't marry without love, Emily."

"I know. And there's no reason you should." Emily's voice broke. "Thank you for telling me so
soon. It's good to have this settled, one way or the other." The matter-of-fact tone said she was
going to push through and not break down. She wasn't going to cry.

"I apologize for putting you through this."

"It's all right. I asked, and I have my answer. If you feel that way about Madison, then it's better
to know now, than when it's too late. I don't want a marriage where my husband is constantly
wishing he were with someone else."

"Then hold out for love, Emily. You'll find him, just hold out until God sends him your way."
Terry squeezed his eyes shut and prayed she wasn't about to cry. Something in him said that she
was. "God bless you, Emily. I pray someone will love you like you deserve."

"Thank you, Terry, but I guess some people are just meant to be alone. I appreciate your prompt
call, and hope we can still be friends--" Tears spilled into her voice, and she hung up before Terry
could say a word more.

He put down the phone, sank into the swivel chair and tried to tell himself she'd be all right. For
all of her forthright frankness, Emily had a soft heart and Terry sensed he'd just given it a deep
bruise. Hopefully, it wasn't too deep. She'd said he didn't have to settle for a loveless marriage,
and had an idea it meant she didn't love him. But it was the thought of giving up that dream, of
living out the rest of her life alone, that had pushed Emily to tears.
That he should be the one to push, made Terry sorrier than he could put into words. He knew what that sorrow was like, and even now, he wasn't so sure he still wouldn't be facing a similar future.

Maddie would never marry him.

The triplets were stirring with loud yawns and quiet chatter when Terry came out of the office. He stuck his head into the girls' bedroom and smiled at their blinking eyes.

"Nap time is over, munchkins."

The girls nodded, and slipped off the mattress, one by one.

"Your mom has cookies waiting in the living room. Mrs. Doyle brought them, so make sure you say 'thank you' when you see her."

That got smiles from the girls, and they went to the living room while Terry moved into the master bedroom to get Ricky up. The boy was on his side, wide-awake and playing with his toy firefighter. Abby had said Ricky named him Stan, and the name reminded Terry of Emily's father. His name was also Stan, and Terry worked to put away his guilt. He wouldn't be there to help Emily with her frail father, and he wouldn't be able to take them to Jersey City to see Aunt Martha.

It wasn't a very good feeling.

"Hey, Ricky." Terry moved to the bed, and the boy looked up from his play. "Do you remember the Doyles? They came to your daddy's graduation. They're visiting with your Mommy and Daddy right now, and I know they'd like to see you. What do you say?"

Though Ricky looked uncertain, when Terry picked him up, Ricky hugged Terry around the neck.

"Thank you." He patted Ricky's arm. "I needed that." After making sure Ricky had Stan, Terry carried the boy down the hall and into the living room.

The effect was immediate.

"There's my namesake!" Dick stood up, and even though Ricky looked a bit confused, he didn't fight when Terry handed him over to Dick. "This is one big boy! Isn't he getting big, Sara? I can't believe how much he takes after his daddy. What's this? A fireman?"
Ricky nodded, and looked to Jake for help.

A glance about the room told Terry what he needed to know. John and Izzy were probably outside, trying to calm Maddie down before bringing her back to the house. Terry caught Jake telling Ricky, "Say 'hi' to Grandpa," and had to smile.

It figured Jake would want Ricky to call Dick, Grandpa, for the Doyles were almost like parents to Jake. Dick beamed ear to ear, sat down on the couch and held Ricky like a pleased grandparent. Grandma Sara asked about the firefighter, and it broke through some of Ricky's shyness. While the girls crowded around the tin of cookies Sara had brought, Ricky explained how vital Stan was to put out fires. According to Ricky, it was "super 'portant." Then his eyes strayed to the tin, and Sara rewarded him with a large chocolate chip cookie that was bigger than both his hands.

"Thank you." Ricky smiled, and accepted another cookie from one of the triplets. Terry didn't know how Abby felt about sweets, but the boy looked content with his treats and sat quietly on Dick's lap while he ate.

Dick looked to Terry with a question in his eyes. "Is Madison all right? We saw her go out, and she looked scared."

Sara nodded. "I hope she's not coming down with the flu."

"No, I don't think it's that." Terry sank into the nearest chair, which happened to be the recliner. In a way, Terry wished John were sitting there, so John could say what Terry was having a hard time confessing in front of so many. Especially in front of Abby and Jake. He opened his mouth to say "I love Maddie," but closed it when his heart jumped into his throat as the front door opened.

John came in, and smiled at the Doyles. "I was just talking to Izumi," he said, holding the door open for Maddie and Izzy, "and we agreed you should stay to dinner."

"Oh no, we couldn't impose." Sara shook her head even though Dick looked ready to stay.

"Nonsense, we'd love to have you." Izzy gave a sincere smile and helped Maddie to the couch. "Cover your legs," Izzy said, and then collected Maddie's coat before shedding her own. "I have dinner all planned out, and if you turn us down, we're going to have more food than we'll know what to do with." It was said with a lighthearted laugh, though Terry knew good and well that
they’d already had the big meal for the day. But if Izzy thought she could put something together for their guests, then more power to her.

An offer to help was on Terry’s lips, when Sara beat him to it, and it was settled. The Doyles would stay to dinner. The girls sat on the carpet, munching away on their appetite spoilers, while Ricky kept working on his cookies and listened to the grownups.

In all the banter, no one had answered Dick’s question about Maddie, and it prompted a curious look from Abby. Jake hadn’t been so easily distracted, either, but they kept silent and let John and Izzy lead the discussion away from Maddie.

"It’s too bad the sunlight is fading." John put away Agatha’s chair, put a lid on the cookie tin and placed it out of the children’s reach. "If the rain had stopped any sooner, we could’ve gotten in some fishing."

"I hear you, John. I hear you." Dick laughed and bounced Ricky on his knee. "Sometime soon, I’ll take you up on it." Ricky gave a cough, but Dick didn’t seem to mind in the slightest. When he started in on what Terry trusted would be a child-safe story about Dick’s time as a young correctional officer when he was just starting out in the criminal justice system, Terry slid his gaze back to Maddie.

The recliner afforded a better view of her, and it was harder for her to ignore him. His eyes caught hers, and she looked away only to shyly look back. Nervous shock slammed into sheer joy, and danced up and down Terry’s spine without mercy. So this was love. Love had found Terry, or Terry had found love. He wasn’t sure which, only that what he felt was one of the most precious, tender feelings he’d ever had. It overwhelmed him, squeezed the air from his lungs until he felt as breathless as Maddie looked.

Her eyes darted away and he was left to reel in their wake.

Oh, how he loved her. If the Doyles hadn’t been there, and if AJ hadn’t been in the room, and if Maddie had been somewhere else, he would have admitted it out loud. Right there, without any hesitation whatever.

"Uncle Terry?" Abby was looking at him. "Are you okay?"

"I’m fantastic." Terry leaned back in the recliner and couldn’t stop grinning. "In fact, I’ve never felt better."

A smile shadowed around Jake’s mouth, but Jake said nothing.
As Dick continued with his story, Maddie looked at Terry again, and Terry plunged back into the stunned shock, to gasp and find his breath. If he wasn't enjoying himself so much, he could wish Maddie would cut it out and stop looking at him.

When Jake coughed, Ricky offered his daddy a bite from his cookie.

While Dick told his story to a rapt audience, Sara and Izzy went into the kitchen to start dinner. Late afternoon had melted into early evening, and Terry was thankful the day was drawing to a close. He didn't know how much more he could take. His nerves had flexed back and forth like a coat hangar, and now that things were calming down, he let himself relax and enjoy what remained of the day.

The cell phone in his pocket started to belt out the theme song for "Bassin' the Weeds with Dennis," and while Abby cooed about how sweet and loyal her uncle was, Terry tugged the phone out of his pocket.

"Hey, I'm doing my part to support your career," Terry said, putting the phone to his ear. "Say what you want, but this family sticks together." The voice on the phone was hard to hear over the laughter in the living room, and Terry got up to go into the hall to hear better.

"Terry, sorry to break in on your Sunday like this." It was Henry Peterson, and by the formal tone of his voice, Terry was reminded that his friend was also the sheriff. "Do you remember I asked Madison for her former address so I could do a little checking on her background?"

"Yes, vaguely." Terry didn't know whether to be nervous or not. He'd quite forgotten Henry had done, (or was doing), a background check on Maddie. "Did you find anything?"

"Now that's an interesting way to put it." Henry sounded as though he were getting comfortable on a couch, his voice deliberate but laid back in a controlled manner that had Terry wishing Maddie had never given him her address. "I say interesting, because I followed up and contacted the man currently renting Madison's former home. He'd never heard of Madison, but he gave me the landlady's number. I called it, and didn't hear back from her until this afternoon. Actually, this morning-- she left an answer on my machine, but I didn't know about it until we got back from church. Which, now that I think of it, how are you and the family doing? I hear you have the flu."

"Thanks, we're good." Terry turned his back to the living room as the children scurried past him on their way to the girls' room, probably to play with their Mac. "Abby, Jake, and Ricky have a touch of fever, but they're doing well."
"That's good to hear. Like I was saying," Henry lost no time getting down to business, "I returned the landlady's call-- a Mrs. Jack Snyder-- that name ring a bell?"

"No, should it?"

"Just wondering," Henry said with a hint of serious curiosity that made him sound very much like a cop. "That woman is quite a character. When I talked to her, the first words out of her mouth were, and I quote, 'You can't arrest me.' I explained no one was in trouble, that I was just following up on a background check, and wondered if she knew a Madison Crawford."

"And?" Terry pressed.

"She said she'd never heard of her."

"But, she had to have. Maddie lived there before she came to Three Mile Bay-- I remember Maddie commenting about the landlady helping her out." Terry left out the fact the landlady had unchained Maddie, and Terry's mind struggled to make sense of what he was hearing.

"Well, I pressed that fact home to Mrs. Snyder, I told her that I knew Madison had lived in one of her rentals; she said, if that's what I'd been told, then she couldn't deny it. I asked again, had she heard of Madison Crawford. Yes, came the answer, but she wasn't responsible for her tenants, and what they did behind closed doors. I asked what she meant by that, and she shut up tighter than a clam about to be served up raw on someone's plate. It didn't take a cop to know she was hiding something."

"Go on."

"When I finally got her talking again, she said Madison had left some things behind, and did she want them forwarded to her new address? If not, Mrs. Snyder was going to throw everything away, and had I not called when I did, she would have done just that. So I'm calling you, so you could ask Madison what she wants Mrs. Snyder to do with her things." There was an ironic tone to Henry's narrative, one that hinted at sarcasm and disbelief that things were as innocuous as it seemed.

"Okay." Terry tried to think. "Do you have any idea what Mrs. Snyder is hiding?"

"Not a clue. But I'll tell you what, that woman was scared." Henry paused. "I don't have a good explanation for Mrs. Snyder's behavior, but the background check on your friend, Madison,
came up clean. No criminal record, no wants, no warrants. Aside from having an interesting
landlady, her story checks out."

"Okay. That's good." Terry swallowed hard. "Just give me a moment, and I'll ask Maddie what she
wants done with her things."

"Sure enough." Henry waited on the line as Terry covered the cell phone and moved into the
living room.

"Maddie, come here a moment, would you?"

While Dick, John, and Abby swapped fish stories, Maddie got up and came into the hall.

"Sheriff Peterson had a phone call from Mrs. Snyder."

The news turned Maddie several shades whiter, and she slunk back a few steps.

"She said you left some things behind, and wants to know if you'd like them sent to your current
address."

"I didn't leave anything behind."

"She says you did."

Shaking her head, Maddie's arms wrapped around herself in a tight hug. "I don't know what she's
talking about, I cleaned the house out. What I didn't take or sell, I threw away."

Remembering the thin grocery bag Maddie had brought when Terry had found her at the Old
Mill Campground, Terry figured there hadn't been very much to sell or throw away.

"Mrs. Snyder says she has some of your things, Maddie. She'll throw them out if you don't speak
up."

Maddie backed toward the living room.

"What do you want Sheriff Peterson to tell Mrs. Snyder? He's waiting for an answer."

"Why did she call the sheriff? Am I in trouble?"

"Oh, no. Henry was only following up on a background check, that's all."
"My background check?"

"That's right." It seemed Terry hadn't been the only one to forget that Sheriff Peterson had asked for her former address, and other information, so he could check and make sure their newest citizen of Three Mile Bay wasn't wanted by the law. Though Henry usually kept abreast of the people moving into the area, Terry had a feeling his run-ins with Victor had made Henry more wary of the people Terry tried to help.

"Could I have it sent to my apartment?" Maddie gulped so hard Terry could hear it in her voice. "Do we have to send it here?"

"No, there's always your place. Is that what you want?"

After a long moment of hesitation, Maddie nodded, and Terry got back on the phone.

"Henry, tell Mrs. Snyder to send it to Maddie's apartment," and Terry rattled off the address by heart. It was only a digit different than his own. "Did Mrs. Snyder happen to say what things she has?"

"Nope, only that she wanted to get rid of them. She didn't even mention the cost of shipping, so I have a hunch she's eager to get rid of whatever Madison left behind."

"Maddie said she didn't leave anything behind."

"Well, now. That's curious." Terry could hear Henry thinking, could all but hear the gears turning in his friend's mind. "I'll call Mrs. Snyder back, and give her Madison's address. Interesting. Very interesting. You take care, Terry." And with that, Henry Peterson hung up.

Looking frightened, Maddie tugged at Terry's shirtsleeve. "Am I in trouble?"

"No, you're fine. Mrs. Snyder didn't return Henry's call until this morning, and if she hadn't asked what to do with your things, I don't think he would have even bothered to call us." Terry eased into a smile for Maddie's sake. "It's all right. Nothing bad will happen."

"Are you sure?"

The worry in her face troubled Terry. It made sense, considering what Maddie had been through with the Dragon. "I don't think there's anything to worry about. Mrs. Snyder didn't say very much to Sheriff Peterson. He said she was as tight as a clam." Terry paused before he let Maddie
go back to the living room. "How much does Mrs. Snyder know about your time with the Dragon? You told me she took off your chain after he died."

"She found me," Maddie nodded, speaking in such a frenzied whisper Terry was afraid the others might overhear. "I don't think she knew about the chain until she found me. I think it scared her. She said I had to go."

Terry nodded, his thoughts working as he went. "I have to ask something, but I don't want you to panic. Do you know if the Dragon abused anyone else?"

"I'm the only one. I'm positive."

Terry was surprised at her certainty.

"He always bragged about the bad things he did, like how many prostitutes he saw. I even know all the ugly stuff he did when he was a boy, and I was the only one he hurt like me."

"All right." Terry sucked in a breath. "I can't see dragging the law into this when the abuser is already dead, so there's no need for Sheriff Peterson to know. Mrs. Snyder isn't talking, so as far as I'm concerned, no one has to find out about your chain. Let the dead bury their dead, and the let living get on with her life."

Looking a bit relieved, Maddie nodded, and obeyed when Terry said she could go back to the couch.

Terry's hands were shaking. He put away his cell phone, pressed his hands together to calm himself and get his mind right. The past had just intruded on the present, and it rattled his courage. He prayed he was doing the right thing in not telling Henry anything more than absolutely necessary. Maddie wasn't in any kind of trouble, and Terry thanked God for that peace.

As Izzy announced dinnertime, Terry left the hall to enjoy a meal with Maddie and the others.

* * * *

Hearing that name come out of nowhere had been a shock to Madison. She'd hoped her past was firmly behind her, and maybe it still was. Although what in the world Mrs. Snyder had wanted to send her, was beyond Madison. She'd gone through every room, sold what she could, kept a few things to take with her, and stuffed everything else into dark trash bags. She'd watched the man who took away the trash, dump them into the back of the trash truck. She'd
even followed the vehicle down the street, just to make sure no one took anything out of the bags, but hadn't been able to keep up.

Everything had gone into the trash or had been sold. Nothing had been left. Maybe Mrs. Snyder had found something Madison had missed, but Madison couldn't imagine what. Worry knotted her stomach but she forced herself to eat everything on her plate. Terry would worry, and she didn't want that. During the prayer before dinner, everyone had held hands, but Terry had been on the other side of the room, so she hadn't been able to feel his hand around hers. Terry had said she wasn't in trouble, and she tried to remind herself of that when worry got the best of her.

She had to trust God, and push the bad stuff aside.

After dinner, the Doyles said goodbye, and Sara gave Madison a great big hug.

"I hope you'll be very happy here," Sara said, and Madison was too tired to wonder what she meant. Dick made a move to hug her as well, but Madison ducked behind John and escaped the goodbyes without being touched again.

After seeing the Doyles out to their car, Abby and Jake came back inside and shut the door.

It didn't take Abby very long before she turned to Terry. "What happened, earlier? We saw Madison run out of the house without her shoes and coat. Mom went after her, and then you, and then Dad. Then you come back, only to disappear into the office. What's going on?"

A thoughtful look settled over Terry's face. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his slacks, glanced at Madison, and smiled.

"We've been working a few things out. For one, I'm not marrying Emily, and told her so this afternoon."

"Really." Jake stood beside Abby and raised his brows. "How did she take the news?"

"I would have thought your first question would be 'why'?"

"Well, why isn't too hard to figure out." Jake didn't look in Madison's direction, but it was implied. Madison could feel it.

Izzy and John looked to Terry, for like Madison, they didn't know the outcome with Emily, either.
"She was disappointed. I tried to be as kind as I could, but when she hung up, she was crying."

"Oh, no." Izzy covered her mouth. "I'd better call, and see if there's anything I can do."

"Not much you can do, except apologize."

"But, John, I was the one who asked her to come to dinner. I picked her."

"Yes, but you don't want to embarrass Emily by making a bigger deal over it. Let things die down a while before trying to give her any comfort. Emily isn't put together with flower paste. She'll get over it, and move on."

"But, John--"

"At least wait until tomorrow before calling," John sighed.

"So..." Abby looked at Madison and let the remark hang in the air.

With a confirming nod, Terry smiled. "I have feelings for Maddie."

"Are you getting married?"

"No."

His quick answer calmed Madison.

"Not yet."

Madison's calm fluttered away.

"We have a lot to work out, and I don't know yet if she'll ever accept me as anything but a friend."

She wouldn't-- Madison was sure of it.

"We're going to talk to Dr. Jacoby when he comes back from vacation, and see if we can't get him to take us."

"Dr. Jacoby?" Jake asked, and the young man's face turned sober. "Have you talked to him?"
"No, he's coming back from vacation this week."

"He won't take you and Madison on as patients." Jake folded his arms while the children watched TV with the volume turned low. "He was my therapist, as well as Abby's, and he won't want to take anyone else from my family. It would be too difficult, even unethical, as far as he would be concerned. He only saw Abby because of me. I think it's like a lawyer having a conflict of interest. He won't do it." Jake looked pained to say it, and Terry looked pained to hear it.

Madison, on the other hand, breathed a deep sigh of relief. She wouldn't have to go, and quietly rejoiced as she stood beside the couch.

"You could ask Dr. Jacoby, and maybe he could give a referral," Jake suggested. "You need someone especially suited to treat PTSD, and he would know all the best therapists in the area. She does have PTSD?"

Terry nodded, and Madison wondered what they meant.

"I can't say I'm surprised," Jake said. "Maybe therapy would do you some good, as well."

"I don't know about that." Terry quieted, and for a long moment, the room sank into silence besides the TV. "Thanks for the information," Terry said finally. "I'll call and ask Dr. Jacoby for a referral."

Regret tugged at Madison. Maybe she shouldn't have given her permission to Terry to contact a psychiatrist for "them." Terry was hoping for something that would never, ever happen, and it seemed almost cruel to let him try. But if she said "No, absolutely not," Terry would be sad, and she didn't want that, either. She felt trapped, and hoped she would be able to find a way out without hurting Terry. Izzy had said his heart broke easily, and Madison believed it.

While the conversation drifted to their visit with the Doyles, Madison slipped into the kitchen for a glass of water. Her mouth felt dry and she wanted some time to pull herself together.

From the kitchen, she heard Terry say he needed to take Maddie home, and it caused her some pain. How she wanted to curl up next to Terry on a couch somewhere and go to sleep, to just know that she was safe and could sleep without having to think about anything at all. She stayed out of the living room for as long as she dared, wanting to put off the trip back to her apartment.

To Madison's wonderment, Abby came into the kitchen, leaned against the counter and smiled at her. "Uncle Terry is saying good night to Ricky and the girls."
"Oh," Madison said, and washed her glass in the sink.

"Uncle Terry's going to sleep at his apartment tonight," Abby went on, "so he wanted to warn my sisters not to bother camping outside his bedroom door in the morning." Abby paused. "I don't know everything that's going on between you and my uncle, but I want you to know I'm glad he found you."

Madison looked at her. Abby had meant it.

"He looks happy," Abby smiled. "It's nice to see him hopeful about the future, for a change. After his breakdown, he concentrated on getting through the day in front of him, and nothing more. He wants a family, and that's good. It means he's thinking about the future." Abby sighed, and gave another smile. "I think he was supposed to find you."

Putting the glass away, Madison tried to be honest with Abby. "I can't marry him."

Abby gave a slight shrug. "I just wanted you to know that we're glad you're here."

Though Madison couldn't understand, Abby didn't look as though she regretted her words. Instead, Abby smiled and went to get something from the fridge to help Ricky's cough.

"Maddie?" Terry called from the living room. "Are you ready to go?"

The prompt hurried Madison into the next room, only to find Terry already in his coat. He helped her into hers, then waved to the munchkins watching TV.

"Don't give your daddy and mommy a hard time when they say you have to go to bed."

"We won't," Debbie promised, coming to her uncle with bright eyes and a smile. "Are you going to eat breakfast with us?"

"Probably not. But," Terry added quickly, "I wouldn't miss lunch with you, for the world. You can count me in on those tuna fish sandwiches your mommy is planning for tomorrow." He stooped to give the girl a hug. "Be good." Since Debbie had gotten a hug, the other two clamored for one as well, and even Ricky stood in line for his turn. When all of the kids had been hugged and kissed, Terry opened the front door.

"Go on, before they beg you to take them with you," John laughed.

"Will you need me for anything tomorrow morning?" Terry asked, his jeep keys in hand.
"Not that I can think of. If you want to stay out, you don't have to clear it with me."

"I know," Terry smiled, "but I don't want to leave you hanging."

"If something comes up at work, I have your number." John nudged him out of the house, and after a wave to Izzy and AJ, Terry stepped outside. Madison followed, and automatically went to the garage while Terry lingered by the front door.

"Thanks for everything, John."

"Hey," John smiled, "you'd do it for me. Good night."

The door closed, and Terry sighed loudly. It was a happy sounding sigh, one that said he was glad to be alive. Madison waited by the garage, more relieved than she liked to admit that he would be sleeping at his apartment tonight. It meant he would be close by.

"Just look at all those stars," Terry said, pushing off the front step and heading for the garage. "The sky is so clear, you could almost see the end of the universe, right here from Three Mile Bay."

She looked up at the dark heavens strewn with tiny lights. She couldn't see what he did.

Not needing a reply, Terry opened the garage, got into his jeep and started the engine. He pulled out, and Madison climbed into the passenger seat while he went to close the garage. She didn't want to think about the psychiatrist, or Mrs. Snyder, or even her full tummy after having eaten so much dinner to keep Terry from worrying. All she wanted to do was sleep.

On the drive into Chaumont, Terry let her sit in silence and didn't try to get her talking. He hummed a tune, and smiled to himself like someone with a happy secret. Abby was right. He was happy.

Trees silhouetted in dark moved past Madison's window, and every now and then she glimpsed the bay between their branches. Moonlight glinted off the water before slipping out of sight when Terry headed inland. Though she didn't recognize the streets in the dark, she knew they were nearing home by the sigh that came from Terry. He said nothing as he pulled into the apartment parking lot, came to a stop in front of his place and shut off the ignition.
She took off her seat belt, and sat there, waiting for him to either get out, or to at least tell her to. After another sigh, Terry pushed open the driver's side door. He let it fall shut, rounded the hood and opened her door with a half smile.

"Home sweet home," he said as she stepped outside. "Hold up, and I'll walk you to your front door."

"It's just a few feet away, Terry."

"Hey," he grinned, and lightly swung the passenger door shut, "you're supposed to let the man walk you to your door, if he offers. The only option you have is to graciously accept."

He was in a good mood, and it lightened Madison's heart until she was smiling, too. Oh, she had a heart, and right now, it was beating to a happy tune, a tune that was all because of Terry. She waited, and when he came to her side, she let him lead the way. It really was just a few steps, but he seemed to take delight in making the effort.

"There," he sighed as they reached her door, "nothing to it. Do you have your key? Oh, wait a moment, I think I have it in my pocket. Here it is." He unlocked her door, gave her the key and took a step back. "I know it's customary to kiss the girl right about now, but..."

"We're not married."

He nodded. "We could fix that, though."

"Terry, I can't marry you."

He held up his hands in self defense. "At least we'll have something to talk to the therapist about."

"I wish you wouldn't make that call, Terry. It won't do any good."

A sigh rumbled through Terry. He smiled, took a step back and waited for her to go inside. "Do you need any help making your couch? If I remember right, it's a mess in there."

"It's okay, I can clean it up." Madison moved past him through the open doorway. She flipped on the living room light switch, turned, and looked at Terry. "If I didn't like you so much, I wouldn't try to warn you. I'm messed up, Terry. It's too late to try and fix me so I can be normal like you and everyone else."
"I'm not normal, Maddie."

She shook her head. "It's too late for me."

"Then why did you tell me not to marry Emily?" When Madison didn't reply, Terry gave his handsome, lopsided grin. "Good night, Maddie. I'll see you in the morning." He turned to go, but didn't leave until she had closed the door. Before he could try the handle, she locked it, then put on the deadbolt and chain. The handle jiggled, and then several moments later, she heard Terry's apartment door swing shut.

She looked about the cold room, went to turn up the thermostat, then headed for the couch room to fix the mess she'd made from the night before. With the lights on, she could see everything, and it wasn't as hard as she'd feared before the couch had been made, her pillows had been fluffed and put back in place, and the blankets were neatly tucked and ready for bed.

The cell phone in her pocket rang, and she pulled it out to find Terry's number glowing on the small screen. She flipped it open and sighed with contentment when she heard Terry's voice.

"Keep the phone close by, Maddie."

"I will."

"See you in the morning," he said, and hung up.

She closed the phone, tried to suck in a breath and realized the emotion that was drowning her. It bubbled up somewhere inside her and threatened to overflow to the point of bursting. It pushed at her, sending panic into an already tired body.

Thoughts came too rapidly to slow down and hold onto for help. Walking on water-- a lopsided grin-- a battle cry written in her notebook somewhere-- painful soft kisses on her hair-- tumbled feelings that came from deep inside her but had no way to spill out. A thought zipped through her that she should try something else, but she couldn't think past the need, and in her frenzy, all but ran to the kitchen.

She wanted Terry, and hurried into the bathroom to settle herself the only way she knew how. Through pain.

* * * *
Long after he went to bed, Terry stared up at the ceiling and couldn’t stop smiling. Love felt different than he’d thought it would. It was a strange blend of terror and sheer joy, emotion that stirred his blood like lightning on a soft summer’s night. If only she loved him, he could slip into this romantic insanity without a fight. He’d strike his colors, run up the white flag and propose to her just as soon as he possibly could.

They needed help.

Tomorrow morning, Terry would call Dr. Jacoby. Technically, the good doctor wasn’t supposed to be back from his vacation yet, but this was important. The mental health and wellbeing of two people depended on it. There was an intensity about Maddie that Terry could feel even standing on the other side of the room. Something special was happening, and Terry didn’t want to miss a single thing. Each day with Maddie was tucked away in his heart, and he prayed this was only the start of a lifetime of days such as this...

Only without the upheaval of making life-changing decisions, plunging heart over sneakers in love with a woman who steadfastly refused to marry him. Though today, he happened to be wearing oxfords. He prayed Emily would never know the feeling of being turned down by someone she actually loved. It was pure torture.

He didn’t remember falling asleep, but something ding-donged in Terry’s dreams. It came again, and he blinked open only to find himself staring at the ceiling. Thinking it was just a dream, he rolled onto his stomach, closed his eyes, and was shaken awake by the ding-dong of a doorbell.

His doorbell.

Pushing back the covers, Terry climbed out of bed, padded down the staircase in his socked feet and wondered who on earth would be paying him a visit at... what time was it? He squinted at the clock in the TV cabinet and stumped his toe on the coffee table, in the process. The bell rang again, and Terry pushed aside his annoyance to unlock the door. Who in their right mind would pull someone out of bed at three in the morning? Annoyance turned to concern as he opened the door. Maybe it was John. Something might be wrong at home.

He came nose to nose with the person ringing his doorbell and blinked.

The sleep had to be playing tricks with his mind.

"Brian, what are you doing here?"

"Stan called me. He said you and Emily broke up, and now you’re in love with Madison."
"Stanley called you at three in the morning?"

Arms slightly bent like a prizefighter staring down an opponent, Brian nodded. "He said you made Emily cry."

"I'm afraid I did, but why should he call you?" Just then, Terry heard the faint tone of a cell phone upstairs. "Would you hold on a moment? That phone call could be Maddie."

"So it's true? You and Madison are seeing each other?"

Not knowing how to possibly answer that in five seconds or less without just blurting, "yes," Terry let the front door stand open and jogged to the stairs. By the time he got to the cell phone beside his bed, it had stopped ringing. A check of the screen showed a missed call from John. Dialing John, Terry headed back down the stairs with the phone.

"Hey, what's up?"

"Terry, I wanted to warn you Brian was just here. He's as angry as I've ever seen him, and he's looking for you. I didn't tell him where you were, but I think he's guessed."

Stopping at the open front door, Terry saw Brian still waiting on the doorstep. "Yeah, he guessed."

"He's there, isn't he? Do you want me to come down?"

For a moment, Terry considered the clenched fists of the visitor outside. Brian did look angry.

"Thanks, I'll handle it. You can go to bed now-- I'll talk to you in the morning."

When John hung up, Terry motioned for Brian to come inside. No use keeping him on the front step where neighbors could overhear and spread fresh gossip.

"I thought you were my friend. I just don't get it." Brian shoved past Terry, stood in the middle of Terry's living room in a crumpled pajama top and a pair of blue jeans. A sports coat had been thrown over the pajama top, and Terry hadn't needed to see the wildly messed up hair to know Brian had been sleeping not too long ago. "I thought you said you weren't sweet on Madison?"
"I wasn't." Terry shut the front door. "It snuck up on me when I wasn't looking. And what's all this disappointment about me and Maddie? You walked away, and she hasn't heard from you since."

"I didn't walk away. I was thinking." Brian huffed out a breath. "I needed time to think about what I was getting myself into. I never would've guessed you'd make a move on Madison behind my back-- not when you were already so close to Emily. I thought we were friends."

"Listen, Emily came to our house for dinner once, I went to Emily's house for lunch once-- two meals, count 'em, just two-- and then we had a phone date. That's it. That's the sum total of our relationship."

"So now you're with Madison?"

Terry sighed. "I never thought news could travel so fast."

"The news had help." Brian ran a hand through his already messed hair. "I had a phone call from Stan--"

"Wait a moment." Terry put on the breaks. "I still don't understand why he called you."

Hesitation came to Brian's eyes. He winced, rubbed his forehead and looked reluctant to speak. "I sort of dated Emily a year ago, and-- don't look so surprised. Our church isn't that big, and I thought you already knew."

Terry shook his head in full surprise. He'd been aware of at least two other men from their congregation who had dated Emily, but he hadn't known about Brian. Though it probably wasn't a deep dark secret, Terry hadn't known, and probably neither had Izzy. If Izzy had known about Brian and Emily, she might never have called up Emily to date Terry, if Izzy had also known Brian was pursuing Maddie. But then, if it was over between Brian and Emily, it shouldn't really matter. Should it? Terry sighed. Life was complicated enough, but when you tossed single people into the mix, looking for spouses in the same small church, it made things interesting.

"You and Emily?"

Brian nodded. "It's all in the past, but yes, I used to date her. Stan called me when he couldn't stop Emily from crying, and I think he was hoping I'd come over here and give you a hard time."
"I'm very sorry to hear that." Terry folded his arms, looked at his friend and realized he hadn't been keeping up with the social happenings at their church. "I had no idea about you and Emily."

"Okay, but we're getting off topic." Brian took in a deep breath. "Stan thinks you dumped Emily, even though Emily isn't saying much to anyone. According to Stan, she sits in her room and cries. Stan is upset, and I don't blame him. He can't get anything out of her except that you two broke up today, that the relationship is over and now you love Madison."

"I'm afraid that's all true. She's still crying?"

"What do you mean, 'still'?") Strong emotion tensed Brian's face. "What did you do to her? Any man who'd dump a woman like that, and make her cry, is lower than any life form I'd care to name."

"I tried to be gentle," Terry said, dropping his arms to his side in defeat. "I found out I was in love with someone else. It seemed only fair to tell Emily."

"Are you sure it's love?"

"I'm sure." Terry took a seat on the coffee table, put down the cell phone and rubbed the toe he'd stubbed on his way to the door. "Aside from the fact Maddie seems to like me a lot, I'm not sure of the extent of her feelings. My heart isn't in question, though. I love Maddie."

The words seemed to take the energy out of Brian.

"Oh, man." Brian sank onto the couch looking like a disheveled husband trying to get his pregnant wife to the hospital. Whatever Stanley had said to Brian, it had gotten Brian out the door, half dressed in his PJs. "I guess I shouldn't have given myself so much time to think."

"I'm sorry. I thought you were no longer interested."

Brian groaned. "Madison aside, there's still Emily to think about. She's crying, and Stan is at his wit's end to know what to do. Can you tell me, exactly, what happened today?"

"If I do," Terry said quietly, "I'll have to ask you not to repeat this to anyone else, besides Stanley. I don't want to embarrass Emily in front of the town."

"Fine. I wouldn't want that, either."

"Emily asked me to marry her, and I had to turn her down."
"Emily proposed?" Brian looked thunderstruck. "She proposed to you?"

"She did. When I realized I had my answer, I called her back as soon as I could."

Stunned, Brian shook his head. "I had no idea she was that serious about you. Surely, we can't be talking about the same woman. No man in his right mind would turn down a proposal from her."

"I take it she's never asked you?"

"No. She hasn't." Brian couldn't stop shaking his head. "I can't believe you walked away from Emily McCall. And she's the one crying?" Brian blew out a frustrated groan. "Some men get all the breaks."

"I'm curious," Terry hoped he wouldn't get decked for asking, "when you and Emily stopped dating-- who called it off, you or her?"

"It wasn't either of us." Brian gave a helpless shrug. "Stan had a health scare, and after that, Emily pulled away from me. I've always thought Stan had something to do with it, that maybe he'd even faked being sick. I don't know. Maybe I was just trying to find someone to blame, but I've always had the impression he didn't like me."

"Strange you should say that," Terry said with a frown. "I had the same impression about me."

Brian sighed, leaned forward on the couch and looked at Terry. "Everything aside, she's crying. I don't know that she's crying this second, but when Stan called, he seemed to think she had been crying all night. I had the strong impression her heart was so broken in two, she couldn't see straight."

"When we ended our phone date," Terry admitted, "she was in tears. I didn't think her heart was very broken, though. More like disappointed. She all but said that she didn't love me."

"Really?" Brian sat up straight.

Terry thought it over and nodded. "If she's still crying, it's not over me. After that last phone call, I think I can safely assume she's not in love with me, and I don't think love had anything to do with why she asked me to marry her. I told her to hold out for love, and she said that she guessed some people were meant to be alone."
"Emily said that?" Brian frowned, scratched his knee and didn't say a word for a full minute.
"Did Stan ever have any health scares while you were dating Emily?"

"I couldn't really call it a health scare; he had hyperglycemia when I showed up to lunch that one time. He had been eating candy in church, so it was understandable."

"Had he known you were coming to lunch?"

"I don't think so. She invited me on the spur of the moment after services."

Frowning, Brian shook his head. "Stan knew. That's why he took the candy-- he wanted to get sick."

It took Terry a moment to let the words sink in.

"Stanley would never do that. He has genuine concern for the welfare of his daughter. He even tried to get me to send Maddie away so it wouldn't interfere with my relationship with Emily. He loves his daughter. He wants what's best for her."

The frown didn't leave Brian's face and he stared dead ahead in concentrated thought. "I've been underestimating that man. When I was seeing Emily, he voiced concern that my son Dave wouldn't want another mom. I hadn't proposed yet, I hadn't even been sure I was in love at the time, but I took it as a good sign that Stan was thinking about Emily one day marrying me. Stan said he wanted us to take things slowly so no one would get hurt, so everyone would have time to get to know each other, before any big changes were made."

"I can't believe anything bad about Stanley." Terry shook his head. "He might be on the senile side of cantankerous at times, but he's a good man. He wouldn't do that to his only child."

"His only child takes very good care of him," Brian said, and left it at that. He got to his feet, then held out a hand of friendship to Terry. The anger had left Brian's eyes, and Terry shook the offered hand without needing to think it over.

They were friends, and with God's help, always would be.

"I hope you'll forgive me for dragging you out of bed. I was sound asleep when Stan called me, and--" Brian didn't finish the thought out loud. "I went to your house in Three Mile Bay, so if you would, tell John I'm sorry for barging in so late. He must have thought I'd gone mad-- I wasn't making much sense at the time. I'm ashamed to admit what I've been thinking about you
and Madison. Stan said--" Brian broke off with another painful wince. "I thought you had
double-crossed me. I should have known better."

Though Terry couldn't bring himself to think poorly of Emily's father, there wasn't much else to
do but shake Brian's hand.

"I wish you and Madison all the best," Brian said, going to the door. He opened it, paused and
looked at Terry. "Things worked out the way God intended, but I did learn my lesson. Next
time, I'll do my thinking on my knees. And then I won't hesitate to act."

"I'm sorry it didn't work out with you and Maddie."

Brian smiled. "No, you're not. But thanks, anyway." He gave a nod to Terry, then stepped outside,
closing the door after him.

It took Terry a long time before he got up from the coffee table and went to lock the front door.
What an odd night. It felt to Terry he was still fast asleep and only dreaming, but the emotion in
Brian's face had been all too real. No, this had happened, and now Terry was left to wonder
about Stanley.

As Terry picked up the cell phone, then clicked off the living room light, he put himself in
Stanley's position. Wake up Brian from a dead sleep, excitedly tell him that another man had
wronged a woman Brian had once cared about-- and maybe still did-- hint that Terry had been
sneaky and had somehow stolen Maddie from Brian, get Brian wound up with anger, then
suggest someone should deal with Terry for mistreating Emily. Stanley was a father, after all, and
Terry had been the one to call it off, not Emily. In all the anger and excitement, Terry and Brian
would lose each other's friendship, and Terry would get the message that Stanley didn't want
him to change his mind and come crawling back to Emily.

Not that Terry would, but Stanley had wanted to make sure.

It was mostly conjecture, but that one late night phone call from Stanley to Brian, had made an
already complicated situation dangerous. If Brian hadn't been able to be reasoned with, and if
Terry hadn't been so quick to back down from a fight, the incident would have gotten ugly, fast.

Sort of like killing two birds with one stone, or rather, using one to punish the other.

Pretty cagey for an old man who seemed brittle and frail, and at times, senile. Terry could only
hope senility had muddled Stanley's thinking enough to accidentally get Terry and Brian into a
potential fistfight. The more Terry thought it over, though, the more he doubted it.
Poor Emily.

Padding his way up the stairs, Terry tried to calm down and think about going back to bed. It was four-thirty, and weariness tugged at his limbs.

He sank onto the bed, stared at the clock and decided he had to get more sleep. He climbed beneath the covers as the cell phone he'd just placed on the night table, broke into a rousing chorus of "Bassin' the Weeds with Dennis." Terry glanced at the screen, smiled, and answered the call.

"Maddie, you should be asleep."

"I was, but I heard someone in your apartment."

"A friend paid a late call, but it's no one for you to worry about."

"Was it Victor?"

"No, just a friend wanting to talk." Terry veered off and changed the subject. "Is your room clean? Are you comfortable over there?"

A smile sounded in Maddie's voice, and he closed his eyes to picture those peaches and cream in full bloom. "I'm comfortable, Terry."

"Good, then go to sleep. I intend to invite you to breakfast tomorrow morning, and I don't want you snoozing at the table."

"Terry?"

"I'm still here," he smiled.

"I really like you."

Tired but happy joy spread through Terry until his heart filled to capacity. "I really like you, too, Maddie."

"Good night," she whispered, and hung up the phone.
Grinning, Terry placed his cell phone on the night table. It felt good to know the woman he loved was next door, safe and warm and close by.

Before he fell asleep, he sent up a prayer for Emily, that she would find the man God intended for her to love. He also prayed for Stanley, that if what he and Brian had thought was true, really was, that Stanley would repent before he forever ruined any chance of future happiness for Emily. After hearing what Terry had from Brian, Terry knew that if he wasn't already so much in love with Maddie, he'd have given some thought to marrying poor Emily. Someone needed to take care of her.

Fatigue pulled at Terry. One was enough. It was all he could do to help Maddie, let alone Emily. As he drifted to sleep with Maddie tucked away in his heart, a smile came to Terry's lips, a smile that would remain even through the dreams that would later tumble into his rest.

Hope was a powerful tonic.

He slept soundly, knowing he would see Maddie in the morning.

"He that is slow to anger [Terry] is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit [Brian] than he that taketh a city. He that covereth a transgression seeketh love; but he that repeateth a matter separateth very friends [Stanley's call almost did]."

~ Proverbs 16:32, 17:9 ~
Though sleep tempted him to try and get more rest, Terry spent some time with the Lord before sunrise, then climbed out of bed when the light shone through the slats of his window blinds. His heart wouldn't let him sit still any longer. Hope made him buoyant. His insides were dancing, his pulse humming so much he couldn't help but sing in the shower.

At the sink, when he shaved in front of the mirror, his smile kept getting in the way of the electric razor. Who was that grinning man? Surely, it couldn't be Terry Davis, the guy with no significant other in his life, the one who feared he would never fall in love? Laughing, Terry tugged on jeans, pulled a merino sweater over a white T-shirt, then headed downstairs, still humming and grinning like he was the happiest man on Planet Earth.

This morning, he was.

He needed to start planning what to fix Maddie for breakfast, and the thought of her being just next door, made his heart sing even louder. God was so good. The fact Terry had no silverware in his kitchen did nothing to dampen his spirits. He was hoping, he was in love, and it felt wonderful.

Cell phone in hand, he went to the fridge and called Maddie. The phone rang four times before she answered.

"Hey, neighbor, can I come over and borrow some forks and spoons? And some food. It looks like I've given nearly everything away."

"Sure, come over." Her voice sounded hazy, like she'd just been awakened from a deep sleep. "I'll unlock the door."

Terry glanced at the time and winced. "Sorry I woke you."

"It's okay, Terry. I don't mind."

"I'll be over in a minute then."
They hung up, and after a cursory check of the pantry, Terry had a good idea of what he still needed to make a nice breakfast. Nothing heavy-duty, but special enough to celebrate the morning. This wonderful, wonderful morning with Maddie.

The sweater did little to keep him warm as he stepped outside and went to Maddie’s door, just a few steps away. He rang the doorbell, huffed out a vapor trail against the freezing early morning. If the weather hadn’t already been enough to warn of the coming winter, the numbing temperature as he stood waiting on Maddie’s doorstep was enough of a reminder. He should have put on a coat.

He rang the doorbell again, then remembered Maddie had said she would unlock the door and tried the handle. It worked, and the door turned on its hinges with a low creak.

"Hey, Maddie?" He looked about the living room, saw no one, and stepped inside before he froze to death. If it had been this cold yesterday, the rain would have almost certainly turned to snow. Thankfully, Maddie had remembered to turn up the thermostat, so the apartment was comfortable. "Maddie?" he called again, moving to the kitchen. He heard something, and started for the room that wasn’t really a bedroom, but a room with a couch.

"In here," she called, as he moved down the short hall and came to the open bedroom door.

He looked inside, not wanting to invade her privacy but knowing Maddie well enough to be a little concerned that she hadn’t met him at the front door. The room looked clean and orderly, not like the last time he’d seen it, and Maddie lay on the couch, covered with a thick comforter pulled up to her chin.

"How are you feeling?" Terry asked, and ventured inside. His heart lodged in his throat when he got a better look at the pale, pale face staring at him from over the blanket.

"Hi, Terry."

He nodded without thinking, moved to the couch to place a concerned hand on her forehead.

"I don't have a fever, so I'm all right."

"You're whiter than bed linen, Maddie. What's wrong? Do you feel sick?"

"No, I'm fine."

"You can't be-- you're so pale."
"Do you think it's the flu?" she asked in an almost hopeful voice.

"You've taken your temperature?" He relaxed a fraction when she nodded "yes." "And you're sure you have no fever? I don't get it. You were just fine, yesterday." He checked her forehead again, but she felt normal. She just didn't look it.

"Maybe I have the flu?" she asked again, and Terry didn't answer.

"Do you feel like getting out of bed, and going somewhere today?"

"Where?" she asked.

"I don't know where-- that's not the point-- do you have enough energy to go somewhere if you wanted?"

Her eyes turned away and she shook her head.

"Have you been coughing?"

"No."

"The last time you turned this pale, what was it? six, seven days ago, when you told me about the Dragon for the first time? Remember? In the evening, we went to the MegaMart to pick up some hot dogs to eat at my place, because you looked so pale I didn't want to scare John and Izzy. That night, you gave me the keychain. I remember that night clearly, and you look paler now, than you did then."

She closed her eyes.

"Maddie," he crouched in front of the sofa, "what's going on? Are you taking anything I should know about?"

The gray eyes opened and she shot him a stare. "You mean, drugs?"

"I mean-- yes, I suppose I do. But I know you better than that." Terry blew out a frustrated breath. "The trouble is, I'm starting to see a pattern here, and I don't know what to make of it. How's your hip? Are you in any pain?"

Her mouth opened, but she didn't answer.
"It's the pain, isn't it? I knew it." He punched the air and she backed further under the blanket.
"Why haven't you been taking your painkiller? That's what it's there for." He stood, turned to get the bottle of acetaminophen when he saw it open on the floor beside the couch. "How long ago did you take that?"

"Two hours."

"And you're still in this much pain?" It didn't make any sense, but that pale face looked so drained, he couldn't just shrug it off. "I'm taking you to the emergency room."

"No."

"You're not well, Maddie. If you had a mirror, you could see for yourself." Terry started for the bathroom. "That's not a bad idea, if you could see what you looked like--" he shoved open the bathroom door, stepped inside and skidded to a complete and total stop.

His heart slammed against his ribs. Seven or eight large drops of something dark were on the floor in front of the bathroom sink. They were dried, and if he didn't know any better, he'd say that looked a lot like--

"Maddie?" He pushed back into the bedroom. "Did you get hurt? There's blood on the bathroom floor."

He didn't think it possible, for she was already so pale, but she blanched even more.

"Did you have a nosebleed? Maddie, I'm getting scared here and I need some answers. Is that why there's blood in the bathroom?"

She shook her head.

"Your period?" he asked, and again, she shook her head. "Then show me where you got hurt, and I'll get something to clean the cut. The way you're looking, I don't want to take any chances with infection." Terry went back to the bathroom, opened the medicine cupboard, plucked up the antiseptic and noticed the bottle was smeared with dried, brown smudges. He noticed blood in the sink, and more on the faucet handles.

The phone in his jeans pocket sounded. Absently, he pulled it out and answered.

"Is now a good time?" John asked. "I'm curious what happened with Brian."
"Huh?" Terry forced his mind to work. "What about Brian?"

"That's why I'm calling you-- to find out what happened. I didn't get much sleep last night thinking about it."

"Sorry, I have to go." Terry pocketed the phone and went back to the bedroom where Maddie was still hiding behind her blanket. "There's blood on this bottle, and there's even more in the sink. Why didn't you call me? I could have taken you to the emergency room."

She blinked, and didn't say a word.

"Show me where you got hurt." Terry moved to the couch, and she hurriedly tugged the blanket up to her eyes. "I won't be mad, okay? I just want to see where you're hurt. There's a lot of blood in the bathroom, and I don't mind telling you I'm scared. Now show me the cut. Did it happen in the kitchen? Were you trying to fix a snack, and the knife slipped? Is that it?"

Her breath was coming fast now, fast enough for him to hear it behind the blanket.

"Maddie. Show me where you got hurt, or I'm taking you to the emergency room."

She didn't budge an inch.

"Okay." He turned to leave. "I'm starting up the jeep."

The blanket came down a few inches. "Terry--"

"Don't tell me this is because of the flu, Maddie. I'm not buying it. Accidents can happen-- I understand that-- I've cut myself on enough knives to appreciate the fact I'm sometimes clumsy-- but I do care that you're trying to hide it from me." He tried to calm down, but found it hard. "I even once cut myself on a stupid butter knife, so I understand. Okay?" His mind screamed that it hadn't been something so trivial. Whatever had hurt Maddie, it had not been a butter knife.

The way she lay there, not moving, her peaches and cream complexion drained of all color, he couldn't wait for her to find courage to tell him what was wrong.

"We're going to the emergency room."

"No, I'm all right."
"You keep saying that, but I don't understand. I really don't." Terry put down the antiseptic, not liking the heavy feeling settling in his heart. "Did you, or did you not, have an accident in the kitchen?"

"Terry, it's okay."

"How did it happen?" he pressed. "Did you break a china plate and cut yourself? I won't be angry if something's broken, but I need to know how you got hurt."

"Please don't worry."

His mind felt numb, for he knew the next question. He hadn't worked at the crisis hotline for nothing. Especially when he considered Maddie's troubled background. He knew he had to ask, but it came hard.

So hard.

"Did you do it on purpose?"

"Terry--"

"Please, just answer the question. Was it on purpose?" He took in a deep breath, and willed himself to get out all the words. "Are you cutting?"

Alarm shone in those gray eyes, and Terry didn't want to believe what he was seeing.

She remained silent, and so did he.

The phone in his pocket went off. Terry jerked it out to find John trying to reach him again. He let it ring, shoved it back and tried to breathe. She wanted to lie, to tell him he had gotten it all wrong; he could feel the intensity of that gaze and knew she wanted to lie. She wanted to, but couldn't, so she hid under that blanket like a puppy dog who'd just been caught wetting the carpet.

"Maddie, I need to see how badly you're hurt."

He prayed he was wrong, that maybe the paleness was because of her hip, that the blood was just a clumsy accident in the kitchen. Anything but what he was thinking.

Kneeling, he looked into those troubled gray eyes and prayed for strength.
"Maddie, please show me."

She shook her head, the fast intake of her breath threatening hyperventilation. He reached out, touched her fingers as they tightly held the blanket.

"I won't be angry, I just need to see how badly you're hurt so I know how to help. Please, Maddie. I care too much about you, to walk away."

Her eyes squeezed shut, and a tear spilled onto her cheek.

"Let me help you. Please, let me try."

Her eyes turned on him, and he was struck all the way to the heart with the depth of their pain.

"Do you want me to get Izzy? Would you feel more comfortable showing her?"

"No."

"Then would you show me?"

The panicked look on Maddie's face deepened. "Promise you won't hit me?"

Pulling the dagger from his heart, Terry fought for composure. "Maddie, have I ever?"

"Promise?"

"You have my word. Before God, I will never, ever, lay a hand on you in anger."

The oath seemed to steel her with courage, for the blanket lowered. He half expected Maddie to show her arms, or maybe her wrists-- places that could be easily covered and that she wouldn't mind showing a man. She wore a T-shirt, though, and her arms were fine.

Then he saw the front of her shirt. Blood had seeped through, staining the material. Her slender hands trembled as she lifted the edge of her shirt to show her belly.

Terry had a working knowledge of self-harm, what it could look like, what the symptoms were, the warning signs that would help someone identify a possible problem. Although limited, he had some experience dealing with cutters, and had always thought he could handle even the
worst cases that might come his way. But nothing could prepare him for what he was about to see, for none of them had been Maddie.

He groaned at the sight before him.

Her delicate stomach was crisscrossed with ridges of broken skin. They ran over each other in grotesque crosses and slashes, some old, others much more recent. Every scar bore testament to the pain they must have inflicted. They ran from one end of her belly clear to the other, a battlefield that must have taken years to scar so badly.

His mouth went dry. He let out the breath he'd been holding, pushed himself off the floor and went to get the antiseptic. It made sense now. He could count three times in the past when she'd come down with inexplicable paleness. Once that Sunday morning when he brought her to church for the first time, then the day she'd given him that keychain. And this morning. He fought to search his memory for other times, times he might not have been paying attention, but couldn't think of any.

"How long..." His voice failed him, and he moved to the bathroom to get cotton swabs and bandages. Maybe he should take her to the emergency room. He couldn't think straight, and washed his hands so he wouldn't infect the wounds before returning to the bedroom.

She was sitting up now, and on the verge of tears.

"Hey, hey." He dropped the items on the blanket beside her, knelt on the floor to level with her eyes. "I'm not angry, Maddie. Do you hear me? I still care about you very, very much."

"You think I'm crazy."

"No, that's not what I'm thinking." He twisted open the bottle, poured a little into the cap and used it to dip in a cotton swab. "Would you lift your shirt again?"

Smearing her eyes with the back of her hands, she obeyed, and Terry braced himself to look at the lacerated skin.

"Have you ever cut yourself this deep before?" When she didn't answer, he looked up to find her nodding "yes." "Oh, Maddie." He didn't know what else to say, and started to apply the antiseptic. She winced, and he tried to be gentle.

"I'm sorry, Terry."
He rubbed away his tears with his shoulder.

"I didn't want you to know."

"How long have you been doing this?"

"For a while."

"Years?" he asked, and she nodded "yes." "Oh, Maddie." He kept saying that, but the number of scars running across her belly-- new and old-- were heart-numbing.

"Do you think God minds?" she asked in a timid voice that choked on a sob before she could get all the words out.

"He minds." Terry looked up at her. "He minds, and so do I. This has got to stop."

"But I'm not trying to kill myself."

"I can appreciate the difference, Maddie, but our bodies are God's temple. I can't remember the verse at the moment, but He minds very much. Do you understand?"

She shook her head, wiped her face on a shirt sleeve while he went back to work.

"I can't believe I missed this." Terry grabbed another cotton swab, trying as hard as he could to not inflict more pain. "I should have recognized the signs. I should have taken better care of you. I'm sorry, Maddie. I'm so sorry."

"Terry?" The fear in her voice made him look up. "Does this mean we can't be friends anymore?"

"Do me a favor, Maddie, and never say anything like that again. Never, okay? I couldn't walk away from you if I tried."

"Are you going to try?"

"What do you think?" He gave a look that had her smiling through the tears. "That's never going to happen. You're stuck with me for the long haul, whether you marry me or not."

"Thank you, Terry." Genuine relief sounded in her voice, but Terry was feeling anything but relieved.
"I need to get you to the emergency room. Some of these are deep, and I don't know what I'm doing. This one is at least two inches long, and it's deep. I need help."

"It'll be all right."

He shook his head. "Maddie, I'm no doctor but these cuts look serious."

"It's okay."

"No, it isn't." He applied a bandage as best he could over the long cut but knew it wasn't enough. She needed stitches. "If I take you to the emergency room, are you going to run away?"

"No, Terry, please don't."

"Will you run away?" He pressed the question home with such force, Maddie winced.

"Will you stay with me?"

Unable to speak, he nodded.

"Then I'll go."

Feeling more gratitude then he could utter, he squeezed her hand, then reached into his pocket for the cell phone. As he punched in John's number, a knock sounded on Maddie's front door.

"Come in," he shouted.

Amazingly, the visitor must have heard him, for the door opened and a moment later John stood in the doorway of the bedroom. The phone in his pocket sounded, and John answered it to hear Terry speaking just a few feet away.

"Are you all right?" John asked as they put away their phones. "You sounded scared when I talked to you, so I hurried over as soon as I could."

"I don't have time to talk," Terry said, pushing to his feet. "I have to take Maddie to the emergency room. She cut herself." Terry went to her closet to find a coat, and a sweater to cover her bloodstained shirt.

"Depending on how bad it is," John suggested, "you could always try urgent care. They open at seven, and it'd be less crowded than the emergency room."
Checking his watch, Terry nodded. "That sounds right. If we leave now, they should be open by the time we get there." As he located the sweater he’d given Maddie yesterday, John moved close to Terry.

"How bad is it?" John asked in a hushed voice so Maddie wouldn't overhear.

"I don't know." Terry forced himself to calm. "It didn't look pretty, I can tell you that much."

"How did it happen?"

Terry glanced at John before going back to the couch. He didn't know how to tell John, and worried what John might say in Maddie's presence. John might not understand.

John, however, didn't look ready to go away. "I'll help you get her down there."

"I can handle it."

"I didn't ask if you could handle it." John gave Terry a solid look. "I can help. I can fill out paperwork while you take care of Madison."

With a sigh, Terry helped Maddie into the sweater, then her coat, careful to not let John see her shirt. He knew John wasn't going anywhere, and silently thanked him for being stubborn. Not giving Maddie the chance to move on her own power, Terry scooped her up and headed for the bedroom door. John moved ahead of them, and held the front door wide open.

Terry carried Maddie outside, too busy to care what the neighbors might think.

"Jeep keys are in my right pocket," Terry said, and John fished them out to open the passenger door. Terry placed Maddie on the seat, not bothering to put on the seat belt. He didn't want to risk getting the cuts infected, and shut the door.

Before letting go of the keys, John locked the apartment, then climbed into the back seat before tossing them to Terry.

John had wanted to make sure Terry didn't leave without him.

No one spoke as they made the drive to the Urgent Care Center. Terry found a parking space near the entrance, then got out to carry Maddie into the building. John went ahead of them to
the reception desk, and while John handled the paperwork, Terry found a chair in the waiting area to place Maddie.

"Don't leave me?" she asked.

Terry squeezed her shoulder, then with a bowed head and quiet voice, he prayed out loud so Maddie could hear. "Make this to go well, Lord, and cause the wounds to heal. In Jesus' name, amen." He took the seat next to hers, and held her hand. "Maddie, you have to stop. You understand that, don't you?"

Her answer came in a whisper. "I don't know how."

"Terry," John came striding over with the paperwork, "you'll have to finish these. I filled in as much as I was sure of. She doesn't have any allergies, does she?"

Turning his attention to the details of getting Maddie help, Terry prayed for wisdom and help for himself. Right now, he felt like a tidal wave had swept out the feet beneath him, and he struggled to not let his emotions get in the way of taking care of Maddie.

When the paperwork had been finished, Terry handed it in to the nurse. She looked it over, then slanted Terry a puzzled look. He moved close and whispered, "Self-injuries."

Sighing, the nurse nodded and went about her business. She looked all too familiar with the problem.

Since it was so early in the morning, there weren't many in the waiting room, and after a few minutes Maddie's name was called. Still holding Terry's hand, Maddie got to her feet, and tightly clung to him as they followed the female nurse. They passed through a doorway, and saw other nurses dressed in scrubs, getting ready for the long workday ahead. Their nurse took them to an examining room, and then filled out some paperwork before asking Maddie to change into a dressing gown.

"I'll be outside," Terry said, squeezing Maddie's hand.

Even though Maddie looked as if he was abandoning her, Terry left the examining room and waited outside the door. In a way, he hoped he wouldn't have to watch the stitches being made. He didn't mind the sight of his own blood, but the sight of other's suffering made him dizzy with sympathy. Years ago, when Izumi was in the hospital, waiting for Abby to come, Terry had had to wait outside because he couldn't stand seeing Izzy in so much pain. Not much had changed, and Terry still felt woozy just thinking about it.
A man in a white lab coat went into the examining room, leaving Terry to pace outside. Terry wished he'd had the presence of mind to ask for a female doctor. The nurse was still in there with Maddie, so maybe Maddie wouldn't panic with another woman nearby.

The door opened, and the nurse smiled at Terry. "She's asking for you."

Terry nodded, and went into the room.

Lying on her back on the examination table, Maddie had a white sheet covering her body from the hips down, and her dressing gown had been pushed to below her armpits, so only her stomach showed. When she saw Terry, she reached for his hand. Grabbing it, Terry stood beside the table and hoped he wouldn't pass out.

The doctor pulled on latex gloves. "When was your last tetanus shot?"

"I had one this month." Maddie didn't say more, and Terry guessed her primary physician had made sure Maddie had been given one, especially after seeing the scars.

"She'll need some stitches," the doctor explained to Terry, "but they should heal without any scarring. She's been given a shot of local anesthesia, so she shouldn't feel any pain." The doctor made no mention of the other scars, and set about his work while the nurse assisted him.

Squeezing her eyes shut, Maddie held onto Terry's hand for dear life as the doctor gently drew the skin together. Terry felt the woozy sensation flood his brain, and decided to just watch Maddie's face.

"When you leave," the doctor spoke to his patient as he worked, "you'll need to be careful not to pull out these sutures."

Maddie nodded.

"They'll dissolve over time, so you won't need to have them removed."

The doctor gave them instructions on how to care for the wounds, and what to take for the pain while she was healing. When Terry chanced a glimpse of what was going on, he wasn't surprised to find the doctor closing the smaller cuts as well as the larger ones. Good. Terry looked back at Maddie's face, and found her watching him. He gave her a smile, and maintained a tight grip on her hand to give her courage. Just because Maddie had done this to herself, it didn't mean she enjoyed the pain.
Hopefully, though, the local anesthesia was doing its job.

"She'll need to rest while these heal," the doctor said to Terry, as if to make sure Terry understood.

Terry nodded. "I'll see that she does. She's going to see a psychiatrist, as well."

While the doctor looked gratified to hear it, he kept any personal remarks to himself. Some gauze and white tape were applied, then the nurse smiled, and patted Maddie's sheet-covered knee.

"You can get dressed now."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Terry went outside and the doctor soon followed. "Thanks," Terry told him, and the doctor gave a tired smile before going to his office. A few minutes later, the door opened and Maddie came out dressed in her everyday clothes, still looking pale, but ready to leave. "Is it okay for her to walk?" Terry asked the nurse.

"As long as she doesn't overdo it," the nurse nodded. "And remember to take care of those stitches."

"Thanks." Maddie smiled weakly, and the nurse patted her on the arm before leaving.

Hovering beside Maddie, Terry led her out to the waiting area where John sat reading his iPhone. Between all the cuts, the doctor had given Maddie nine stitches, and Terry didn't want to advertise the fact to everyone in the building.

"How'd it go?" John asked, getting up to meet them.

"She'll be all right." Terry pulled out the wallet from his hip pocket. "Would you take her out to the jeep, and make sure she sits while you guys wait for me? I have to stop by the desk."

With a knowing look, John led Maddie away.

Though Terry hadn't wanted to say it in front of Maddie, he needed to pay for the treatment she'd just been given. Terry didn't mind the out-of-pocket expense. She'd gotten the care she needed, and that was all that mattered.

When Terry left the building, he found John and Maddie waiting in the jeep, ready to go home.
He knew. He actually knew. Her secret was out in the open, and he knew. Terror shimmered through her veins, followed by the reminder that Terry wouldn't leave her. He'd tightly clung to her hand through the whole thing, and he hadn't hit her, or told her that if she got any sicker, he would finish her off. There was no hot anger, just concern and a gentle insistence that the cutting had to stop.

Wasn't he wonderful? Madison closed her eyes on the drive home and pretended he was still holding her hand. Then the shame peeked through and she fought to keep from crying. She was so tired. Why did he have to find out? Why? She had hoped to clean the bathroom before anyone saw it, and had been too weak to do it last night. That Terry had been able to guess before he even saw her belly, was frightening. What else did he know?

Why hadn't she been able to scare him off? It baffled her, but then, he was so nice, if he were hiding angel's wings under that coat, she wouldn't have been at all surprised.

As much as Terry wanted her to stop cutting, she knew she couldn't. She'd already tried, and had failed. Would God hold that against her? Terry had said God minded, but what if it wasn't possible for her to stop? Would He still mind then?

She struggled with the pain swirling inside. The local anesthesia was beginning to wear off a little, but that wasn't what hurt so much. She longed to be normal, and the stitches on her belly only seemed to mock her. Being normal would never happen, it was something always out of reach, no matter how hard she struggled. Hope plummeted, and she fought to open the passenger door at the first red stoplight they came to.

"Whoa, Maddie!" A hand shot out to hers, stilling the frustration long enough for her to stop. "Hold on, okay? I'd already planned to call Dr. Jacoby today, but just as soon as I can, I'll make that call."

"Why? It won't get any better."

Terry squeezed her fingers. "I'm praying it will."

"But what if it doesn't?" Panic started to well inside her once more, and she let go of Terry's hand to fight the door.
"Hey," John said from the back seat, "you can't get out now. The light's about to turn green." John reached around her seat, caught her left shoulder as the jeep started moving again.

Heading to the side of the road, Terry parked, leaned over to grab her before she could get the door open now that they'd stopped. "Calm down. Maddie, calm down. You're a little scared-- I can understand that, but calm down." He held her firmly, and only started to let go when she stopped struggling. "You're going to be all right."

"No, I won't."

"I need you to be willing to face this, Maddie. You can't move forward unless you do, and that's something I can't do for you. You must face it."

"I can't."

"Look at me." He gently moved her chin so she looked directly at him. His chest heaved, and she could see the strain he was under. "Whatever there is to face, I promise you won't have to do it by yourself. Do you hear me? We need to have faith and keep moving forward. He will help us."

Her eyes half closed, but Terry would not let go.

"You were meant to survive this, and I refuse to let you give up now."

He offered his hand, and she clamped onto it as hard as she could.

Terry's jaw tightened with resolve. "Don't let go of hope."

Swiping away a tear, Madison could no longer look at him. His hand tugged away from hers, and the jeep moved back onto the road. She had no idea what was going on, only that things were changing, that her world had forever changed the moment she'd let Terry see her wounds.

His hand reached over to hers. The hard squeeze told her he was still fighting for her sanity. She was struggling, but he wouldn't let her go without a fight.

Why wasn't he running away? For the life of Madison, she could not understand. He should be running as fast as he could, screaming at the top of his lungs to get away from her. His heart broke easily, so why wasn't he trying to save himself?

Cars zipped past her window, people going on with their lives with no troubles like hers to face. She couldn't suck in the air fast enough. The more she felt for Terry, the closer it shoved her
toward the ragged edge of insanity. She was feeling too many things, things she couldn't understand and didn't want to.

Only the quick pulse of the hand gripping hers, held her back from thrashing about in the seat.

* * * *

That intensity was back in full force, and Terry struggled not to let it gain a foothold in him. Whatever it was, it radiated from her in strong waves, a sensation so very real, he could almost taste it. Her nails dug into his hand as she clung to him, and when he flicked her a glance, he saw wild panic.

"Have faith, Maddie. Have faith."

Time for Terry to calm down. He had to deal with whatever was tiding through Maddie. She didn't have the best grip on reality, and it fought with his confidence that God was in control, that everything would turn out all right. Terry's emotions were shoving at him hard. It wasn't anything romantic, but the fear of losing himself again in a sea of shattered glass, like a window that couldn't be fixed and had to be swept up and thrown away because it wasn't good for anything else. Terry didn't want to shatter.

"Do you think it's going to rain?"

"What?" Terry was pulled from his thoughts by the passenger in the back seat. John. Terry had nearly forgotten he was there.

"If the sun stays out long enough," John continued, "how about we go fishing?"

"Yeah. Okay." Terry blinked hard, and fought to remember his battle cry. He could feel Maddie's pulse beating wildly, and feared if he slowed down, she might jump from the vehicle.

"Have you and Madison eaten yet?"

Terry glanced at Maddie. "No, not yet."

"Why don't you head over to the house, and we'll feed you a late breakfast?"

"Okay." Terry glanced in the rear view mirror at John. "$Thanks."

"Just watch the road," John said.
Instead of going back to the apartment complex, Terry changed lanes and headed to Three Mile Bay. The fact Maddie had been willing to show him those cuts, both encouraged and discouraged Terry. She could have waited and shown Izzy, but because Terry had asked her, Maddie had been willing to trust him enough to show him her pain. On the other hand, Terry was discouraged by the fact those cuts were even there. Besides the meager answer he'd managed to pull out of her earlier, he wondered how long she had been cutting. Okay, years-- but how many?

The older the habit, the harder it would be to break.

They reached home none too soon for Terry. He pulled to a stop in front of the garage, let go of Maddie's hand and noticed the red half moons on his skin where her nails had dug in. He shut off the engine. Now to face the others. Terry got out, rounded the hood to open Maddie's door, while John climbed out and waited beside the jeep.

Terry felt the need to tell John. He didn't like keeping secrets, and this one was a doozy.

As Maddie got out of the jeep, he saw the familiar wince, the quiet pain he'd noticed before and had not been able to fully explain. She had a lot of problems, both physical and mental, and it was hard to know which was responsible for what. In this instance, the direct correlation between the one and the other, struck Terry as ironic. Her outside health mirrored the health of her inside.

Even now, she looked like a frightened colt, waiting for a moment to bolt and run away.

"Easy, Maddie. Take it easy or you'll hurt yourself even more."

She gave him a scowl and it felt like a kick to his chest.

"You may not want to admit you care about the pain, but I do. So deal with it." He glanced at John, who was still waiting by the jeep. "I'd like to tell my family what happened. Though if you want me to, I'll keep quiet."

Head bowed, she squirmed and writhed on her feet as though her skin were chafing against her bones. "They're going to think I'm crazy."

"They're going to think you need help," Terry reworded, "but they're my family-- I know them. They won't make fun of you because of this, and if I ask them not to, they won't tell anyone outside the family."
"I wish I was dead."

"No, you don't." He took her hand and steadied it with his own. "May I tell them?"

Her fingers dug into his skin. She nodded "yes."

How Terry wanted to blurt his entire heart to Maddie. Now that he allowed himself to love her, that love grew stronger with every breath he took, and it was hard to see her like this.

"It's going to be all right," Terry whispered. "We've taken a hit today, but we're going to remember Psalm sixty-one, verse two, and take heart. Do you remember my battle cry? Make it your own, Maddie." He could see her struggling to remember, and helped her by reciting it out loud. "'From the end of the earth will I cry unto Thee, when my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the rock that is higher than I.' We're overwhelmed, right?"

She nodded emphatically.

"Then cry to God, and He will lead us to the high rock. We're down here in the valley right now, and the water is deep. So let's go higher."

She leaned against Terry.

"God, lead us higher," Terry prayed. "Help us to not forget You, or Your promise to never leave us, and forgive us when we do. Please, help us, Lord."

Maddie hid her face against Terry's shoulder. She looked steadier now, and Terry made sure he didn't move too fast, so she could stay at his side as they walked to the house.

Looking as though he'd been doing some praying, himself, John followed.

Noise poured from the house even before Terry opened the front door. It was a weekday, and no sleepy, sedate Sunday home from church, and inside, the house breathed with life. A thick quilt had been spread on the living room carpet, and a board game was in progress that not only included the triplets and Ricky, but Jake and Abby, as well.

A shout sounded, and Debbie celebrated with a little wiggle when her token landed on a treasure box.

"That's the second time in a row," Ruthie lamented, and slumped against Jake. "That's not fair."
"Keep playing and maybe it'll get better," Abby said, giving the dice a good shake before letting them clatter to the board. "Let's see, that's--"

"Hi, Uncle Terry." Jake smiled from his vantage on the blanket. He sat cross-legged with Ruthie on one side, and Lizzie on the other, and though his hair was uncombed and his face showed a day's worth of stubble, Jake looked happy to be surrounded by family. He coughed into the sleeve of his flannel shirt, and gathered the dice for Ricky's turn while Lizzie counted out her plastic gemstones with simple math.

Abby looked up from the game, and smiled. "Good morning."

"Good morning," Terry greeted as he brought Maddie inside. "I see you're having fun."

"I would if I landed on treasure," Ruthie said, as the dice were passed to Debbie. "Why can't I get any gems?"

"Keep playing and don't give up," Jake coaxed. He quickly grabbed a tissue and looked ready to sneeze. Ruthie leaned away from him, and when the sneeze didn't come, she and Ricky burst out laughing at Jake's shrug.

"Uncle Terry, guess what?" Lizzie said, as John came in and shut the front door.

Terry glanced at the little girl and saw she was waiting for him to guess.

"I don't know, I give up." Terry moved Maddie to the couch, and with a gentle squeeze on Maddie's arm, got Maddie to sit down.

"We don't have to go to preschool. Mommy said so."

"She did?" Terry helped Maddie out of her coat. "Do you want breakfast?" he asked quietly.

Maddie shook her head.

"Guess why, Uncle Terry."

"Let me see..." Terry waited a few beats before giving up.

"We're going to be sick, so we don't have to go."
John gave a small laugh. "We don't want you making the other kids sick, so you'll be staying put until the flu blows over. Who's winning?"

"Me!" Lizzie smiled and held up a handful of large gemstone game pieces. "Can I give some to Debbie? She can't get any yet."

Though Terry wanted Maddie to eat, he couldn't force the food down her throat. He took off his coat and noticed the sober looks from Jake and Abby. That Maddie wasn't feeling well, was obvious, and Terry hoped they wouldn't ask any questions he couldn't answer within earshot of the kids.

"Are you both staying for lunch?" Abby asked, looking hopeful that the answer would be "yes."

"He promised to eat tuna fish with us," Ruthie said, as Lizzie's token advanced around the board.

"We're staying," Terry nodded.

Jake coughed into his shoulder, and gave a thumbs-up to Terry. "We could use you and Madison in this game."

"Thanks," Terry glanced at Maddie and decided he would be doing good to get her to rest, let alone play with the others. "Maybe later."

As Jake took his turn, John pointed to the hall with his chin. Terry nodded, and the two men left the living room to the cheers of Jake landing on a treasure box.

"Good, I was just about to call you." Izzy came from the master bedroom in a long skirt, and a pale blue sweater pushed up around her elbows. "John called me earlier from urgent care, and said something happened to Madison. I haven't told Abby or Jake yet-- I thought I'd wait until I knew more. John said she cut herself? On what? and how badly is she hurt?"

"Could we talk in the master bedroom?" Terry asked. He followed Izzy and John into the room, then shut the door. "I don't want the kids to hear, and I'd really appreciate it if this never got outside our family."

"Yes, if you say so, but what happened to Madison?" Izzy waited for an answer, and looked close to leaving to see Madison for herself.

Folding his arms, John waited with a fixed expression Terry recognized as concern.
Terry sighed. "I found out this morning that Maddie has been cutting."

"She's what?"

"Maddie has been cutting herself." Terry saw the alarm dawn in John's eyes, and Izzy's mouth fell open. "She cut herself early this morning, or last night, and that's why she looks a little washed-out right now. She's had nine stitches, but the doctor said they should heal nicely provided we take care of the wounds. So everything is fine." Terry winced, realizing he was beginning to sound like Maddie. "I know what this sounds like, but it wasn't a suicide attempt. She told me she's been doing this for a number of years. How many-- I don't know-- but this isn't a new development."

John and Izzy didn't look as though they knew what to say. It took John a full minute before he found his voice.

"Does she realize she needs to stop?"

"Yes, and if she still doesn't, I'll make certain she understands. I'm also going to contact Dr. Jacoby before lunch to get that recommendation. We need it badly. I want to also talk to our pastor, and get his advice."

"I don't understand, Terry." Izzy looked baffled. "Is this some kind of cry for attention?"

"No, she did it in secret and it was supposed to stay a secret." Terry ran a hand behind his neck, hoping his friends would understand. "This is probably Maddie's way of coping with things she can't handle. When life gets too much for her, she cuts."

"But how can that possibly help?"

"It can't. Any relief she has is fleeting, but up until now, that's been her coping mechanism. She's had to live with being raped, beaten, starved, and who knows what else since she was a little girl. Until now, cutting has been the least of her problems."

"Terry, she needs to stop."

"I know. And she will. If I have to watch her every second of every day, she's not going to cut again."

"But how can you possibly manage that?" Izzy looked overwhelmed. "You can't be around her all the time."
"Then I'll find someone who can."

"Who?"

"I don't know who--" Terry blew out a breath-- "I haven't been able to wrap my mind around this yet, but if I have to, I'll pay someone to live with Maddie. Maybe a retired nurse, a kind old lady who wouldn't mind earning some money babysitting a troubled woman. I don't know yet, Izzy. I haven't gotten that far. After we're married, I can stay close to Maddie all the time." Terry looked about the room, saw a comforter neatly folded on a chair in the corner. "Can she borrow that?"

"Yes, of course." Izzy went over and picked it up. "I think she should sleep here at the house, don't you? At least until you find someone to stay with her... John, please say something. What are we going to do?"

"Please," Terry accepted the blanket from Izzy, "try not to treat Maddie any differently than before. I'm going to handle this. I realize it's serious, and I'm going to treat it that way. But if we go in there and start behaving like she's just sprouted another head, we're only going to make her feel worse. Let me handle this."

"She should sleep here, though."

Terry nodded. "I suppose, but there's already so many in this house."

"Never mind that. That's not my biggest concern."

"She's welcome to stay here, but you're going to need more help than that." John didn't sound as overwrought as Izzy, and it helped to steady Terry's already stretched nerves. "When you need help with Madison, all you have to do is ask."

"But what are we supposed to do in the meanwhile? Stand by and watch?"

"We pray, Izumi, and wait for Terry to ask for help as he needs it." John put an arm around his wife, and tugged her into a hug. "Let's not flood them with good intentions. Trust Terry to do what he thinks is best for Madison."

Pushing out a sigh, Terry headed for the bedroom door. "I have to go check Maddie."

"Tell us when you need help," Izzy called after him.
The kids were still playing with Abby and Jake, their laughter mixing with the coughs and sneezes of those fighting the flu. Maddie sat on the living room couch, head back, arms at her sides, looking like a tired, worn out rag doll after a long day of being thrown about by a child.

She opened her eyes as Terry spread the blanket over her lap.

"Do they know?"

Terry nodded. "They won't tell anyone outside the family."

Her eyes closed, and he didn't bother to ask if she was hungry. If he offered food again, he knew Maddie would turn it down.

Later. He would feed her later.

Bringing Maddie here had been a good idea. The house had calmed her, probably because it was filled with people, and it was easier to draw from their calm than try to make her own. He stood by the couch and watched her fall asleep, amazed at the depth of the feeling in his heart.

He loved this woman. She had troubles he was still finding out about, but he loved her with everything he had.

Lord, please help her.

"I have gems now!" Ruthie held them up for Terry to see, a small girl celebrating a minor victory even though it appeared she was still losing the game.

Sometimes, it seemed, Terry had to look hard for the blessing, but it was always there. Terry smiled at Ruthie. His emotions were exhausted to the point of breaking, but God hadn't left them. He glanced at the hallway as Izzy and John came into the room, and realized what he'd just told them. "After we're married..." He'd said the words as though it were going to happen, not just something he simply hoped for, but actually married.

Take it easy, he told himself, and backed away from the thought. He couldn't think of the future too much, not when the present needed so much attention.

John settled in the recliner with his laptop, and Izzy made her way to the kitchen, saying she needed to clean the cupboards. Terry guessed she just needed to stay busy to keep from thinking too much about Maddie's problem.
"Is this game over yet?" Jake coughed into his shoulder while Ricky and Firefighter Stan played with the gemstones Jake had let the pair guard for him. "I don't suppose anyone else here is getting hungry?"

Ruthie looked to Abby with hope in her eyes. "Mrs. Doyle's cookies? Pleaseeese?"

The noise stirred the sleeping woman on the couch. Terry turned to find Maddie staring at him.

"Cookies after lunch," Izzy called from the kitchen, "but not before."

Abby called in return, "When are we eating?"

"At the same time we usually have lunch. If you're hungry, there's fruit cups and ginger-ale in the fridge." That little announcement prompted a minor stampede to the kitchen.

Terry glanced at the time and realized the entire morning had gotten away from him. He moved into the hall, went into the office to find some privacy as he fished the cell phone from his pocket.

"Please, God, let him be there." Terry tried Dr. Jacoby's number and prayed the doctor would pick up. The number answered and Terry's hopes fell. Even before Terry heard Dr. Potter give his name, Terry knew it wasn't his friend's voice. He had known Dr. Jacoby wasn't due until later this week, but Terry had been hoping, hoping for some help for Maddie.

"I'm a friend-- a close friend of Dr. Jacoby's," Terry added for good measure, "and I really need to get in touch with him. I don't know if it's possible, but maybe you could give me the phone number where he's staying? I promise not to tie up too much of his time."

"Okay, let me think." Dr. Potter breathed a sigh and it sounded over the phone. "Hiram needed to get away from work, so I volunteered to fill in until he got back from a much-needed vacation. I know I'm not him, but maybe I could be of some assistance?"

Steadying himself, Terry tried to explain.

"I have this friend, her name is Madison. She was sexually abused for a long time, has night terrors, won't eat unless I'm there to make sure she does, has trouble being alone, and has a marked hatred of men despite the fact she says she really likes me a lot."

"I see."
"And," Terry pressed on, "I found out this morning she's been cutting. Her belly is tracked with scars, and they're hard to look at. She says she's been cutting for years."

"May I ask how involved you are with Madison?"

"I'm involved. I'm in love with her." Terry forced himself to breathe. "I know she has strong feelings for me, but we need help. She can't go on like this, and neither can I. I'm in over my head, and I know it."

"What was your name again?" Dr. Potter asked, and Terry heard office sounds in the background. "I'm supposed to have a secretary, but she keeps calling in sick, so I'm here to fend for myself. Your name please?"

"Terry Davis. Dr. Jacoby helped my nephew, Jake Murphy, four years ago. I was hoping Dr. Jacoby could give me a referral, someone who can handle PTSD and self-harm."

"You're familiar with post-traumatic stress disorder?"

"Yes, I was abused as a child, and recognize the symptoms."

The fact that Dr. Potter was talking to a survivor, who was trying to help another survivor, wasn't lost on the doctor. "I'll tell you what. I'll call him at his vacation house, tell him your situation and pass along your number if he decides to reach you. How does that sound?"

"Thank you, that's very kind." Terry gave Dr. Potter his cell phone number, then hung up with the promise to not call again before Wednesday, the day Dr. Jacoby was due back to work. Dr. Potter hadn't asked for the promise, but Terry gave it anyway.

Even psychiatrists needed vacations.

Though the strain of being the one responsible for Maddie was strong, Terry wouldn't have had it any other way. If she needed everything he had, then so be it, he would stretch until he couldn't reach any further, then hope and pray it would be enough.

Should Dr. Jacoby call back soon, Terry used the office landline so his cell phone wouldn't be busy, and punched in the number of another friend. Taking a deep breath, Terry gave a brief rundown of the situation, and then had a heart-to-heart with his pastor.

* * * *
A new box of tissue was passed across the couch from Jake, to Ricky, to Abby, before it landed in Madison's lap. She didn't have a runny nose, so she gave it back to Abby. Who, in turn gave it to Ricky, who dropped it in Jake's lap.

Abby groaned. "I need to be working, not watching TV."

"Have you told Dennis you have the flu?" Jake asked, tugging out another tissue before giving the box to Ricky.

"I told him." Abby flipped to another channel. "He said to get rest and drink plenty of liquids."

"Sounds like good advice."

"I know, and I'm not complaining-- not really. I have the best boss in the world, it's just that I don't like sitting around all day, drinking plenty of fluids when there's so much work to get done."

"Mommy, cartoons."

"We saw cartoons this morning."

"Please, Mommy?"

From where she sat on the end of the couch, Madison saw a look pass over Ricky's head between Jake and Abby. Jake smiled, and Abby channel surfed to the nearest kiddie show.

"I hope these cartoons aren't turning our brains to mush."

"If they are," Jake laughed, "we'll never know."

"Izumi?" John called from the recliner. "Do you still need me to run to the store later today?"

"Yes," came the reply, and John went back to his laptop with a grunt.

The girls played on the quilt in the middle of the floor with their sticker books and paper dolls. Madison wished she had her notebook with her, so she could join them. Maybe it was best she didn't. Her belly hurt so much she didn't want to move.

Shivering, Abby rubbed her arms even though the young woman wore a sweatshirt and jeans.
"Do you want some of my blanket?" Madison offered, and untucked one end of the comforter. "It's a big blanket."

"Thanks." Abby smiled at the offer. "Ricky and Jake are warm enough, but I can't seem to shake these chills. How about you? Are you feeling all right?"

Madison nodded. She was grateful for Terry's sweater, for it not only kept her toasty, but it also covered the bloodstains on her shirt.

"I wish this flu would hurry and go away." Abby coughed, and Ricky handed her the tissue box. A small wastebasket sat off to one side of the couch, and every so often, someone tried to land a "two-pointer." The carpet around the basket was littered with misses.

Someone on the floor coughed, and John looked away from his laptop at the triplets. It was Debbie.

"Where's Uncle Terry?" Abby asked, cozying beneath the blanket. "He's missing out on all these cartoons." Abby's leg bumped against Madison's, but Abby didn't seem to notice the contact. "Maybe if we turned it to something tech-y, it might lure Uncle Terry away from his work. A special about the geopolitical ramifications of nanotechnology is on."

"That would do it," John smiled, and kept tapping away at his laptop.

"I'm hungry again." Ricky pulled another sheet from the tissue box, and wiped an already red nose.

Ruthie sighed as she flipped through her sticker book. "Me too."

The sound of a door opening got everyone's attention-- even though it wasn't food-- and Terry emerged from the hall looking tired. He stepped around the quilt, and Debbie smiled up at him.

"If you want, we can make room for you on the couch," Abby offered.

"Thanks, maybe later." Terry gave Madison a smile that warmed Madison down to her toes, then Terry moved off to the kitchen.

They sat watching the cartoons until Terry moved past them with a small paper bag, on his way to the hall. Minutes later, he passed by them, and went back to the kitchen.

Jake yawned, stretched his feet out and watched Terry go back to the hall.
"Dad, what's Uncle Terry doing?"

John didn't look up from the laptop. "Does he have to be doing anything? Maybe he just wants the exercise."

Abby laughed as Terry crossed in front of the TV, this time without the paper bag. He paused to pick up the tissue around the wastebasket.

"Dad says you and he are going fishing after lunch." Abby sniffed, snuggled the blanket up to her shoulders. "Mind if I joined you?"

Terry smiled. "Have I ever turned down your company?"

"Not that I can remember." Abby sighed with contentment and looked back at the TV. "It's nice being home again."

The cell phone in Terry's pocket went off, and Terry quickly moved to the hall before answering it. A door shut soon after, and Madison couldn't help being curious. She sat watching the cartoons for several minutes, and when one show ended and another started, she pushed off the couch and wobbled her way to the hall.

She could feel someone watching, and looked behind to see John studying her from the recliner.

"Do you need anything?" John asked.

Maddie shook her head, and John went back to tapping away at his laptop.

The office door swung open. Terry stepped into the hall with a cell phone pressed to his ear, saw Madison, and waved her inside. "Here she is. Hold on a moment, and I'll put her on the phone."

She went inside, and Terry closed the door behind her, all the while motioning her to the leather chair at his desk. "I'd like you to meet someone special. His name is Dr. Jacoby, and he'd like a word with you." Terry handed her the cell phone. "Dr. Jacoby knows about this morning."

"You told him?"

"I had to." Terry leaned against the heavy executive desk, folded his arms and smiled. "It's okay. He's a friend."
"But you said you'd never tell anyone outside of the family."

"He IS family. Talk to him."

Hesitant, Madison lifted the cell phone to her ear. "Hello?"

"Is this Madison, Terry's friend?" The voice sounded old, but upbeat, positive. "I wanted to say 'hi,' and welcome to our neck of the woods. Have you ever been to Upstate New York before?"

What that had to do with anything, was beyond Madison. "No, I haven't."

"It's a far cry from the big city, isn't it?" Dr. Jacoby sounded relaxed, as though he were taking a tour of the area-- either that, or making up a vacation pamphlet. "Around here, there's farms and agriculture, mountains, large expanses of sky. And of course the lakes and the great fishing. From what you've seen so far, do you like living here?"

"Yes."

"Is it because of the things I mentioned? or maybe it's something else?"

"I like it here, because I like Terry."

The answer made Terry grin ear to ear.

"I know Terry cares about you," Dr. Jacoby said, a smile in his voice, "and I'm very happy to see you care about him, too. It's all right to give the phone back to Terry now. It was a pleasure meeting you."

"Okay." Madison passed the phone back to its owner, then got up from the comfortable chair. She'd been curious what Terry was doing, and now that she knew, she wanted out of the office. He was talking to shrink, and even though Dr. Jacoby had sounded nice, she really didn't want to talk to him.

Therapists were for crazy people. Okay, yes, she was crazy, but Terry was fishing for something he'd never catch and Madison didn't like to see him getting his hopes up for nothing.

"What was her name?" Terry pulled out a notepad and pen. "Dr. Carolyn Bennett."

The last name had Madison sitting back down. Bennet? Like Elizabeth Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice*?
"Do you have her number?" Terry scrawled in short, even strokes. "She sounds wonderful, but if she's as particular about taking on new patients as you say, will she even take my call? Do I need references, or something? Uh-huh. Thanks, I'd appreciate that." Terry gave Madison a smile. "Thank you, we really need this, especially Maddie."

Madison frowned, and folded her arms.

"Okay, thanks again for talking to me. I hope you have a pleasant vacation." Terry punched off the phone and blew out a breath. "That," Terry grinned, "was Dr. Jacoby. He interrupted his first vacation in ten years to talk to us, so I hope you know how special that makes you."

"Did he give a referral?"

"He did." Terry picked up the notepad. "The psychiatrist at the top of his list was Dr. Bennett. She's highly sought after because she takes on the hardest cases and has a reputation for not giving up. Because of that, Dr. Jacoby said she's not taking anymore new patients. But she's supposed to be the best. Among other things, she specializes in rape, incest, PTSD, self-harm, and marital sexual problems."

"I'm not going."

"Maddie, we need to work this out."

"No we don't."

A tired smile played on Terry's lips. "You like me, remember?"

Madison hoped she was scowling. If she wasn't, it wasn't for lack of trying.

"Besides that, you also need to deal with your cutting. If nothing else gets addressed, that has to be at the top of our list." Terry picked up the cell phone, slipped it into his pocket with a satisfied nod. "Dr. Jacoby is using his connections for our benefit, and calling Dr. Bennett, himself. Maybe he can swing it so she'll at least look us over. He's not making any guarantees, only that he'll try, and after he's had a good chance to talk to her, he'll call us back. Hopefully, that will happen before the end of the day, so we can get in line for an appointment."

"Terry, I'm never going to marry you."

Terry looked away, pushed out a sigh and didn't answer.
"Nothing is going to happen. Just because I talk to some shrink, doesn't mean I'm going to change my mind."

He turned his brown eyes on her, and held her in that one, gentle look. "If you had the chance--if you were more 'normal'--would you want to marry me?"

She kept quiet.

"Do you want to be with me, Maddie?"

"No."

He looked at her, and she bit her lip.

"Sometimes."

"Okay, then. Let's talk to Dr. Bennett and see what happens." Terry straightened, turned to open the slim laptop on his desk. "I'm not giving up on us, Maddie. And I'm not giving up on your never needing to cut again."

His back facing her while he did something smart with his laptop, Madison kissed her fingers over the sweater Terry wore. Just enough to graze the fabric and feel the warmth of its owner. How she wished she could be normal. For his sake.

A knock sounded on the office door and Madison jerked her hand away.

"Come in." Terry closed his laptop as John came inside. "It's time for lunch?" Terry guessed.

"Yup, tuna fish sandwiches, and there's more than enough for everyone. I think Izumi's trying to keep our strength up to fight the flu." John looked at Madison, then Terry. "We still on for fishing after lunch?"

Terry nodded. "Just give us a moment, will you? I'm not done with Maddie yet."

"Come when you're ready," John nodded, and closed the door as he left.

"I called my pastor." Terry looked at Madison and she sighed.

"Let me guess. You told him, too."
"He won't tell anyone."

"He doesn't have to. You're doing it for him."

"Maddie, please. I'm being careful." Terry leaned on the desk, and faced her with a frank expression. "Earlier this morning, when you asked if God minded-- I couldn't remember the passage I wanted. But Pastor Bill gave me the reference. First Corinthians, chapter six, verses nineteen and twenty. I have it here on my laptop." Terry opened the computer, showed her his Bible program and read aloud; "'Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's.'"

Terry closed the computer. "Our bodies are not our own, they're the Lord's. When we hurt ourselves on purpose, we're dishonoring Him. He bought us by dying on the cross for our sins, and when His Holy Spirit came to live in our hearts, we became His temple here on earth. Do you understand?"

Madison looked away. "I don't know what you want from me."

"I think you do." Terry reached the distance between them, and gently touched her chin with his finger. "I want you to try, Maddie. I want you to try because God wants you to, because I want you to, and because you need to stop."

"I have tried."

"Maddie, I know this isn't going to be easy. Please, look at me." He waited until her eyes met his. "I don't expect this to go away overnight. I'm not an idiot. I know you're hurting, but I also know God is planning something better for you, something more than you're planning for yourself. And I'm not talking about you and me-- I'm talking about a life without cutting. A life where you have struggles, but where you turn to God instead of the knife. Maddie, you need to stop."

The words tugged tears from her, but she remained silent.

"God loves you, Maddie. I look at you and I see someone who survived, who not only stayed alive, but a beautiful soul who's trying to get past the pain long enough to find a life of her own. Whether I'm in it or not, this needs to stop. Can we agree on that?"

She nodded.
His hand reached for hers, and she slipped hers against his palm.

"I'm not asking you to do this by yourself, and neither is God. There's His great and precious promises to lean on, the comfort and fellowship of the Holy Spirit abiding in you, not to mention the friend you have in Jesus. You aren't alone." Terry's hand lightly caressed hers in a close, intimate gesture that had her backing away and longing to rush him with kisses at the same time. "You also have me. I'm in your corner, rooting for you each step of the way. I mean it when I say we're in this together."

"I'm scared, Terry."

"I know." He gave her hand a squeeze. "I am too, but that only means we need to trust Him more. Oh, Maddie. There's so much I wish I could tell you. There's things about me, about my childhood you don't know, things that will probably only make this harder for you than it already is. Maybe I should never tell you, I don't know. I only know I want to take you in my arms and make the hurt go away. I want to make you happy. I hope I can give you a fraction of what you've given me."

"What about your childhood?"

"When you smile," Terry's face lit up like her angel on the dresser at home, "I feel this overpowering joy. It's like no pain on earth could possibly hurt me, like I could live through all the tomorrows in front of me and be outrageously satisfied. My heart is so full, I wish you could look inside me and see it. There's a newfound joy that wasn't there before, and it's all because of you."

"Me?"

Terry smiled, and squeezed her hand again. "You and me, Maddie. We do this together."

A million questions came to her mind, but her heart beat so loud she couldn't hear them. She only knew that when Terry held her hand and looked into her eyes, she wanted to fight for him. But oh, how it hurt. She pulled away, until her hand was safely back on her lap.

"I emptied the bathroom cabinet, Maddie."

She blinked at Terry.

"I made sure there wasn't anything sharp hidden in the bathroom adjoining the office, then I took out most of the antiseptic and bandages and gave them to Izzy. If you cut, Izzy will help
you clean the wounds, and make sure you'll get the care they need. I left enough in the bathroom
cabinet for an emergency, but Maddie, I'm not trying to make it easy for you to cut."

She saw the earnest concern in Terry's eyes, even his desperation, and swallowed hard. He meant
business.

"I've asked Izzy to hide all the kitchen knives."

Panic welled inside Madison. She stood, but Terry took her hand and held it so firm she didn't
have the strength to run.

"When you have the urge to cut, Dr. Jacoby suggested I try to find you a substitute, something
else to do that isn't as destructive."

"Like what?"

"Hold on." Still leaning against the desk, Terry slid out a drawer, picked out something, then
placed it around her wrist like a bracelet.

"A rubber band? A stupid rubber band? You hide the knives and expect this to make it all
right?"

He lifted her hand, snapped the rubber band hard enough to leave a slight red mark on her skin.
Slight or not, it hurt.

"If this doesn't work, then we'll find something else. But I'm asking you to try, Maddie. Fight this
with everything you've got." He looked at her and waited, and with every second that passed, she
felt a greater need to answer.

"I'll try."

His eyebrows raised. "Would you promise me that?"

"I promise." Going to him, Madison propped her shoulder against Terry's, and couldn't help but
smile when she heard him swallow loudly. It served him right, stroking her hand that way. The
rubber band, she didn't hold against him.

"Okay, then." He stood, and let the momentum of it push her away just a little. "Izzy's waiting for
us to come to lunch."
For several moments, Madison stood there and looked at Terry. Where had he come from, that he could talk to her with such gentle assurance? He was a man, after all, and men were animals, a bunch of brute beasts who only thought about sex. But Terry wasn't like that. There was a gentleness about him she couldn't understand. He was a walking contradiction, someone, to her way of thinking, who couldn't possibly exist in this pain-riddled world. Maybe he really was an angel. Or maybe, he really was just a very nice person.

"Lunch, Maddie?" Terry held out a hand, and sighed happily when she took it. "You and me," he whispered, lightly pulling her with him to the door. "You haven't eaten all day, and neither have I. We need to get something in us before we pass out."

That strong hand meant the world to Madison. It meant God was helping her, that she wasn't alone, that there was hope.

Hope.

What a strange word. It held a strong kind of magic that wasn't magic at all. Maybe it was faith, faith to keep going, to keep... hoping. It was easier to hope with Terry holding her hand, and Madison made up her mind to give him her hand every chance she got.

They came into the living room and found everyone eating tuna fish sandwiches on colorful plates and drinking sugar-free soda. The children sat on the quilt, picnic-style, enjoying their food and the stickers and toys scattered around them. Despite the room being cozily crowded, Abby had saved a spot for Madison and Terry on the couch. Even though Izzy sat in the recliner and John occupied a dining chair, no one had taken the two seats beside Jake and Abby. Everyone was probably saving the couch for the sick people, and since Madison wasn't feeling very well, they had saved her a seat. But they had left enough room for her and Terry.

A new feeling spread inside Madison.

It felt different somehow, coming into that room with Terry's hand around hers. It was as though they were making a statement, a fact. They were the same and yet different. They were together. The family had saved two places, side by side, and it meant they understood.

As Terry and Madison settled on the couch, Izzy got up and returned a moment later with two more plates of sandwiches.

"I've been waiting to ask ever since Brian left here last night," John said around a mouthful of whole wheat bread and tuna, "but what in the world happened when he got to your apartment? I never did find out."
"Mr. Donovan?" Abby looked to her Dad. "He was here last night?"

"He was." John nodded in Terry's direction, waited while Terry and Madison silently prayed over their food. When they were done, John picked up where he'd left off. "Brian dropped by here at-- oh, I can't remember what time-- it was dead of night, that I remember-- and he was looking for your uncle. When he didn't find him here, Brian guessed and took off for Terry's apartment. What I want to know is, what happened when Brian got there?"

It was nice to have something to talk about that didn't point to her emergency that morning, and Madison felt free to enjoy her sandwich. Nothing bad had happened with Brian, for Terry had already told her that much. Relaxed and happy, she cozied between Abby and Terry, and ate her food, relieved she had nothing to add to the conversation. Abby spread half the blanket over Madison's lap, and when Madison tried to thank her, Abby was too drawn into Terry's story to notice.

Izzy's blue eyes went wide with amazement. "Brian and Emily dated?"

"Then I was right--" Terry brushed some crumbs away from his mouth with the back of his hand-- "you didn't know they had a history as a couple."

"No, I didn't." Izzy shook her head, and passed Terry another napkin. "I can't believe Stan would do that on purpose, and to his own daughter."

Terry shrugged. "On purpose or not, the results are the same. Emily is alone."

"Let's hope not for long," John commented, and picked up another sandwich. "If Brian knows what's good for him, he'll make his move before someone else comes knocking on Emily's door."

John sighed through his nose as he tasted the next sandwich. "These are really good," he said as crumbs tumbled onto his sweater.

"Mommy?" Ruthie showed her mother an empty plate. "I ate all my food."

"Thank you, dear."

Ruthie sighed patiently. "Can't we have cookies now?"

"Oh, I see," Izzy smiled. "Wait until everyone else is done, then we'll have the rest of Mrs. Doyle's tin."
Ricky took a drink from his sippy cup, then danced Firefighter Stan around his empty plate. The boy had not forgotten about dessert.

It didn't take much time for John to finish eating, then Terry, Jake, Abby, and Izzy. The kids had long finished their lunch, and were now staring at Madison's slow progress. After all, Izzy had said "everyone." Feeling the pressure, Madison tried to hurry through her second sandwich when a bite got caught in her throat.

"Don't rush things, Maddie." Terry gave her a sip from his soda can, and smiled when she was able to swallow.

Izzy got up to get the tin of cookies. Those four pairs of little eyes watching Madison from the quilt, were too much, and the cookies were mercifully divided among the people in the room, including Madison, before Madison could get down the last of her sandwich.

"Okay, everyone," Izzy said as they enjoyed their large, chocolate chip cookies, "we need to talk about making a change in our sleeping arrangements. Madison needs to sleep on our living room couch."

"We don't want her to be by herself," John added when Abby looked ready to ask why. "I'll explain later, after the kids are asleep."

"Why can't you talk now, Daddy?" Debbie, the precociously bright one of the three, got on her knees to examine the very best bite of her cookie that would include the most possible chocolate chips. Madison knew that was what the girl was doing, because she was doing that, herself.

"Later," John said, and Debbie went back to her cookie. Madison breathed a sigh of thanks. She really didn't want the munchkins to hear what she'd done.

"What I'm thinking is this," Izzy said, and began to explain the new arrangements. In order for Madison to have the couch, they needed to move Ricky, but because Ricky had the flu, Izzy didn't want to put the boy on the floor. That was out of the question. Madison was ready to volunteer for the floor, when Abby interrupted with a laugh.

"We could always go home, Mom." Abby broke off part of her cookie before popping it into her mouth with a smile. "We could just as easily go home, and be sick there."

"No, I want you here." Izzy sounded of motherly experience. "I can help take care of you, Jake, and Ricky better if you're here. Besides, you don't have the energy to unpack and set up house. So that's that. I'll sleep in the recliner, and John, Terry, and Ricky can take the master bedroom."
"Or," Abby suggested, "Ricky could sleep with me and Jake."

"Yes, but then where would your uncle sleep?"

Following the back and forth, Jake looked amused but thoughtful. He glanced over Abby, and gave Madison a kind smile. "Mom," Jake spoke up, "we could always get out a sleeping bag. Or better yet, the inflatable mattress. You don't need to sleep in the recliner."

With a groan, John shook his head. "I don't want my wife sleeping in the recliner."

"But the inflatable mattress is so much trouble."

"John," Terry waited a moment longer for Izumi to finish, "I hate to kick Izzy out of her bed. Maybe I should stay at my place."

"Thanks, I appreciate the sentiment," John said dryly, "but we need you here. And as far as Izumi is concerned, if I have to inflate the mattress with lung power alone, she is not sleeping every night in that crazy armchair. This family pulls together. We'll manage."

"How long are we going to manage?" Abby wondered out loud, and Jake bumped her with an elbow. "Okay. I still think we should go home. As soon as we don't have any fever, we'll get out of your hair."

"I don't mind a few tangles now and then," Izzy smiled, and the topic was left in favor of going fishing.

Then it hit Madison.

They were treating her like family.

She'd tried to warn them she wasn't going to marry Terry, and John and Izzy knew Madison had problems, but they were still treating her like one of their own. For the first time in Madison's life, she began to feel what it must be like to be loved by a family.

Sitting side by side, Terry's hand sought Madison's. He gave it a painfully gentle squeeze, and slanted her a look that had Madison's insides doing cartwheels.

"That is so sweet." Abby saw their joined hands, and Terry's cheeks blushed bright pink. "They're like teenagers in love. Aren't they sweet, Dad? Maybe we could nickname them?"
"Oh, no." Terry shook his head. "No nicknames."

"But that's not fair. You started calling us 'AJ,' and we never had a say in the matter."


By now, Jake was laughing softly, and suffering a bout of coughing at the same time. Abby patted Jake on the back, and flashed Madison a smile.

"Men. Don't you love them?"

No, Madison did not, but stopped herself from saying it out loud. Though she felt alarm at Abby's use of the word "love," Madison decided it was all right. As long as Terry never used any of the L words in front of her-- love or lust-- then Madison hoped she was safe.

Warm and safe with Terry's hand wrapped around hers, Madison tried to enjoy what she could from the moment.

"Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear Him. For He knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are dust."
~ Psalm 103:13, 14 ~

"Casting all your care upon Him; for He careth for you."
~ 1 Peter 5:7 ~
Chapter Twenty-four
A Woman's Joy

"They that sow in tears shall reap in joy."
~ Psalm 126:5 ~

Fly fishing wasn't high on Terry's list right now, not while every moment he hoped and expected for a phone call from Dr. Jacoby. Since Maddie had needed to lay down on the couch to lessen the pain of her stitches, it seemed sensible to let her rest while he went fishing. It hadn't been easy to leave, even with Izzy's promise to keep an eye on and take good care of Maddie.

So Terry had gone fishing. There wasn't much else he could do besides pray and wait for Dr. Jacoby's call.

And of course fish.

Wind gusted over the water, playing with Terry's line so much, he had to keep double-hauling the casts to make any progress. The fish weren't biting, but it didn't matter. John had gotten Terry out of the house and back on the shore, and doing a decent job of getting Terry to relax.

Which, Terry figured, had been the whole point of them coming out here in the first place.

"How do you like the fly?" Abby asked as she executed a sweet triple-haul that had Terry smiling.
"I also made one for Dad, though we're probably going to have a long wait before he tries fly fishing again."

Further down the shore, John grinned as he reeled in a few inches of his line. "Thanks for the gift, but when I try to fly cast, I look like a maniac with stripped line piling at my feet."

"That's because it takes practice."

"I've had enough practice looking like a maniac," John laughed. "I'll stick with what I've got."

"You do all right," Terry smiled, working to time the rhythm of each cast. "The fish don't seem to be interested in us today, but I like the fly."

Just then, a male voice sounded behind them.

"Hey," Abby paused to greet the newcomer. "What are you doing out here?"
Coughing, Jake rubbed his hands together before shoving them into the pockets of his heavy coat. "I thought I'd watch."

"You should be inside." Abby gave her fly rod to John for safekeeping, then used her free hands to zip up Jake's coat and pull the collar up around the young man's neck. "You can watch us some other time. You should be resting."

"So should you." Jake planted a kiss on Abby's forehead, smiled, and looked to Terry. "Did I miss anything? Have you talked about her yet?"

"You mean Maddie?" Terry did a short retrieve before the backcast. "I guess now is as good a time as any." Trying to keep the mood from taking a nosedive off a cliff, Terry told them about Maddie's problem as simply as he could. He tried not to watch their faces as they registered the news, but a quick glance at AJ showed them sober and quiet.

Abby had her fly rod back, but she had stopped fishing.

"Is there anything we can do?" Jake asked.

"Just pray, and don't treat her weird."

"What made her cut?" Abby asked. "Was it because of me?"

"I doubt it." Terry flicked the line back onto the water. "I think she's done this three times since I've known her, and you only came home the day before yesterday. This isn't because of you."

"Then why is she doing it?"

"I don't know." Terry slowly reeled in his line. "Besides it being her way of coping, I don't know what specifically pushes her over the edge."

"Then how do you know it wasn't my fault, this time?"

"Abby," Terry stopped to look into the concerned face of his little fishing buddy. "A lot happened yesterday besides your apology to Maddie. Most of the tears she shed, were because of me-- not you."

"Why would Madison cry because of you?"
"Because Maddie is confused." Terry sucked in a deep breath as John came over to better listen. The fish had been forgotten, and Terry knew Abby was struggling with guilt. "It's not because of you. It's not. If I could point to anyone, it would be me."

"But I don't understand."

Finding it hard to put into words, Terry prayed for wisdom. "Maddie feels a lot for me-- how much or how deeply, I can't say, but it's there. When she found out yesterday that I had feelings for her, as well, it caused her pain."

"Why?"

A sigh slipped from Jake, and he nodded knowingly. "Because Madison loves our Uncle Terry, and she doesn't want him to get hurt."

"Why should he get hurt?" The words weren't out of Abby's mouth before she looked as though she finally understood. "Yesterday, Madison told me she couldn't marry Uncle Terry."

Though it didn't surprise Terry, it pained him to hear that, and his pain only seemed to confirm Maddie's concern. He was already getting hurt.

The cell phone in Terry's pocket sounded, and he quickly stepped away to answer the call. Thank the Lord, it was Dr. Jacoby.

"I had a talk with Dr. Bennett."

"And?"

"And she really does have a full caseload. However, she told me to direct you to her website, and asked you to download the intake form and the medical release files. You and Madison each fill out a set, then give Dr. Bennett a call to make an appointment. She may have to stay after her usual office hours to fit you in, but she will see you both."

"Thank you. Thank you." Terry blew out a sigh of relief and stared up at the heavens. "I can't thank you enough for this. It means a lot to us."

"You're very welcome, Terry. I hope Dr. Bennett works out for you and Madison." A long pause emphasized Dr. Jacoby's next words. "I'm not only thankful for Madison's sake, but also for yours. I believe therapy will do you good, and I mean that in the best possible way. I know the
last several months have been hard on you, so try to take advantage of Dr. Bennett’s help. For your sake, as well as Madison's, you must take care of yourself. It must be a priority."

"I understand." Terry looked out over the bay, the waves cresting in the wind and forming whitecaps. "You’re a good friend, thank you."

After giving Terry the website URL for Dr. Bennett, and talking more about his high opinion of her, Dr. Jacoby hung up to try and resume what was left of his vacation. After getting so involved in their troubles, Terry guessed it wouldn't be easy.

Trying to calm himself, Terry slipped the phone back into his pocket. He needed to take one steady step at a time, but at least he and Maddie were heading in the right direction.

He looked back at the others.

"Important call?" John asked, and Terry nodded.

"We have a psychiatrist."

* * * *

The children were doing kid-safe watercolors at the kitchen table, and from the couch, Madison could hear them busily having fun. Izzy kept hovering between the kitchen and living room, keeping an eye on the munchkins, and keeping Madison company as the TV droned in the background. It made for a lightly noisy house, but Madison didn't mind. She tried to lose herself in just being there, letting the TV do its thing while Izzy commented on the program and the triplets and Ricky made a mess in the kitchen. Like water washing onto the beach, Madison let everything around her flow where it wanted.

"Mommy, Ricky says my grass shouldn't be purple."

"Then don't make it purple." Izzy flipped to another channel as Madison shut her eyes. "Do you need anything for the pain?"

"No, it's not as bad right now." Madison pulled the blanket around her shoulders, and when the front door opened, so did her eyes.

In he came, the one who kept surging through her thoughts no matter what she did.
"Hey there, princess." Terry stepped inside with his fishing stuff, and the others came in behind him. "How's everyone doing?" It was code for how she was doing, and Madison couldn't help her smile.

"She's tired, but doing just fine." Izzy stepped halfway into the kitchen to check on the kids. "John, maybe you could run to the store now?"

"Man," John snapped his fingers, "I knew I'd forgotten something."

"Mommy, Debbie spilled her glass."

"I'll take care of it," Jake said, and moved past Izzy to clean up the tipped over puddle in the kitchen.

"Uncle Terry, do you want me to put away your gear?" Abby smiled helpfully when Terry handed her his things, then turned to her father as he checked his pockets for a wallet and cell phone. "Sometime soon, we need to unload the moving trailer so we can get it back to the rental people."

"After I get back from the store," John nodded, "we'll take care of it, and just stack everything in your house to be unpacked for later. Terry, go do what you need to. I can handle things around here."

"Are you sure?"

John nodded. "I have it covered." John let Abby go put away his things, and while he talked to his wife about what she needed at the store, Terry crouched by the sofa and smiled at Madison.

The fresh scent of the outdoors clung to Terry like a tight hug.

"Dr. Jacoby called," Terry said in a private hush. He reached for Madison's hand, and gave it a light squeeze as he spoke. "Dr. Bennett agreed to see us. Would you come to the office in a few minutes? We have paperwork to fill out before we can make an appointment."

With a sigh, Madison nodded. Unlike Terry, she couldn't work up any joy over the thought of going to some stranger with her problems.

She watched as Terry stood, and moved to the hallway with his coat slung over one arm. Maybe he would change his mind and call the whole thing off. Maybe he would forget, and they
wouldn't have to go to any appointment. It wasn't likely though, not with the way he seemed to be pinning his hopes on getting her help.

A few minutes later, John had left for the store, Jake was resting in the recliner, and Abby was talking to Izzy in the kitchen while the children finished their works of art. What the women talked about didn't matter to Madison, just as long as the sound of their voices and the drone of the TV kept her distracted.

She wondered if it was too late to run away? Probably.

Knowing Terry had to be waiting for her by now, Madison climbed off the couch, and Jake gave her a brave smile as she headed for the hallway. Easy for Jake to smile, he wasn't the one about to be analyzed, or whatever it was shrinks did.

The office door stood open, an unspoken invitation to come inside. She did, but ever so slowly. Terry sat at his desk, retrieving something from the office printer, and when he saw her, he rolled out another chair as she shut the door.

"Terry?" She went to him, hoping he would listen to reason. "Is this going to be expensive? If it's going to cost you a lot of money, then why do it? Think about the price of gas for a minute. You'll have to pay for all that gas to get us to wherever this lady is, and it might add up. Maybe we should stop before you go broke."

He looked at her skeptically. "What do you know of the price of gas?" He placed another stack of paper in front of her as she eased into the chair. "I can afford the time and expense, whatever that might be, so stop trying to stall. I know all this paperwork looks daunting, but it's necessary."

"What if I don't want to see that lady?"

"You promised me," he reminded. "You said you'd fight this with everything you've got."

"That promise was for cutting-- not for this." Madison peered at the thick pile of sheets Terry had neatly stacked together. "Do I have to answer everything?"

"Please, Maddie."

She sighed as Terry handed her a pencil. A very big part of her wanted to leave, but the part near her heart made her want to stay. She was only doing this because God minded her cutting, and it would hurt Terry if she left. No other reasons than those, could have made her stay in that chair.
"I read the position statement on Dr. Bennett's website." Terry sounded hopeful. "Dr. Jacoby told me Carolyn Bennett was a professing Christian, and after what I just read, I think we're going to like her."

Numbly, Madison nodded. She stared at the stack in front of her, and the stack in front of Terry. Two different stacks for two different people. It didn't make any sense.

"Why do you have to fill out anything, if we're going in because of me?"

"It's because we're going into therapy, together." Terry glanced at her and smiled. "I meant it when I said you're not in this alone."

The words tugged her into action. Pencil in hand, she read the first line and immediately blanked. They wanted today's date. She couldn't remember, and looked over to Terry's form and borrowed his answer.

She copied the referring doctor's name-- Dr. Jacoby-- then printed her name as firmly as she could until the tip broke.

Terry handed her another pencil.

Social Security number, home address... Madison paused when they asked who to call in case of emergency. "Can I put in your number?" she asked, and Terry smiled as though it was an honor. She printed his cell phone number on the line, and worked her way to the next section.

Uh-oh.

"What are the problems you're coming in for, and what are your treatment goals?" She read the words out loud and got a pained look from Terry.

"What are you going to put down?" he asked.

Feeling trapped, Madison thought about escaping back to the living room. Maybe even back to the Old Mill Campground.

"Don't panic, Maddie."

"I'm not."
He gave her a look and she forced herself to calm down.

"We agree getting treatment for cutting comes first, right?"

She nodded, and wrote that in.

stop cutting

The graphite tip broke, and Terry pushed the pencil into a sharpener before handing it back.

"Getting help for your flashbacks, dealing with the night terrors, things that get in the way of a happy life. It's up to you, Maddie. What's your next priority?"

She thought it over, and put down her answer.

become normal

Although Terry winced, he didn't call her stupid for being so wishful.

"Then there's you and me." He bowed his head a little, as though he couldn't quite meet her eyes because of what she might say. Such as, "Get lost." "What's your goal for us?" he asked.

"I'm not marrying you."

He looked away, and went back to filling out his own form.

"I'm not having sex, Terry. Not again. Not ever."

"Put down what you want, Maddie. I won't pressure you into something you don't want."

"Then say I don't have to see this lady."

"I meant," he looked at Madison, "not where you and I are concerned. But you are going, if only to get help for yourself."

The empty line stared up at her, daring her to at least comment one way or the other about Terry. They had a relationship-- she didn't doubt that, but if she put down "get married," then that would mean sex. If she didn't, then maybe she would lose out on getting to be with Terry at all. Even kissing him.
Terry sighed. "Why don't you fill out the rest of the form, and come back to that later?" He spoke without looking up, and she leaned in to see what he had written.

*Help Maddie stop cutting.*  
*Have a loving, healthy relationship with Maddie.*  
*Make Maddie happy.*

Tears welled up in Madison's eyes and she pushed away from the desk. It wasn't fair.

Silently, Terry kept working on his intake form.

If she could be brutally honest with herself, if she could put down anything at all-- if she could tell her most farfetched wish and not have to be afraid of what anyone thought, she knew what she'd put on that third line. It went against everything she thought she wanted, but the words were there. Right under the surface of her heart, where her feelings beat inside her chest until it ached.

Terry wasn't playing fair.

Pulling the roly-poly chair back to the desk, Madison picked up the pencil. In slow, uneven strokes, she wrote from her heart.

*stop cutting*  
*become normal for Terry*  
*marry Terry, have sex with Terry, have Terry's baby*  

Seeing it down in writing came as a terrible jolt, and Madison scooted the chair farther away from you-know-who. Feeling gutted, she moved on to the next question. What were her symptoms, their time of onset, and how long had she been experiencing each one?

Madison groaned.

"Maddie? Do you need help?"

"If I didn't need help, would we be here, filling out all these dumb questions?"

A smile parted Terry's lips. "Do you need help understanding what's being asked? Maybe I could make it go easier for you."
She wanted Terry's help, and yet she didn't. Especially after what she'd already put down. Rereading those hyper, crazy-bold words, she shook her head. She would fill out this form on her own, or die trying. And dying was a real possibility.

This was killing her.

Steadying her hand, she struggled with her words.

cutting/since I was 13 years old, nightmares/since the first time I was used (8 or 9 yrs old), hurting
hip/I was dragged by my leg sometimes, and now it hurts almost all the time if I don't take my

"Terry, how do you spell acetaminophen?"

He started to spell it out loud, and she groaned.

"Hold on." Terry wrote it on a notepad, then pushed it to her.

She copied out the long word, then decided that was enough. If Dr. Bennett couldn't tell by now that she was crazy, and feeling an awful lot for Terry, then the lady was either dumb or not paying attention.

The next few pages were easy. Many of the questions Madison skipped, mainly because she had no idea what the answers were. Which was why they were easy. She had no idea if any of her immediate family members or relatives had ever had any addictions, etc. She had no idea.

They wanted to know about her mother, and Madison did her best to give what they wanted with what little she recalled. Momma was a dim memory to her, especially since Madison had worked so hard not to remember.

she liked to drink a lot, yelled a lot, and said i was her big mistake. sometimes i miss her.

Then came questions about her father. She didn't even consider him by that title, and no way would she talk about him. They wanted a name, and all she would write was one word--

dragon

"How's it coming?" Terry paused from his work and Madison realized he was almost on the last page.
After all the questions she’d been filling out, it made her curious. "Could I see what you wrote when you’re done?" she asked.

"I don’t know." Terry cocked an eyebrow at her. "Will you show me what you put down?"

"No."

"Then I’ll keep this to myself." He went back to work, leaving her to wonder what he’d written.

"Terry?"

"Uh-huh?"

"Are we going in together? I mean, when we have to start talking, will we be together?"

"I don’t know. I hope so."

Madison bit her lip and winced when she tasted blood. She hoped that didn’t count as cutting. "Is she going to get us to talk about what we wrote?"

"I suppose." Terry looked uneasy at the thought. "I hadn’t considered that, but it’s a strong possibility."

Feeling trapped, Madison glanced over her treatment goals. "Could we print out these forms again, and do them over?"

Nodding, Terry opened up his laptop as though he’d had the same thought. He stopped, and looked at her. "Maybe I’m making a mistake." He studied the desk a moment before letting out a long sigh. "Going into therapy, there’s probably something you should know about me."

"Then I don’t want to know."

"I thought you just asked to see my intake form?"

"That was before you started looking so sad. If you tell me something sad, then I’ll feel guilty about not telling you something sad, and then we’d both be miserable. Even more miserable than if I’d told you."

"Come again?"
“I don’t want to trade secrets.”

“Okay,” Terry nodded, “that’s fair. If I tell you this, we don’t have to trade confidences. The thing is, this is important, and it’s bound to come up in therapy. I think I’d rather you first heard it straight from me.”

As long as it didn’t mean she had to do anything in return, like spill her heart out at Terry’s feet, then she was content to listen. And she was curious.

He leaned back in his chair, folded his arms and looked strangely remote, as though he were about to say something he disliked greatly and didn’t want to feel the impact of his own words.

“When I was a boy, I was raped by my step-father.”

Oh no. That’s not at all what she’d thought he’d say.

“It started at an early age and since I was too scared to tell my mom, it went on for years. I kept holding onto my secret, but the more my step-dad would beat me, the more others started to notice. A teacher got concerned, and one day, social workers showed up at our house. I was eight at the time. Are you all right, Maddie? Do you want me to stop?”

Gulping, Madison shook her head, “no.”

“When they showed up, I was scared and Dad gave me a look that said, ‘Don’t you dare.’ So I didn’t. But they kept asking me over and over, what had happened to me, how did I get those bruises? Mom lost it, grabbed a knife and held it to my throat. She said she’d rather kill me, than let someone else raise her son, because she was convinced they were only there to take me away from her. After the knife had been wrestled away, I told them what was going on with me and my dad, and they put me in a foster home.” Terry paused, as if needing a moment to collect his thoughts. “It’s funny, but looking back, I thought the shame was behind me.”

“It wasn’t?”

“No.” Terry shook his head. “My first foster parents decided they couldn’t deal with my emotional problems, and I was given to a second couple. My new foster dad knew I’d been molested before, knew I was at-risk, vulnerable, and already emotionally scarred. What did it matter if he added to it? It wouldn’t be as if it was his fault for messing me up. I’d already come that way.”

Madison covered her mouth. “He hurt you, too?”
Terry nodded. "He never had intercourse with me, but it was still sexual abuse and it went on for two years. I was so ashamed, I couldn't take it anymore and finally told John. The poor guy was only ten at the time-- the same age as me-- and was probably too young to understand what I was saying. I scared him badly even though I hadn't meant to, and he went straight to his dad, and his dad immediately called the police. Thank God."

"What happened then?"

"Well," Terry pushed out a sigh, "my foster dad pleaded guilty to what he'd done without dragging me through a second criminal trial. I had to be grateful for that. The first one with my step-father had been difficult, and it was a relief to know I wouldn't have to go through that again."

Sadness touched Terry's features. "A fresh round of counseling came next, and another foster home. I went through so many foster parents, I stopped trying to remember all their names. The men wanted to be called Dad, and the women, Mom. So that's what I did, right up until I was old enough to attend college with John." Terry glanced at Madison. "It's all right. This happened a long time ago, and I'm fine now."

Wet rolled down Madison's cheeks. It wasn't all right. Was this world losing its mind, or was she? She couldn't catch her breath, her eyes burned, and all she wanted to do was cry.

"Not you, too. Please God, not you, too."

Leaning forward in his chair, Terry reached across the desk to touch her hand. "Please don't cry-- not because of me."

After what he'd just told her, tears were not something she could help. Terry might as well have asked her to reverse gravity, and he would've gotten the same results.

He stood, came around the desk, gently tugged her out of her chair and wrapped his arms around her as the tears kept falling. He'd told her once that he'd had a rougher than average childhood, but until now, she'd had no idea of how rough it had been.

"I pray I did the right thing in telling you. Maddie, please stop."

"Not you-- no, please God-- why did it have to happen to you, too?" Madison felt sick, and she moved out of Terry's arms to lean against the desk. It hurt to think, and it hurt to feel Terry hugging her.
It hurt.

"Everything in life happens for a reason, Maddie." Terry didn't back away from her, but brushed the hair from her wet cheeks. "If I'd never been hurt, I never would have met John. When we were children, I first met John when he came to my rescue when the others at school were bullying me. Then later, John and his father saved me by going to the police. Without John, so much of my life would have turned out differently." Terry gentled a hand over hers.

"Without John, I never would have been a part of this family. And if I'd never been hurt, I probably wouldn't have volunteered for the crisis hotline, because I was trying to help others the way John had helped me. And if I hadn't been a part of that hotline, I wouldn't have searched the Old Mill Campground in the middle of a rainy night, looking for someone else who needed help. That pain made me who I am."

Strength drained from Madison. She needed to sit down and Terry helped her back to the chair. She didn't have the energy for tears, and yet they kept squeezing out and rolling down her cheeks. Terry, though, didn't leave and kept gently talking to her.

"This family's legacy of helping someone, started with John. Then John helped Izzy, who had some close calls of her own father raping her, when she was young. Then their daughter, Abby, helped Jake. I think I told you Jake was abused?"

Madison nodded, and swiped at her tears with the palms of her hands.

Rubbing his face and groaning, Terry sank back into his large desk chair. "Jake's story is so much worse than mine, but Abby married him, loved him fiercely, and I don't think Jake has ever been happier. I seriously doubt it. We carry scars, Maddie. This family may have started with Izumi and John, but their legacy began much earlier."

With a sniff, Madison dried her eyes on the shoulder of her sweater. "So now you're trying to rescue me?"

Terry smiled. "I prefer to think of us as rescuing each other."

She felt helpless to tell Terry that he'd gotten it all wrong. Instead of helping him, he kept getting pulled in deeper and deeper into her nightmare, and there he sat, insisting he was the one being saved.

"Sorry I told you?"
She shook her head.

"Then let's get this finished. I'd like to call Dr. Bennett as soon as we have this paperwork done."

A teeny tiny smile formed inside Madison, and slowly worked its way to her lips. Her poor Terry. She found it quietly amazing that this enviable, happy family had come from so much pain. From John befriending Terry at an early age, all the way down to Terry helping her, this family had deep roots. They protected each other, looked out for one another in a way that baffled Madison. The world chewed up its own, but these people did not. They refused to.

Several moments ticked by before Madison could read the page in front of her. Terry. Her sweet, sweet Terry was a survivor.

He gave her a new pencil, and this time, her smile came without even trying. His grin was immediate, a flash of white teeth that faded into a shy, lopsided smile. In that flickering, tender moment, Madison steeled herself to do whatever it took to stay with Terry. She couldn't give him sex, but she could do her best to take care of him, to make sure he didn't drown whenever past pain was remembered, to protect him the way the rest of this family protected each other.

Maybe Terry needed her. The startling thought gave her existence new meaning and fresh hope. Maybe God had a use for her, after all. The possibility of that thought took up so much of her attention, made her so nervously happy, she forgot to ask Terry to print out the form so she could start over.

* * * *

He chanced a look over the desk, saw her working that pencil hard into the paper. All in all, that had gone off pretty well. He'd finally told her about himself, and she hadn't rejected him. Not that Maddie would have been capable of such a thing, but it felt good knowing that she knew, and that she still liked him in spite of the abuse.

Hopefully, by now, she was in love, or very close to it. He felt happy enough to be on the receiving end of love, but since he'd never been here before, he had nothing to compare it to. He'd seen loving relationships with John and Izzy, and Abby and Jake, but that had been mere observation, not actually taking part in what was going on. Kind of like watching someone else eat ice cream-- you knew it had to be good, but you weren't the one doing the eating so all you could do was guess.

In all his life, this was the closest Terry had ever come to eating the ice cream.
By the time Terry had moved on to the medical release (so his psychiatrist would have access to his medical records), Maddie was still working away on the intake form. When she had at last finished, Terry added it to his pile without looking the pages over to see what she had said. If Maddie had wanted him to know, she would have told him. He helped her to understand the medical release, then showed her where to sign.

Through the closed door, Terry could hear the children loudly playing at something in the hallway. He hoped they weren't waiting for him to come out. He helped Maddie back to the living room couch, smiled at the kiddies, then went into the office and closed the door.

Their paperwork ready, Terry called Dr. Bennett’s appointment number.

A receptionist answered.

"Yes, I was told to expect your call," the man said, the recognizable sound of a keyboard tapping away in the background. "Dr. Bennett doesn't have any openings for new patients at present, but I have instructions to schedule you for six o'clock this evening-- that is, if it’s convenient for you and Ms. Crawford. If you've finished them, please fax us your intake forms and releases now, so your medical records will be here and in front of Dr. Bennett before you come in."

"Yes, tonight is just fine. And thank you."

"This first visit will be for an evaluation of you and Ms. Crawford, and if more time is needed, it will be completed in later appointments. I should warn these typically take about two hours, per person, so you might be here until late tonight. If this isn't a good time, let me know and we'll work something out."

"No, we'll come." Terry answered a few questions about payment, then hung up with instructions to fax the filled out forms to the office without delay.

Whew. An appointment for six o'clock in the evening. Clearly after office hours, and late enough for Terry to feel the influence of Dr. Jacoby's handiwork. Terry faxed the paperwork as quickly as he could, then went to go tell Maddie the good news.

He found her on the couch with Abby, the first absently watching TV, while the latter read from a fly fishing magazine. Instead of a happy face, however, he was met with an open-mouthed stare.

"You faxed my form?" Maddie looked lost and more than a bit frightened. "I was going to ask you to print it out again."
"I'm sorry, but it's too late now." Terry rubbed the back of his neck and wondered if he could call to get the paperwork changed. "Dr. Bennett is bending over backwards to fit us in, and I hate to cause trouble. If it's important, let her know tonight, when we go in for the first appointment. Maybe you can take care of it then."

"You're starting tonight?" Abby smiled and put down her magazine. "That's nice of your therapist."

"Yes, it is." Terry looked toward the armchair where John sat with his laptop. "Are you back from the store, already?"

"What do you mean, already?" John smiled. "I've been back for the past few hours."

The time was slipping away from him, Terry realized, and he went back to the office to get his coat and jeep keys. "Hey, Maddie?" He moved into the living room at a quick clip, sidestepping the munchkins as they played on the floor. "I'm going back to my apartment to lock things up. Do you want me to get anything from your place? Like maybe clothes?"

The quietly stunned look on Maddie's face gave him concern, but she nodded and he pulled out his iPhone to make a list. She wanted her spiral notebook (of course), her pajamas, clothes, all the things in her dresser (which weren't that many), and her purse and brush.

"Are you all right?" Terry asked, and again, Maddie nodded. "Make sure you're taking the painkillers? Stitches giving you any trouble?"

She shook her head.

"Abby, look after her while I'm gone, would you? The acetaminophen is by the couch. Izzy?" Terry moved into the kitchen. "Maddie and I are going to need an early dinner."

"Then I'll have something ready by the time you get back."

"Thanks."

"Don't worry, Uncle Terry," Abby smiled as he strode through the living room on his way out, "we'll take care of Madison like she's our aunt."

Terry grinned, and was out the door.
Though tears had made her feel better, Emily McCall wasn’t used to giving way so totally to grief. She had thought hiding out in her room so she wouldn’t upset her father when she cried, had been the responsible thing to do, but he had heard her through the wall. When she’d gone to answer him, she’d found him more angry than she cared to admit. She had nothing to be angry about, and had tried to tell him so.

Anger only got in the way, and in this case, was not a reasonable response to what had taken place. Terry loved someone else. He hadn’t committed a crime, and she wished Daddy would stop treating it that way.

Of course, arguing had made Daddy’s blood pressure go up, and this evening, the “I told you so,” he’d slung before she went to the kitchen to start dinner, had hurt. He just couldn’t stop talking about it, not even after all she’d said to defend Terry that day. Yes, she and Daddy had been concerned about Terry’s relationship to Madison, and yes, her father had voiced his opinion on that matter on more than one occasion. But in the semi-privacy of the kitchen, Emily had to admit that Madison probably needed Terry more than she did. It didn’t make the disappointment hurt any less, but it did help.

Dinner cooked on the kitchen stove while Mitch came in to wash his hands before cleaning Daddy’s bedsore.

"Is he any calmer?" Emily asked, and Mitch gave a weary laugh.

"He’s still giving me a hard time about taking his meds. I guess you could say he’s venting his frustration at someone else."

"I’m sorry for that," Emily sighed.

Mitch shook his head. "Better me, than you. I have a date tonight, but if you need someone to stay around and take care of him, I’ll cancel."

"Thanks, but you go ahead. I can take care of Daddy."

With a nod, Mitch went back to work, leaving Emily to stare at the pasta boiling on the stove.

Was this what her life would look like, ten, twenty years from now? Would she be having the same conversations with the aides, trying to manage her father’s illnesses, trying to keep her sanity while she held down a job with no hope of promotion? Besides the fact Emily guessed she
wouldn't have trouble with men being interested in her anymore, life seemed to only hold more promise of loneliness and strain.

Not that Emily minded taking care of Daddy, but she found it difficult to move on with her life when his needs were so very pressing. She'd tried to marry, and it simply hadn't worked out. Men didn't want to get involved with a woman who acted as full-time nurse and loving daughter to an aging parent. She could take the hint. She wasn't meant to ever have a family of her own. This was it, so she'd better get used to it.

Oh, this pouting wasn't like her at all. Emily stirred the pan and asked God for the grace to live without regret. She did not—would not, ever regret coming back to Three Mile Bay to take care of her parents. If this was the limit of God's will for her life, then so be it. She would not go on mourning the passing of a very dear and treasured dream.

She would never know love and she would never marry.

The doorbell rang, forcing Emily to leave dinner cooking away on the stove. The clock showed a quarter after five, and she knew Daddy would expect his meal soon. Why did it seem there were never enough hours in the day to get everything done? With a sigh, Emily opened the door and startled at what she found.

"Brian, what are you doing here?"

Brian gave a wry laugh. "I've been getting a lot of that, lately. How have you been holding up?"

"Holding up?" Emily felt worry creeping over her heart. "What are you talking about?"

"You and Terry." Brian shook his head when she was still puzzled. "Didn't your father tell you he called me last night?"

"He did? When?"

A shadow of concern crossed Brian's face. "Stan never told you? It was about three in the morning, and he was worried you couldn't stop crying."

"Daddy? Called you?" Confused, Emily moved aside to let Brian in. "I don't understand. I'm sorry he woke you so early, he shouldn't have done that."

"It's all right." As good-natured as ever, Brian shrugged and stepped into the living room. He wore a sports coat and slacks, and his hair looked so messy it made him look more boyish than
usual. "I just got off work." Brian went to the couch, started to sit down but hesitated when she headed for the kitchen.

"I have dinner on the stove, but maybe we could visit while I get it ready?"

"Sure." Brian followed but remained in the kitchen doorway as she moved to the stove. "You probably don't know this, but I called last night to let your father know about my visit with Terry."

"You saw Terry? Last night? After Daddy called you?" Emily stared up at the ceiling and silently prayed for help. This was not happening. She fought for composure as she added seasoning to the pan. "What did you talk about? I hope not me."

"You don't have to worry about Terry." Brian sounded confident. "Terry's a stand-up guy, he'd never say anything you'd have to be worried about. When I asked Terry what had happened to make you cry yesterday, he swore me to secrecy before he'd say a word about it."

Though Emily was grateful for the gesture, and while she didn't want her private life bandied about town, swearing people to secrecy was a bit much. It made her present situation sound fanciful, like a plot to some ridiculous, overblown romance novel. Except this was real, and it was happening to her.

"I didn't come here to talk about Terry, though."

"You didn't?"

Brian shook his head. "I came to talk about today, or more to the point, this evening." The smile in Brian's voice made her smile, too. Despite being embarrassed to no end that Daddy had dragged Brian into her heartache, she couldn't help responding to that handsome face with the familiar kindness. "I thought maybe you'd like to go see a movie." He let out a breath. "With me."

Her ladle almost clattered onto the stove. "Pardon?"

"That is," Brian pressed on, "if you have someone on tap to watch your dad. I don't want to take you from him, if there's no one else around."

"Brian, that's very dear of you, but I don't need cheering up. My tears are over and life has gone on."

"I know." Brian studied the kitchen linoleum. "I just didn't want it to go on without me."
The frank tone had her staring at Brian in amazement. It wasn't like him to be so... so bold.

"I meant," he looked a bit flustered, "I didn't ask you out, to be kind. I'm asking you out because I like you. I always have."

Oh, she had to be dreaming. She'd dated before, had a relationship that hadn't worked out in New York City, but Brian Donovan had always been different. She'd tried not to talk about him to anyone, to not even think about him in her quiet moments alone. Daydreams weren't easy to control, though, and it hadn't been easy.

And now he was admitting that he liked her, and always had.

Not knowing what to say, Emily stood there in her everyday dress and blouse, a stained apron tied about her waist. Her hair probably frizzed from standing over a steaming pan, and of course, today would be one of the days she hadn't bothered to put on makeup. How could Brian look at her with such passion in his eyes, when she had to be an absolute wreck?

Thank God, Terry had turned her down.

"I hope I'm not rushing things--" Brian swallowed. "I prayed about it all through my lunch break, and even though Dave is home and probably eating out of the cupboards by now, I had to come and ask you..."

"Ask me to go with you to a movie?"

"Yeah. Well, not just that." Brian worked a hand behind his neck. "I learned my lesson, and I'm not going to wait when everything else says go ahead."

Emily didn't reply. How could she, until he asked? And she became suddenly aware he was about to do just that-- ask.

"I was wondering... maybe... that is, if you weren't in love with someone else, that, well... maybe," Brian swallowed again and Emily braced herself to keep from toppling over in a dead faint, "that maybe, you might consider... that you might like the thought of us getting, well, of us getting married."

"But what happened with you and Madison? I thought you were smitten?"
"Smitten, maybe, but not in love-- not the way I am with you." Brian had meant it, she could see it in his eyes. "I hope I’m not messing this up. Please God, don’t let me mess this up. When Margaret was here, I didn’t have to think about what we felt for each other. I loved her and she loved me. It wasn’t a question, it was a fact, and I lived with that fact until the day she went to be with the Lord. I still do. The point is... man." Brian blew out a sigh. "Things are so much simpler when you know where you stand with a woman. All this guesswork is brutal."

Stunned, Emily tried to fight off the urge to faint long enough to get her brain working.

"Emily? About that proposal?"

"I’m thinking."

"Okay." Brian nodded, backed away a bit while his hands dangled at his sides.

She had to think. She had to. Where was her concentration when she needed it most? What had Terry told her to do? Hold out for love? Well, here it was, standing in her kitchen, waiting for an answer. How could this be happening? Only yesterday, she had been working up the courage to propose to Terry, and now she was the one being proposed to. And by Brian.

God sure had a way of surprising people with what they least expected.

"Are you still thinking?" Brian asked nervously.

"Just a little longer, please." Emily went to the sink to wash her hands. She didn't know why, only that it gave her something to do while she thought. Did she love Brian Donovan? Her heart screamed "Yes!" but how could she know for sure?

She looked back at him-- the messed hair, the lost look on his face, and knew. She knew.

Taking a deep breath, she dried her hands on a dishcloth and nodded. "Yes, I'll marry you."

His mouth opened, but it took a full five seconds before anything came out. "Do you think you might ever love me?"

"I already do."

Brian swallowed hard. "You're sure? You're absolutely sure?"
Feeling the heat of tears, Emily went to Brian and he caught her up in a tight embrace. Oh, it felt wonderful. She had to be dreaming, for this was a hundred times better than what she'd ever hoped for with Terry. Brian loved her, and her future snapped into focus in one long, wonderful dream.

"I love you," Brian whispered in a husky voice. "I should've asked you a long time ago, when we were still dating. I wasn't sure of my feelings then, but I am now."

A gasping breath filled Emily, made her bury her face against Brian's neck. "This can't possibly be true, and yet it is. I didn't think-- Daddy and I didn't think you were serious about our relationship, so I--"

"Enough." Brian pressed a kiss onto her hair. "I don't want to look at the past, only the future. A future with you, me, Dave, your father, and of course, Macho."

"Of course, Macho." She laughed and hugged Brian. "We can't forget Macho. Oh, I'm so grateful Terry turned me down."

They stood in the kitchen until Mitch found them, and Emily had the joy of telling their good news to the young man. Then they went to tell Daddy, and though he seemed strangely belligerent, Emily chalked it up to his not having gotten over Terry yet. Brian was undaunted, and no matter what Daddy said to him about his worries of marrying too soon, or his concerns that Dave might not want another mother, Brian could not, and would not be moved.

They were going to be married soon, and nothing could shake Brian from that certainty.

New admiration dawned in Emily's heart. She had found an anchor in Brian, and she prayed their future together would be blessed by God's love. In truth, God was already answering that prayer.

Oh, what sweet joy! Emily was a blessed woman.

* * * *

Worry stabbed at Madison's heart, followed by a quick prayer for more faith. If she'd known there wouldn't be any time to redo her work, she wouldn't have been so terribly honest about her treatment goals. From what she could remember, Terry's name had been mentioned no less than four times, and her every thought centered on him never finding out.

Please, God, don't let Terry find out.
While Terry ate a fast dinner in the kitchen, Izzy helped Madison to get ready in the bathroom. Her stomach looked good, considering what it had been through, and Izzy made sure when Madison put on a fresh change of clothes, she didn't pull out any of the stitches. The clean shirt and jeans felt good against her skin, and even the pain on her belly couldn't lessen that relief.

Izzy took the pajamas, and the other things that needed to be put into the wash, but promised to have the pajamas ready for bedtime.

The dinner Madison had eaten while Terry went to go get her things, wasn't sitting well in her stomach. She didn't feel queasy, just frightened. Which showed why she needed more faith. The lines she'd written, the fact she was going to see a psychiatrist with Terry, and for Terry, all made her want to dig a hole and play ostrich.

At least until it was over.

"I know you took acetaminophen a few minutes ago, but maybe you should have a few pills in your pocket, just in case." Izzy opened the bottle, tapped out two pills and slipped them into the pocket of Madison's jeans. "If you get tired, tell someone. Don't let Terry run you ragged."

"He wants me to go."

"I know he does, but you've already had a big day. If you need to, tell Dr. Bennett that you're tired and want to go home. And tell Terry. He wouldn't want to exhaust you to the point you become sick."

Numbly, Madison nodded.

"Just try to relax," Izzy said, as she brushed Madison's hair, "and remember God is taking care of you. He put you with Terry, so don't give up. Do you want one of my sweaters? All right, go ahead and wear Terry's if it makes you feel better." Izzy smiled and tenderly squeezed Madison's arm. "We're praying for you both."

"Thank you." Madison wanted to hug Izzy, but before she could, Izzy took her back into the office where John sat at his desk.

"All ready to go?" John asked, and moved to his feet when Madison nodded "yes." "Then I'll let Terry know." He left the office, and Izzy and Madison followed but at a much slower pace.

One of the triplets stood in the hallway and watched as Izzy helped Madison to the living room.
"Wear your nice new coat, and you'll keep warm outside." Izzy spoke as they passed the girl. "Don't be afraid to wake me up when you get back. I know my bed will be on the living room floor, but I doubt I'll get a wink of sleep until you and Terry are home. Watch your step."

Meeting them at the end of the hall, Terry eased his way past the women, on his way to the office. "Thanks, Izzy. Just put her on the couch, and I'll be there in a moment."

Izzy shook her head. "I'll take her to the couch, but no one is putting anyone, anywhere. She's not an object."

The rebuff was met with a hearty chuckle from the office.

"Mommy?" The little girl tagged behind them. "Can I stay up, too?"

"No, Sweetie, it'll be bedtime before Uncle Terry and Madison come home. But after they leave, we'll have dinner and then some hot cocoa while your Daddy blows up the inflatable mattress. That should be something to watch."

"I heard that." A smiling John greeted them from the recliner. "I'll have you know there's a foot pump out in the garage, and if it's still working, you ladies will have to go without the entertainment."

"If that pump doesn't work," Izzy said with a nod, "then you'll need to run down to the home center before it closes." She helped Madison to sit down, then eyed the carpet beside the couch. "I think we'll put it here."

"What? The foot pump?" John laughed when Izzy gave him a look. "If that's where you want the mattress, then that's where it'll go. I just finished helping AJ unload their trailer and drive it back to the rental people, so I'm taking a dinner and hot cocoa break before I start on the mattress."

Standing by the recliner, Ricky played with a toy truck on the armrest.

"Are you sure you know the way to Dr. Bennett's office?" Abby asked as she followed Terry into the living room. "Do you want me to print out a map?"

"I know the way." Terry pulled out a cell phone, punched the screen then showed it to Abby.

"Okay, so you have a map. But what about something to eat? Maybe a snack? I could put some granola bars in Madison's purse."
"No, we won't need any snacks." Terry sighed as Abby went to the kitchen, then hurried back with a handful of fudgy granola bars in individual wrappers. "This will only be for a few hours, Abby."

"You might get hungry," Abby protested as Madison stuffed the granola bars into her purse. "What about water? I can get a bottle from the pantry."

"No water." Terry groaned as Abby dashed off, only to hand the bottle to Madison.

"Do you have acetaminophen in your purse?" Abby asked.

"I put some in her pocket," Izzy broke in while Terry shook his head and chuckled. "Go ahead and laugh, but you're taking Madison out late, and she's already tired. Take care of her."

"I will." Terry looked a bit insulted, but smiled when John laughed. "This is only in Watertown, not the far side of the moon."

"Girls like to fuss," John said, but gave way to a few questions of his own. "Do you have your paperwork with you? Just in case they needed something you forgot to fax?"

"Right here." Terry held up a manilla envelope. "Our appointment is for six, so we'd better get going."

Abby called Jake into the living room, and while the children played in the hall, they bowed their heads and John prayed. It was an odd thing, really. Not the prayer itself, but the way the family came together to pray. When one part of the family struggled, it touched all of them, and never was it more apparent than in the way they stood there with joined hands, asking for God's blessing. Even though she sat on the couch, Terry moved to reach Madison's hand.

"Lord, please be with Terry and Madison, and give Dr. Bennett wisdom in how best to help them. Protect them, Lord, and bless their efforts. In Jesus' name, amen."

"Amen," Jake said as Terry helped Madison to her feet. "Call if you need anything. We'll probably still be awake."

"They have everything on them-- food, water, and paperwork." Abby shook her head. "What more could they possibly need?"

Jake shrugged. "Moral support?"
"Call if you need moral support," Abby laughed as Izzy helped Madison into her new coat. "Try to have fun. I guess."

With a small laugh, Terry opened the door and waited for Madison to limp outside. "Don't wait up for us."

"Don't worry, we will."

Chuckling, Terry waved to Abby as he stepped outside and shut the door.

After having so many around them, it came as a pleasing shock to suddenly be alone with Terry again. Madison followed him to the garage, then waited as the jeep pulled out. Terry leaned across the seat, popped open the passenger door, then hurried out to close the garage.

"How are you feeling?" he asked. "Scared?"

She nodded, eased into the passenger seat and tucked the purse and bottle of water at her side before putting on the seat belt. It hurt her stomach, but she didn't feel the pain too badly. She was too busy trying to remember the battle cry, and opened her purse to dig out the page she'd copied from her spiral notebook. Terry had brought it from her apartment, and now it sat hidden under the living room couch.

Someone pushed back the living room curtain and waved as the jeep pulled away from the house, and she waved back.

"Who was it?" Terry asked.

"I think it was Abby."

"Figures." Terry pulled onto the road while Madison clutched her slip of paper. "Abby's concerned Dr. Bennett won't be the right one for us. Dr. Jacoby called Carolyn Bennett unconventional, and Abby is cautious about what that means. She trusts Dr. Jacoby, though, and is praying it'll turn out all right."

Without listening, Madison nodded and reread the words. Her feet were stepping out onto new ground, and all she had was God's promise and Terry's friendship. That, and the family praying for them at the house.

"Thanks for doing this, Maddie."
She nodded.

With a sigh, Terry drove and watched the road, and Madison kept working the words over and over in her heart. "When my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the rock that is higher than I." She felt overwhelmed, and at the same time curiously excited.

They arrived in Watertown ten minutes before six, and it took Terry some time to find the right street, then the correct building. Dr. Bennett’s office sat at the end of the block, an impressive one-story, brick building that had a sign out front with the doctor’s name in cursive green print. Two cars sat in front of a low hedge that ran to the left of the office, and Terry parked his jeep beside them.

He switched off the engine, sat with the keys in his hand and stared at the building. "Okay," he said finally, and pushed open his door. "Let’s get this over with. Don’t bring in the bottle or the envelope. If we need to, we can always get them from the jeep."

She climbed out, not waiting for Terry to open her door, and slipped the strap of her purse over a shoulder. The sidewalk felt hard under her feet, and the lateness of the day made the street look dead. Maybe because most people had gotten off work and were home by now.

Terry opened the entrance door and held it for Madison.

It felt warmer inside, and a man at a desk looked up from his computer when he saw them.

"Good evening."

"Hi," Terry went to the desk as though he were ordering hamburgers, and not psychotherapy. "I’m Terry Davis, and this is Madison Crawford. I believe we have an appointment for six o’clock?"

"Right this way," the man said, getting up and coming around the circular desk. They were led into a comfortable sized room with brown carpet, plush chairs and a matching couch, and a shiny, wooden desk loaded with picture frames and nicknacks. "Dr. Bennett will be with you shortly." The man shut the door as he left.

"Well, we made it in time." Terry helped Madison into a chair facing the desk, then took the seat next to hers. "It’s something, isn’t it?"
Aside from the frames with diploma-looking documents and photos of people she didn't know, it felt warmer than Madison had been expecting.

"Thank you for waiting," a middle-aged woman entered with a big smile, shut the office door, then came over and held out a hand to Madison. "I'm Dr. Carolyn Bennett, but I hope you'll call me Carol. You must be Ms. Crawford? And you're Mr. Davis. Well, I'm impressed. It's not every day I get a phone call from the renowned Hiram Jacoby, begging me to take on new patients. It's a rare compliment I don't take lightly. Please, make yourself comfortable." The woman went around to her desk, sank into the large cushioned chair and opened her laptop. "Have you both eaten dinner? Good. This will go more smoothly without any rumbling stomachs to get in the way."

Clutching her purse on her lap, Madison tried to keep from bolting out of the room. Terry reached across the short span between their chairs, and Madison took his hand.

"Have you read the position statement on my website?"

"I have," Terry nodded, "and we're professing Christians, ourselves."

The woman smiled, and Madison noticed a dimple in each cheek. While not heavy, Carol had a comfortable look about her, professional, but also very approachable. She didn't intimidate with her presence, and Madison liked that.

"I take it you two are a couple? Not married yet?"

"Not yet," Terry smiled.

"Are you having sex?"

"Not unless we marry first."

The question made Madison squirm. She wished she could leave, or at least speak up about the paperwork.

Adjusting her glasses, Carol used her laptop and studied its screen. "I may ask some very personal questions, things you wouldn't tell anyone. Maybe not even your mother, but I hope you'll be as honest with me as you can. It's safe to talk here, so just relax and make yourself at home." Carol must have noticed Terry looking at one of the photos on her desk, for Carol smiled and made an introduction. "That handsome man is the love of my life, Brent. We met in grade school, and I haven't been able to get rid of him since. Our eldest is in the police academy,
and he studies so hard he worries his mama. And this is our youngest, she’s just gotten her learner’s permit and is driving her papa nuts. If she keeps it up, Brent will be joining us for psychiatric help." Carol’s voice had an easy swing to it, a quiet rhythm that relaxed Madison.

"And now for the evaluation." Carol smiled. "Who wants to go first?"

"I will," Terry volunteered. He took off his coat, hung it on the back of his chair as though he were getting ready for a long visit.

"Do you mind if Ms. Crawford stays, or would you be more comfortable if she waited in another room?"

"She can stay."

"This may take a few hours, but there’s a couch over there," Carol said, gesturing to the sofa on Terry’s left. "If you want, you can lay down, maybe kick off your shoes and take a nap. Are you cold? We can turn up the heat."

"I’m fine, thanks. You can just call me Madison."

"Thank you, I will." Carol immediately went to work with Terry, and Madison didn’t want to interrupt to ask about her intake form.

Stupid, stupid. Why hadn’t she spoken up when she had the chance? Now they were busy.

As Carol asked Terry yes or no questions-- very boring ones, the type that made your eyes glaze over and wonder what that had to do with anything-- Madison tried to look very interested. The way she thought she should look. Carol entered each answer into her laptop, and probably made notes along the way, and before long, Madison was doing her best to not look bored out of her mind. After all, Terry had let her stay and she wanted to make the most of it by listening in.

Stifling a yawn, Madison looked over to the large, plush couch. It looked so comfortable, so inviting, she got up and moved to the soft cushions. Her eyes felt heavy and her stomach hurt, and after taking off her coat to use as a pillow, she tugged off her shoes and lay down.

How many hours passed, she didn’t know, but she drifted in and out of sleep, sometimes listening to Carol’s voice and the sound of her typing, but more often focusing on Terry’s calm, even tone. Oh, he was nice to listen to. When the questions turned to relationships, Madison’s ears perked up.
"It started out with friendship. I just tried to concentrate on being a good friend to her, to keep my distance and simply try to help. I don't know how, or why it happened, but she latched onto my heart and wouldn't let go. She started liking me-- I mean really, really, liking me, and it came as a pleasant surprise when I realized I felt the same about her. I liked her. In a fairly serious way." Silence stretched into a sigh, and Terry went on. "I didn't want it to happen. Up until now, I've been trying to keep my distance, to not fall for her. I did my best to fight it off."

"You tried to keep your distance? Why?"

"Because I was responsible for her, and she had no one else but me. I didn't want to take advantage of that position of trust."

"I noticed you left out something," Carol said quietly. "Do you think you might be in love?"

Dread balled up inside Madison. She stiffened, waited for Terry to answer, and when he didn't, Madison looked over to where Terry sat in front of Carol's desk.

And found Terry gazing back at the couch.

"I haven't told her."

"But you think you know what you feel?"

Terry nodded.

Well, at least he hadn't said it. And hopefully, he didn't feel it, either.

Please, God.

"Madison, maybe you could come over now? I'd like to pick up your evaluation where Terry's left off, then we can go back and finish the rest. What do you say?"

Fearing what might happen if they did, Madison got to her feet, left her shoes, coat, and purse by the couch, and retook her chair.

"On your intake forms, I noticed a similarity in the treatment goals between yours and Terry's." Carol smiled, waited for an answer and Madison wondered if it was too late to have the paperwork changed. "Do you want Terry to wait in another room?"
"I-- I don't know." The answer surprised Madison. She was stunned those words had come from her own mouth.

"Okay, then let's back up, and you tell me if you want to stop. Sound fair?"

Madison nodded.

They began some basic yes or no questions, just like the way Carol started with Terry. It took over an hour and a half before the harder, longer questions came, which needed longer answers. Terry didn't leave for the couch, but remained where he was and listened as Carol kept up her gentle but firm barrage.

"This Dragon, he wasn't your biological father?"

"No, I was adopted."

"How old were you when you went to live with him?"

"I think I was eight."

"And when did he start hurting you?"

Feeling numb inside, Madison shrugged. "It started the first day I was in his house, and it didn't stop until he died."

"Did you have your own bed? Where did you sleep?"

"If the house where we were staying at had a basement, he'd put my bed there. I was chained to the bed so I couldn't leave the room. Sometimes, he used rope."

"How much of the time did this chain stay on?"

"I don't know. Most of the time, I guess. Sometimes, he'd take it off and I could go into the other parts of the house."

"Would he sleep in the same bed as yours, or did he have his own room?"

"He wasn't always home, but when he was, he usually slept with me in the basement. Sometimes, he slept in his own room, but not very often."
"What did he do for a living? What was his profession?"

"He only worked when he had to, when he ran out of money. His last job was as a security guard."

"How long have you been cutting?"

The question put a lump in Madison's throat, and she didn't know if she could speak. "Since I was thirteen."

"When you want to hurt yourself, what do you think triggers these feelings?"

"I don't know."

"Think back. What were you feeling right before the last time you cut yourself?"

"I can't."

"Do you want Terry to wait in the next room?"

"I can't."

"You can't what? Talk in front of Terry? or in front of me?" The gentle but firm tone from Carol made Madison think hard about how to answer. "Take your time. I'm not going anywhere." Carol leaned on the armrest of her chair, exhaled slowly and Madison realized Carol truly wasn't leaving.

"The last time," Madison tried hard to steady her voice, "I cut because I was thinking about Terry."

"What about him made you want to cut?"

Madison gave a shrug, but Carol wasn't put off and kept digging.

"What were you thinking about Terry, what were you feeling before you hurt yourself?"

"I don't know."

"Are you attracted to Terry? As a man, do you find him desirable?"
Even though she didn't want to, Madison nodded, "yes."

"And how does that make you feel?"

"It makes me feel dirty, like I want to punch someone."

"Or maybe hurt yourself?"

Again, Madison nodded.

"Were you having similar thoughts when you cut yourself the time before last?"

"Yes. But after I cut, I saw those movies in my head and I had to make it stop, so I did it again."

"Cutting stops the movies?"

"I guess so."

With a nod, Carol forged ahead. "I noticed a similarity between your treatment goals, and Terry's." Carol paused, as if to give Madison time to say she didn't want Terry in the room. When Madison kept silent, Carol read from her laptop. "In Terry's goals, he wrote, Help Maddie stop cutting. Have a loving, healthy relationship with Maddie. Make Maddie happy. How does it make you feel to hear that?"

"Sad."

"Why sad?"

"Because I can't give him what he wants."

"And what do you think he wants?"

"Me."

"Is that all?"

"I can't have sex."

"Has he ever asked you for sexual intimacy?"
"No. But he wants to get married."

Another slow nod, and Carol read from her laptop again. "For your treatment goals, you gave, *Stop cutting, become normal for Terry, marry Terry, have sex with Terry, have Terry's baby*."

Someone gasped, and Madison turned to find Terry concentrating fiercely on his fingernails.

"Madison, do you think you could ever feel comfortable being with Terry?"

"No."

"You think it might cause you to cut again?"

Madison nodded.

"But you like Terry, don't you?" It wasn't much of a question, for it was obvious, even to Madison.

Trying not to cry, Madison bowed her head and nodded.

After some moments, Carol addressed Terry. "How do you feel about her goals?"

Not able to look up, Madison listened and waited.

"Wow." Terry puffed out a breath, waited a beat before answering. "To be honest, I'm relieved. It's good to know I'm not the only one having these feelings. I want to hug her, and yet I want to cry at the same time."

"Why cry?"

"Because I know it's not easy for Maddie to admit to any of those feelings, let alone act on them. And because she didn't mention love."

Though Madison wanted to shoot back, "Neither did you," she held her tongue and watched as Carol typed in a final something before closing her laptop.

"I think that's all for now. I'd like to order some blood tests to complete the evaluation, review your medical histories a second time, but I don't think it will change my recommendation. I'd like to see you both in my office, twice a week for therapy. For now, we won't have separate sessions where you'll see me alone, but I'll make sure from time to time that you're comfortable
with having the other in the room. If at any time you'd rather not talk in the other's presence, I'll ask that person to step outside until it's agreed that he or she can come back in. How does that sound?"

Madison nodded, "yes."

"Does this mean you have a diagnosis?" Terry asked.

"I'm hesitant to tell give any clinical names, because I don't want to scare you." Carol gave a calm smile. "It won't change our course of treatment, and you won't have to walk around with labels weighing you down. You came to me for help with Madison's cutting, and for a healthy relationship together, and since your treatment goals are in agreement, that's what we'll work on. If you want me to give my diagnosis, I will, but I recommend against it."

Terry smiled. "Dr. Jacoby said you were unconventional."

"Maybe I am," Carol said with a small laugh, "but I'm not the only one who likes to keep things simple. Let's take this one step at a time, and make sure we're all on the same page. Madison, is this all right? Good for you. I think I'm going to enjoy working with you both." Carol got up, tucked her laptop into a leather bag. "It's getting late, so I'll call you tomorrow to see if we can't work out a weekly schedule, one that meets your needs as well as my own. Even though these evening hours are usually the easiest to fill, I've promised my family to try to be home before then. If I need to, though, they'll understand. They always do-- God bless them."

"We really appreciate you meeting us so late today, and with so little advance notice." Terry helped Madison into her coat, then knelt to put on Madison's shoes so she wouldn't have to hurt her stitches by bending over. "Dr. Jacoby was right, you are a nice person."

At this, Carol laughed, and her dimples showed in both cheeks. "I think he's pretty nice, too, but maybe you should keep that under your hat. I don't want the love of my life getting the wrong idea." Carol went to the office door, opened it and waved the receptionist inside. "Thank you, Tom, for staying in late." She looked to Madison and Terry. "Tom wanted to make sure I'd be okay with patients I didn't know after office hours. See, Tom, I told you there was nothing to be concerned about. These nice people wouldn't hurt me, so you can go home the next time I have to stay late." She turned back to them. "Tom will call you, and we'll work out a schedule."

"Thank you," Terry said, and shook Carol's hand, then Tom's.
"I'll see you both soon," Carol nodded as Terry retrieved Madison's purse from the couch. "Tom will give you the number for my answering service, but if you promise to use it sparingly, I've been known to give out my cell number."

Tom shook his head as they moved into the reception area. "She gives out her cell number much too often, if you ask me."

"Well, no one asked you, so give them both numbers." Carol went back into her office, got her laptop bag, and coat, and came back out as Tom was giving Terry a business card with one of the numbers written in by hand.

"Good night, and God bless you both," Carol said as they were leaving.

"Same to you," Terry smiled, and held the door open for Madison.

As they stepped outside, a blast of wind robbed Madison of her breath. She ducked her head, and stuck to Terry's side as they made their way down the sidewalk to the jeep. Night had come while they weren't looking, and the moon shone so brightly it made shadows on the pavement. A street lamp flickered as Terry unlocked the passenger door.

"What time is it?" she asked as she eased into the seat so her tummy wouldn't hurt.

"It's ten after ten." Terry shut her door, rounded the hood as Carol and Tom came out of the building and went to their cars.

Carol waved, and Madison gave a small wave back. It felt odd to know that this stranger, this woman she'd only just met, now knew so much about her.

"It's going to freeze tonight," Terry said, getting into the jeep as vapor spilled from his mouth. "Moments like this, I'm grateful you're not still at the campground. You never would've survived this, Maddie."

"I know, but you came for me." She put on her seat belt, opened her purse and offered him a granola bar.

He huffed out a laugh, took it and thanked God for their evening.

They ate their granola bars in the light of the streetlamp, just a few moments together, alone in the quiet of the night. The careworn expression on Terry's face didn't change, and she knew his thoughts were busy with what she'd told Carol.
“Terry?”

He sighed, and wadded up the granola wrapper. “What?”

“Do you think I’m crazy?”

A smile hinted around his mouth. “No more than I am.”

“But what if I have something terrible, and Carol never tells me?”

“If it was something really terrible,” Terry started the engine, “I mean beyond terrible--horribly--”

“Yes?”

“I think she’d still probably not tell you.” He laughed softly. “Of course, she’d tell you if you asked.”

“Are you going to ask her about yourself?”

“Naw.” Terry pulled onto the street. “I don’t see the point.”

“You can afford to say that,” Madison stuffed their wrappers into her purse, “because what you have probably isn’t anywhere near as bad as what I’ve got.”

“Maybe.” He smiled and tossed her a glance. “I’m kidding, Maddie. You’re fine. So you have a few problems, but you aren’t insane. You’ve got all your marbles.”

“But what if there’s still a few missing?”

“Well,” Terry merged onto the highway, “then you’ll just have to borrow a few from someone else.”

“Who?”

“There’s always me.” He slanted her a look that made her heart beat faster. “Between the two of us, I think we’ll manage. And before you ask, ‘What if we can’t?’ let’s just assume that we can, and give it a rest. At least for tonight.”

“I’m sorry, Terry.”
"You've got nothing to be sorry about." He pushed out a sigh, reached for her hand and she latched on to it hard. "I'm so grateful you're here, and not in some basement, still being hurt. Just thinking about that-- it makes me so mad I can't breathe. How dare he do that to you? How dare he?"

"Please, Terry. Let's give it a rest for tonight, like you said."

He nodded, let go of Madison to switch on the car radio, then returned his hand to her. She closed her eyes, caressed the knuckles, the hair on the back of Terry's hand, and felt the strength he let her soak in through that simple, tender contact. The man on the radio talked about local news, the state of the economy, and all she could think about was how very blessed she was to be here with Terry.

They passed the rest of the drive in silence, and when the jeep slowed, she opened her eyes to see home up ahead. Soft light glowed in the living room window like a warm hug from a dearly beloved friend. She breathed in a sigh, let it out and let herself relax to the point of feeling sleepy.

"We're home, Maddie."

She nodded, closed her eyes and knew she had to be dreaming. It felt good to be alive. Maybe if she prayed hard enough, long enough, this feeling would go on forever. But if it didn't, which she was almost sure it wouldn't, she thanked God for having been alive at the same time and moment as Terry, to share this night and the moonlit drive with him.

Bliss, wonderful, comforting bliss. Holding hands with Terry as their fingers caressed, quietly joyful of being alive on such a beautiful, star-filled night.

This moment, and everything it held, filled Madison with so much joy she didn't know such a thing was humanly possible.


"Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth: my flesh also shall rest in hope."
~ Psalm 16:9 ~
Chapter Twenty-five
A Lot Like Coffee

"Rejoicing in hope..."
~ Romans 12:12 ~

On the drive home, that soft, warm touch helped keep Terry from thinking too hard. Those smooth fingers only held his hand, and yet his heart melted and puddled at Maddie's feet so much he wondered if she noticed. Now more than ever, he was falling soundly for Maddie, and the emotion that came with it only made his thoughts that much harder to take. That monster, that miserable excuse for a human being had kept her chained. In the basement. For "most of the time." And when he wasn't there, she starved. Anger flushed through Terry's veins. He wanted to hurt that man. He wanted it bad, and yet, there was that soft touch and his dark thoughts melted away.

Did Maddie know how wonderful she was? He wasn't making that up, and it wasn't his imagination. It was plain fact, sitting right there beside him, and all he could do was acknowledge its presence. Like admitting the moon reigned over the bay tonight, or that the stars were glowing their hearts out for them. They were tangibly real, just like her. She was wonderful, she was here, and she was sitting in his jeep.

The woman he'd been waiting all his life for, was here. He knew her name, knew the shape of her face and the way she smiled, the joy that came simply because she was here.

He told Maddie they were home, and glimpsed her closing her eyes like someone enjoying a perfect dream. With the moonlight on her face, she looked very much like a fairytale princess, a real live dream that reached for his hand when he had to pull away to park the jeep. The wonder he'd felt that first night when he saw her, filled him once again. He breathed in, shut off the engine and noted the light shining in the living room window.

"They waited up for us."

Maddie nodded. "Abby said they would."

"I still can't believe what you wrote." Terry shook his head and let Maddie reclaim his hand. "Those goals-- wow, Maddie. I've never been more stunned in my life." He thought it over and smiled. "I take that back." As he looked at her, he tried to interpret the quiet alarm filling her eyes as longing and not dread. "The first time I saw you, you took my breath away. You still do."
The grip on his hand loosened. She drew back, could no longer meet his gaze, and when she began to hug herself, Terry knew he'd said too much.

"I'm sorry, Maddie."

She gave a quick nod, but he wondered if she knew what he'd meant. That he was sorry for scaring her, but not for loving her. Not for that. Did Maddie even know he loved her? Unable to say more because it might drive her further into her shell, Terry pulled the keys from the ignition and tried to change the subject.

"Before we go inside, whatever we talked about in Carol's office, is private. I know I nearly tell John everything, but this... this is just between you and me."

Maddie nodded. "And Carol."

"Yes, and Carol." Terry smiled, thankful Maddie was still talking to him. He had to be more careful, to not get so lost in the moment that he forgot her needs.

Sucking in a deep breath, Terry located the water bottle, the manilla envelope, and pushed open the driver's side door. He wanted to get out of that jeep before he said or did something he'd really regret. Like tell Maddie that he was so much in love with her, he couldn't see straight. That he needed her, and couldn't wait another moment to ask her to marry him.

Knowing what her answer would be, Terry made up his mind to not ask until she was ready to say "yes." Hard as he struggled, he reigned in his emotions, and wished dearly that she didn't regard him with such huge eyes as she got out of the jeep.

He walked with Maddie to the house, dug the keys out of his pocket and prayed for help. She wouldn't stand next to him.

"Are we still good?" he asked.

Before Maddie could answer, a wedge of light spilled onto them as the front door swung wide open. Smiling, Jake moved aside to let them in.

"We thought we heard your jeep."

"Thanks for waiting up for us." Terry let Maddie go in ahead of him. "I hope you guys aren't waiting for a blow-by-blow account of the session."
Jake grinned. "We know better than to ask for details."

The living room looked ready for bedtime, with sheets and blankets covering the couch, as well as the inflatable mattress on the floor. John and Izzy sat cuddling on the couch, while Abby sat cross-legged on the mattress. Everyone was in their pajamas, the women in their lounge robes, and there wasn't a child in sight.

"Are the kids in bed?" Terry asked as he helped Maddie out of her coat.

"Yup." Jake moved past them to sit with Abby on the mattress. "Without giving anything away, how'd it go?"

"Okay, I guess." Terry winced as Maddie escaped to the recliner but didn't sit down. "I think we've got a good therapist in Carol Bennett. From what I've seen, I like her."

"That's good." John nodded, an arm sleepily cozied around Izzy's shoulders. "When's your next appointment?"

"We don't know yet. They're going to call tomorrow, and set up a schedule so we can come in twice a week." Terry watched as Maddie retreated into the hall. "We still have a way to go, but it's a start."

"Starting is good." John yawned. "I guess everyone's had a busy day."

"Want some hot cocoa?" Abby asked as Terry noticed they all held mugs.

"Sure. Thanks." Quietly, Terry saw Maddie slink back to the living room. "Have you got enough for one more?"

Climbing off the mattress, Abby smiled and went to the kitchen. "Two cocoas, coming up."

"Maddie, Sweetheart," Izzy gestured to the soft armchair, "why don't you sit and enjoy some hot chocolate? Abby, remember to put in the marshmallows."

"I will," Abby called from the kitchen.

Without looking directly at Terry, Maddie did as she was told, and sank into the recliner. Her arms continued to hug her middle so hard, he feared for the stitches.

"Is that hug hurting you?"
She shook her head, "no."

"Are we good?"

Staring down at the carpet, Maddie nodded, "yes."

"Okay then." Terry tried very hard to believe her. "Thanks, Maddie."

"So..." John let the word hang a moment before pushing on, "I have a message for you from Brian."

While this came as a useful distraction away from Maddie, it seemed to Terry that one concern followed another. "Is it good news, or bad?"

"Don't know, Brian didn't say. He asked you to call him as soon as you got back."

"Did he say anything else?" Terry started for the hallway with Maddie's coat and the things from the jeep. "When did he call?"

"Not five minutes after you took off. Brian only got voicemail when he tried your number, so he gave the house a ring and asked me to pass along the message."

Shifting everything to one arm, Terry dug the cell phone out from a hip pocket, punched the button then remembered he'd powered it down before leaving. He hadn't wanted to be disturbed while talking to Carol.

Taking a sip from her mug, Izzy watched Maddie from the couch.

"Guess I'd better give Brian a call." Terry headed for the office as Abby appeared with a mug in each hand.

"Your hot cocoa is ready." She gave one to Madison, then came to deliver Terry's in his yellow smiley mug. "Did Dad tell you Brian wants to talk?"

"I'll return Brian's call in the office-- thanks for the cocoa." Terry put away the cell phone to take the cup from his niece.

Abby looked curious as Terry went into the office.
He shut the door with a soft click.

Though he didn't know the nature of Brian's message, the fact Brian hadn't told anyone else, made Terry err on the cautious side. He would call without the others listening in, just in case this was highly personal. Like the rest of his day had been. Sunday included.

He emptied his arms on the desk, pulled off his coat and dropped it onto the chair.

The aroma of hot cocoa made him pause to take a sip. It felt good going down, like what a snug cold night should be, when enjoyed indoors. With the family all under one roof, the kids tucked away in their beds, and Maddie safe and warm in the living room with her hot chocolate and marshmallows, Terry felt he could relax.

Then he remembered Brian, and set the feeling aside for later.

He punched Brian's name in the cell phone's address book, and sent up a prayer.

"Hey, it's Terry. John said you left a message to call as soon as I got home?"

"Yeah, I did." Brian cleared his throat. "Are you sitting down?"

"No. Should I be?"

"Maybe, though you might have already seen this coming."

"Brian, what's going on? Is Emily all right? Did you have another call from Stanley?"

"No, it's nothing like that." A smile sounded in Brian's voice. "Several hours ago, I asked Emily to marry me, and she said 'yes.'"

"You did?"

"I told you next time, I wasn't going to hesitate before I act."

"I know, but-- wow. Congratulations."

"Emily and I are hoping to have a small wedding at her house, so Stan can easily attend. We're planning it for this Friday night, then we'll take off for a two-day honeymoon. I wanted to explain things, in person, why we can't invite you. It's nothing personal."
"I understand," Terry smiled. "It might be a little awkward."

"No, it's not that at all. You guys are coming down with the flu."

"Right, I forgot. We don't want Stanley to get sick."

"No, we don't, and I'm thinking we'll only invite a handful of people from church so it won't put Stan to too much inconvenience."

Terry paused. "How's he taking it?"

"Like I thought he would." Brian sounded measured but very determined. "I'm willing to bend where I can. Emily is letting me take a firm enough stand, I think her father gets the picture. Things are going to be different, and I hope, for the better."

"Well, I certainly wish you God's blessing. Is she happy?"

"She is."

"Then I'm grateful. And pleased. Very, very pleased for you both."

"Terry, I want to thank you. Thank you for waking me up, and making me realize what I almost lost for good. I also wanted to thank you for turning Emily down."

Though Terry wanted to chuckle, he couldn't-- not when Brian was being so very serious.

"I shudder to think of what almost happened."

"Then don't dwell on it. God worked this out the way it was supposed to, and it's up to us to be thankful and not dwell too hard on the past."

"Sounds as though you're talking to yourself."

"Maybe I am," Terry smiled. "Guess I'm just tired. Good for you, Brian. Good for you."

"Keep at it, Terry. You'll get around to it, and when you do, count me in as an usher or something. It'd be an honor to see you get married."

A lump formed in Terry's throat. "Thanks. If she ever says 'yes,' I'll take you up on that."
"She will."

"Maybe." Terry blew out a sigh. "I'm very happy for you and Emily."

"I know you are, but it's going to happen for you, too."

"Yeah." Terry rubbed his forehead and forced himself to sound lighter. "You take care, Brian, and tell Emily I couldn't be happier. Expect a delivery soon with a wedding gift, and don't let Stanley talk you out of that honeymoon."

"Don't worry, I won't. Stan will be all right with Mitch to look after him while we're gone. I'd better let you go now, but I wanted to be the one to tell you the good news. And thanks again, Terry. I owe you."

"No, you don't."

"I'll see you around."

The men hung up, and Terry sank into his office chair, only dimly aware that he was sitting on his coat. Good news. Yes, it was good. He felt genuine happiness for Brian and Emily, but at the same time, sadness pulled at him hard. More of his friends were getting married, while he was not.

He needed sleep.

Grabbing his smiley mug, Terry pushed into the hall, went into the living room to find Maddie nursing the last of her hot cocoa.

"What did Brian want?" John asked.

Terry pulled out a chair, sat down and prepared himself to smile. "He proposed to Emily today, and she accepted."

"He didn't!" Izzy sat up straight, momentarily ignoring the arm that kept tugging her back to John's side. "I'm so happy for Emily! I wanted to call today, but John said to give her more time."

"And see?" John grinned. "Now you don't have to tell her how sorry you are. So Brian popped the question?"
"He did." Terry caught Maddie staring at him out of the corner of his eye, and tried not to scare her by noticing too much. While the others listened, Terry explained about the coming wedding, the honeymoon, and the reason Brian couldn't invite them to the happy occasion.

"I'm sorry our flu is keeping you away from going," Abby said glumly.

"It's all right." Terry swirled his mug before finishing the last of the cocoa. "It's probably best I don't attend. Stanley might still be harboring a grudge against me, and Brian has enough on his hands without my making things worse with his future father-in-law. I'll be praying for them, but I think Brian has a decent shot of making Emily's life a happy one. From the sound of things, that's already true."

"We should send them a wedding present." Izzy looked thoughtful. "I'll do some online shopping tomorrow, and see if I can't find something really nice to send to Emily's house. Just look at that clock. It's late, and Madison probably wants to lay down on this couch." Izzy got to her feet, stepped around the mattress on the floor. "Tomorrow, I'm giving more cooking lessons to anyone interested."

"I am." A timid voice spoke up, and Izzy turned to smile at Maddie.

"I thought you might be."

"Could I join?" Abby asked. "I wouldn't mind some of those lessons."

"Of course, Sweetheart, if you'd like." Izzy looked taken aback by Abby's interest. "We'd love to have you in the kitchen, but I didn't know you wanted to learn to cook."

Jake frowned. "You don't need to learn."

"Yes, I do." Abby tipped back her mug, polished off the last of her cocoa, then smacked her lips. "At least I can make hot chocolate. Jake, we ate a lot of sandwiches in San Diego, and it's time I learned to deal with the kitchen."

"But I can cook." Jake took Abby's empty mug, then helped her off the mattress. "Cooking is something I can do."

"You'll have enough work, setting your studio in order and getting down to business once this flu lets up."

"Please, Abby? I need to be useful."
"You already are." Abby gave Jake a hug he readily accepted. "You are a talented, useful man, and don't you ever think otherwise. If you don't want me to learn, then I won't, but I hate to tie you to the kitchen now that college is behind us."

"Maybe we could take turns in the kitchen?" Jake asked, and Abby smiled.

"If that's what you want, but you're missing out on a good thing. After Mom teaches me how, you're going to want me to cook all the time."

John laughed. "Confidence was never your problem, Abby."

"I meant--" Abby said seriously as Jake hugged her even harder--"once I learn how, Jake will want to take advantage of the fact I can cook, so it'll free up more of his time. I already know I'll never be as good as Mom."

"I love you, Abby. Cook if you really want to, but I don't mind being in the kitchen." Jake planted a kiss on Abby's forehead, then hugged her to his side as they made their way to the bedroom. "Good night, everyone."

"Good night," John smiled as the couple disappeared behind a closed door.

From the living room, they soon heard poor Jake coughing.

"There's no hurrying the flu," Izzy sighed. "It'll be over after it's run its course, and not a moment sooner." She moved to Maddie and took Maddie's empty mug. "Your pajamas have been washed and folded, and are waiting in the office bathroom. I left a robe for you. You're taller than I am, but try it on and see how you like it. John, would you put these mugs in the dishwasher?"

Terry passed John his mug as John made his way to the kitchen.

"There's an extra comforter in the master bedroom, Terry." Izzy spoke like a general marshaling her troops. "It's supposed to freeze tonight, so if you, John, or Ricky get cold, put on the extra blanket."

"Are you and Maddie going to be all right in here?" Terry nodded to the mattress on the floor. "Especially you. Do you have enough to keep warm?"

"Don't worry about me, I'll be fine." Izzy paused as Maddie got up and limped for the hallway. "John made me take the heaviest comforter in the house, plus I have the electric blanket. If
anything, I’m in danger of being smothered." After Maddie left the room, Izzy looked over to Terry. "Is everything all right? She seemed a bit frightened of you when you came home."

"You noticed?" Terry pushed out of the chair, slid it away and studied the inflatable mattress. "Did the foot pump in the garage work?"

"You're changing the subject."

"I don't know what to say, Izzy. I'm trying to be careful."

"Give her some time to get used to you." Izzy spread the heavy comforter over the mattress. "I'm going to set up those cooking lessons. When you and she get married, she's going to know how to take care of you."

Terry winced. "Everyone is assuming she'll even have me."

"Yes," Izzy smiled, "I suppose we are."

With a yawn, John came back from the kitchen and scratched at his pajama top. "The dishwasher is going, the house is locked up tight, and like Jake, I'm ready to hit the sack." John moved behind Izzy and wrapped his arms around her waist. "I'm going to miss you."

"I'll just be in the living room."

John frowned playfully. "It's not just the living room-- it's all the way, on the other side of the house. If I want a kiss, I'm going to have to come looking for you."

"Sweetheart," Izzy gentled a hand over John's as he cuddled behind her, "we've been kissing for our entire married life. Haven't you had enough to get along without me for awhile?"

"Nope." John nuzzled Izzy's neck, and Terry lingered to watch them. "Stay warm tonight?" John asked, and Izzy rested her head against John.

How Terry wished he and Maddie could be like that.

Tearing himself away, he left the couple to a few minutes of privacy before Maddie came back. Terry quickly checked his email on the laptop in his office, then headed for the master bedroom, not wanting to be present when Maddie came out in her PJs. He silently thanked Izzy for giving Maddie a robe, for he didn't want to make things worse for Maddie than they already were.
The tender scene in the living room served as a useful reminder to Terry. From what he'd heard in Carol's office tonight, he'd been one of the causes for Maddie hurting herself. The thought gave him some pangs of despair, for if they liked each other enough--which they did-- and they were physically attracted to each other-- which they were-- then Maddie might cut again. Their relationship seemed doomed to failure. She gave him nightmares, and he stirred up enough emotions in Maddie to cut.

The only thing that kept Terry from tipping over into the pit of despair, was God's faithfulness. This was meant to be. He had to cling to his faith in the character of God, that since God seemed to so obviously want this, then God would find a way to make it happen. Somehow.

Search Terry for a way through, he didn't know. But God did.

A night-light shone in the master bedroom, and Terry did his best not to disturb Ricky as the little guy slept under the warm blankets on the bed. Thanks to Izzy, Terry's pajamas were waiting for him, along with a fresh change of socks, and he took them into the master bath to get changed.

If only he hadn't told Maddie the absolute truth about how she'd taken his breath away.

How stupid could he be?

He hoped the remark wouldn't be the cause of any new problems for her. He'd taken all the sharp objects out of the office bathroom he could, and the only way left to really hurt herself would be to break the mirror. Surely, Maddie wouldn't do anything right now-- not after seeing the doctor this morning. Even though he'd messed up with Maddie tonight, it was still too soon for her to cut again. Wasn't it?

Becoming unsure, Terry hurried into his PJs, stepped out of the bathroom and tossed his clothes onto a chair as he headed for the hall.

As he neared the office, Terry heard what sounded like the bathroom door snick open. He froze, took a few steps back as Maddie's shadow silhouetted on the hallway carpet before she came out of the office. He ran back to the master bedroom, ducked behind the door as she stepped into the hall. His heart pounded in his ears like some idiot hiding from the enemy.

Her head down and looking like a lost puppy, Maddie limped toward the living room in one of Izzy's lounge robes.
Terry shut his eyes to think, then retreated from the master bedroom door and went to lay down on the big bed where Ricky slept. He still madly hoped his sweetheart hadn't cut herself, but was too chicken to ask while they were both in pajamas. With a sigh, Terry pulled at the covers while trying not to nudge Ricky awake.

Being friends with Maddie had its challenges, but compared to love, friendship had been a piece of cake.

Some way, somehow, he had to deal with all these emotions while still keeping hold of his sanity. He couldn't afford to lose any marbles, for Maddie was going to borrow some of his and then where would he be? Crazy in love with a woman who didn't know her own heart.

Then again, what did he know? Maybe they were both perfectly sane.

Only God and Carol knew for sure, and Carol probably had her doubts.

* * * *

Madison hugged herself tight, even though the stitches on her stomach kept hurting and made her want to let go. She needed the self-comfort of that hug too much to stop. It felt really odd to look down at her stomach and see all those stitches. She'd never had any before. They made her feel cared for, like she was valuable as a human being.

Someone had cared enough to take her to a doctor, and that meant something to Madison.

The pajamas were clean, and the smooth robe Izzy had given her was so much better than wearing a coat when she had to leave the bathroom. The thought of running into Terry, made her want to stay in the office bathroom and hide until he went to bed.

She'd already had a small idea that he liked the way she looked, but Terry had never told her so bluntly, and with so much enthusiasm, as he had tonight in the jeep. She could take his breath away?

She wanted to forget, but couldn't.

Too weary to reason away Terry's words, she moved down the hall and tried to concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other. As she came to the living room, a soft murmuring sound made her look up from her feet.
Izzy and John were standing together in a close embrace, while John's voice said something so low Madison couldn't make out the words. Whatever he said made Izzy smile, and John's hands rubbed Izzy's arms in an intimate, possessive gesture. He must have thought they were alone, for he nuzzled Izzy, slipped his hand to the small of her back and started to kiss her.

Horror creeped through Madison and she tried not to watch. Oh, she tried.

A hushed, "I love you," fell from John's lips. He looked up, saw Madison and gave a reluctant nod in Madison's direction.

"Take care of my wife," he said, and Madison nodded, moved aside as John gave Izzy one last smile before passing into the hall.

Blowing out a deep, deep sigh, Izzy went to the couch and turned down the covers. "How do you like your robe? Is it comfortable?"

"Yes, thank you."

"If I remember correctly, you like a night-light when you sleep?"

"Yes, please." Hugging herself even harder, Madison went to Izzy's inflatable mattress and nudged it with her toe. Though it looked like a real bed, it had no headboard, no frame, nothing that could hold a chain. It wasn't real, so it was safe.

Izzy leaned over the couch and clicked on the night-light. "I put one of those in the office bathroom, so you won't have to find the light switch in the dark."

"Thank you."

"Do you need something more for the pain?"

Madison shook her head.

"I'm guessing after what you've been through today, you're probably begging for sleep." Izzy fluffed Madison's pillows, then turned to spread a blanket that had a cord running from it, over Izzy's inflatable bed. "I might not need to turn this on, but if I do, at least it'll be ready."

Chin down, Madison circled the mattress on the floor, then climbed onto the couch and almost cried in shock. She held still until the pain eased, pushed back the covers and moved slowly onto her back to keep from moaning. She'd already taken as much acetaminophen as she dared, and
her body was worn out. Even more, her emotions were running low, and she couldn't get that picture out of her head. John had nuzzled and held Izzy, and Izzy had looked as though she actually liked it.

Shuddering, Madison tugged out one of the pillows from behind her, and still on her back, smothered her face in the pillow's softness.

"When I was a little girl," Izzy spoke and Madison looked from under the pillow to see Izzy turn off the overhead light, then the lamp, "I remember wishing very hard for a sister. I begged my parents for one, and it made my dad so angry I stopped voicing it out loud." The soft glow of the night-light showed a wistfully thoughtful look on Izzy's face. "It's probably a good thing I was the only daughter-- an only child, for that matter-- but a part of me has never stopped wishing for the kind of relationship I see in my own girls, and what they share with each other. A sister is something special, don't you think?"

Madison gave a shrug and watched as Izzy sat down on the mattress.

"Through Terry, I don't feel like an only child anymore. He's sometimes my big brother, sometimes my little brother, but he's always been family." Izzy smiled. "I'd still like that sister, though."

Not knowing what to say, Madison buried her face in the pillow and tried not to think too much. Her brain was so tired, she wanted to scream.

"My brood is going to want breakfast in the morning--" Izzy's blankets rustled-- "so I have to get some sleep. Are you going to be all right if I nod off?"

Madison gave a muffled, "yes."

"Mommy?" A sleepy voice came into the room, and Madison peeked from under the pillow. A little girl came to the mattress and climbed onto the blanket covering Izzy.

"What are you doing awake?" Izzy propped herself up on her elbows. "You should be in bed."

The girl gave a pleading look.

"Very well." Izzy opened the covers and the girl scrambled to climb in. "Please don't kick me in your sleep."
"I won't, Mommy." As the girl snuggled with Izzy, another "Mommy?" sounded, and a second munchkin came traipsing in. "If Ruthie gets to be with you, can I get in, too?"

Izzy scooted over and made room. "No kicking."

"Okay, Mommy." The girl climbed onto the blankets, and Madison started to slowly count; before she hit five, the last one came into the living room in search of her sisters.

"You three should be sound asleep, so why aren't you?" The mild scold was met with an eager smile as the third triplet crammed into Izzy's bed. "You're taking advantage of the fact Daddy isn't here to send you back to your room. You know that, don't you?"

Three pairs of giggles snuggled under the blankets, and Izzy sat up a moment to look at Madison on the couch.

"Try to get some sleep. You'll feel better in the morning."

Nodding, Madison untied her robe beneath the blanket but didn't have the strength to tug it out from under her.

"Can we have muffins?"

"Go to sleep."

"But, Mommy--"

"There are others trying to sleep in here, Debbie."

"But can we?"

"If Madison will help me in the kitchen, then yes."

"Madison?"

"Okay."

"Thank you."

In the semi-darkness of the living room, Madison lay there and listened to the soft sounds of people falling asleep, the small stirs of someone getting comfortable. The feeling that she wasn't
by herself in the room, that Izzy and the triplets were there, gave Madison a comfort she hadn't expected.

The tension that had balled inside her chest, began to melt away. She still clutched the blanket, but her eyes soon grew so heavy she could no longer hold them open. A moment of struggle to stay awake, and then the gentle tug of sleep and the welcome calm of rest. Too exhausted to even dream, Madison slept so hard, even the coming of morning wasn't enough to wake her on her own.

* * * *

Terry wasn't used to falling asleep with Ricky and John, stranger still, to wake up to a toy truck parked beside Terry's pillow. It took a moment for Terry's world to come into focus, and to remember that he was sleeping in the master bedroom, and that the truck belonged to Ricky.

The haze of sleep began to fade from Terry's mind, and he rolled onto his back to stare up at the ceiling. He didn't feel like getting up. Yesterday had taken a toll on him, the kind of toll that made a body not want to feel or think too much.

"You awake?" came John's voice, and Ricky stirred between John and Terry.

"Yeah." Terry breathed deeply. "I guess I am."

"There isn't any rain in the forecast for the next few days." John sat up in bed, scratched his head and yawned. "We should paint the new window frame on your apartment, and put sealant on the power washed bricks before it rains again."

"What do you mean, 'we'?"

"You know-- we-- as in me and you." John looked at Terry and gave a confident nod. "If the bricks are dry, I think we stand a decent chance of getting everything done, today. Come on, Ricky. Time to wake up." John gave the boy's shoulder a gentle nudge. "Do you need to use the potty?"

"Uh-huh." Ricky spoke half-asleep, half-awake, and Terry ruffled Ricky's hair to hurry the process along.

"Wake up sleepyhead," Terry smiled, "or someone will get to the bathroom before you do."
Groaning, Ricky scrubbed his small face with a hand, wrestling with indecision on how badly he wanted to stay in bed with his urgency to use the bathroom.

"What made you think of the window and wall?" Terry asked with a yawn.

John shrugged. "Jake and I stopped by your place yesterday, to pick up the car we'd left behind when we hurried Madison to urgent care. Jake noticed your window."

"Did he ask what happened?" All at once, Terry was awake. He sat up, looked to John and hoped AJ didn't know about the recent run-in with Victor. "How much did you tell him?"

"Were you trying to keep it a secret?" John asked, and gave Ricky another nudge.

Terry groaned. "Not exactly, but I wasn't trying to advertise the fact. So you told him?"

"I'm afraid I did."

"How'd he take it?"

"Jake was concerned, obviously, but he didn't seem too surprised. He said people have to want to get better before they can be helped, and that it sounded to Jake like Victor Barlow had never really wanted help."

"But that's what Victor kept telling me-- even when he trashed my apartment, and then with all those ranting phone calls. That he wants help."

"Well," John sighed, "if that's what Victor wants, he's doing a good job of driving it away. The judge didn't grant that restraining order for nothing." John shook his head. "Jake was sorry to hear Victor did that to you, and Jake said to tell you that he'd be the one to break the news to Abby." John looked at the little boy staring face up at him, and smiled. "Your mother is a force to be reckoned with, and that's a fact."

"Grandpa, what's 'reckoned'?" Ricky rubbed the sleep from his eyes and yawned.

"It means she cares about her family. Do you still want the bathroom? because I'm about to get up, and when I do, I've been known to hog the bathroom for ten minutes at a time." John widened his eyes for emphasis, and Ricky giggled. "Up, then, and get in there before I do."

The boy squirmed onto his side, then got onto his knees and crawled over Terry.
"Why do I always get trampled on?" Terry gave Ricky a smiling laugh. "You're no better than your aunts-- they wake up and I get stampeded."

In mid-laugh, Ricky dashed off to the master bathroom.

Terry looked to John. "He's wearing his training pants, isn't he?"

"I think so." John got up and went to go check his grandson.

With a sigh, Terry propped his elbows on his knees and worked to find the mental stamina to face the day. He hadn't done a workout for a while now, and knew he needed to get back into the routine. Some things required new commitment, every single day, or it simply wouldn't get done. Exercise was one of those things. Like Dr. Jacoby had said, he needed to take better care of himself and to make that a priority.

He rolled out of bed, padded into the hall to his bedroom. The door stood open, and when he didn't find AJ anywhere about, he went in to grab his Bible, electric razor, and the things he'd need for the day.

Stalking back to the master bedroom, Terry changed into his gym clothes.

John came out of the bathroom a moment later with Ricky, and gave Terry a thumbs up.

"We made it in time."

"Hey, congrats." Terry pulled on his sweatshirt. "After breakfast and quiet time, I'm hitting the treadmill, then maybe get in some weight training before we head off to my place. I'll need to leave my cell number with Carol's office, though. I don't want to miss Tom's call."

"Sounds like a plan." John started to hunt for his gym clothes. "When you don't exercise, I tend to slack off, myself. After you're done with the treadmill, I'll trade you for the weights."

Leaving in his PJs, Ricky left to go see what was for breakfast while John and Terry finished getting changed.

After a quick shave, Terry went to go check on Maddie. He expected to find her asleep on the couch, or peering at the family from the safety of her blankets.

To his surprise, he found Maddie dressed for the day, and in the kitchen helping Izzy make breakfast. "What's this?" Terry asked as he greeted Abby and Jake as they watched from the
kitchen table. "Is something going on here I should know about? Why is Maddie working when she should be resting?"

"Terry, take it easy." Izzy gave him a smile as Debbie stood on tiptoe to see the bowl Maddie mixed on the counter. "The girls wanted blueberry muffins--"

"Muffins?"

"And Madison offered to help." Izzy poured Terry a cup of coffee, handed it to him and nodded to Maddie. "She's doing a good job. And she pays attention-- at least, when you're not in here watching." Izzy saved the bowl from sliding off the counter. "Terry, would you drink that somewhere else? You're making her nervous."

"I am?" Terry eyed the slender woman working the mixing bowl. "How's she feeling this morning? Is the pain any better?"

Izzy gave him a look.

With a sigh, Terry left the kitchen while Lizzie, Ruthie, and Ricky waited around the table with AJ. Evidently, these muffins were a big deal. Terry hoped they weren't putting too much pressure on her, or expecting her to do something she couldn't handle.

Realizing breakfast wasn't ready and probably wouldn't be for awhile, Terry headed to the master bedroom. He picked up his Bible, padded down the hall, and into the office while trying not to slosh his coffee all over the place.

Setting the brimming full mug on his desk, Terry dropped into the swivel chair and blew out a breath. A tired part of him wished he'd stayed in bed, but he ignored it and took a long sip of coffee. When the first rush of caffeine hit his bloodstream, he opened the Bible to the New Testament and resumed where he'd left off from the day before. It didn't take long for him to wake his iPhone and start collecting the promises he'd read. Scripture about God's faithfulness, the hope and patience of waiting for the answer to come, the comfort of Jesus' words while He was here on earth, slowly made their way into Terry's notes. Things that would help and encourage not only himself, but Maddie, as well. Especially after yesterday, Terry needed to be able to pull them out whenever he wanted, to consciously rely on those precious words like the jewels they were, and to be able to show them to Maddie by simply waking his smartphone and punching his notes app.

When Terry looked up, he saw John at his own desk, taking care of his usual morning routine.
Time slipped past Terry without being noticed, and the house filled with the hungry scent of something good. Thank the Lord, they didn't usually have breakfast this late. His stomach growled and he glanced at the time and knew Tom would likely be in the office by now. Terry called in, only to get an answering service. He left his cell number, and hung up just as Lizzie came into the room with a big grin.

"Guess what?" she asked. "We're having muffins for breakfast."

"Are they out of the oven yet?" John asked.

Lizzie shook her head, and came over to stand by John's desk. "Mommy said we should be thankful you weren't with her last night."

"Oh?" John looked mildly curious. "Why is that?"

"Because we would've had to sleep in our own room."

With a groan, John studied his munchkin. She had his attention now.

"Don't tell me you three piled onto Mommy's bed?"

"We didn't pile."

"But Mommy didn't sleep alone, did she?"

"Uh-uh." Lizzie tried to climb onto John's lap, and he pulled her up to see what he was doing. "Would you please read to me?" she asked, and John turned the page and started to read from the book of Psalms.

As Terry paused to listen to the passage, Abby knocked on the door that stood open to the hall.

"The muffins are coming out of the oven, and Mom said to wash up."

"Before you go--" Terry got to his feet-- "how's Maddie doing in the kitchen? Is your mom careful about her being around the knives?"

Abby's smile turned a shade sober. "Mom's being careful. Why, do you think she'll do it again so soon?"

"Do what again?" Lizzie asked.
A pained look crossed Abby's face. "Sorry, Uncle Terry."

"Tell them we're coming," John said, as he let Lizzie down from his lap. "I hope you made a lot of muffins, because Terry's stomach has been growling right along with mine."

"I'll tell Madison you said that," Abby smiled, and left with Lizzie tagging beside her big sister.

As Terry put things away, he thought over what he'd just asked Abby. Terry wanted to be safe, to not place Maddie into temptation's way by putting her into contact with the very thing he wanted to keep her from. Even so, Terry also didn't want to be so hypervigilant it frustrated Maddie. The world was full of sharp objects, potential ways for self-harm and he saw he needed to walk a line between valid concern and mistrust. Trust would need to play a part, and for now, she had yet to be tested.

Terry felt guilty for even suspicioning her, but self-harm could be addictive, and she'd been doing it ever since she was thirteen years old. He was no expert on the subject, but Terry knew those were a lot of years to overcome.

He washed up in the office bathroom after John, then followed his nose, and John, and the sounds of excitement coming from the kitchen.

Everyone was there as Maddie gently dumped muffin tins onto a sheet of wax paper spread out on the counter. A cooling rack already held a dozen muffins, and Izzy placed the newcomers onto the rack while telling the girls to keep out of Maddie's way.

"Are those blueberries?" John asked in surprise. "This is a treat."

"You have Madison to thank for it," Izzy said, as Maddie scooped the last of the batter into a now empty muffin tin. "Abby, would you get out the orange juice? Who wants coffee?"

"I do!" Ruthie hopped up and down and had to scoot out of Maddie's way as the tin moved to the oven.

"I meant the adults, and stay clear of the oven door." Izzy got out mugs and Terry maneuvered to get his smiley mug refilled. "Madison, do you drink coffee?" Izzy asked.

The question was met with a shrug.

"Would you like to try a cup?"
Maddie nodded, and Izzy got out another mug. "I'll put in extra cream and sugar. Why don't you sit down and I'll take care of the last batch." Izzy handed Maddie a piping hot mug of java and pointed Maddie in the direction of the table. "I hope we didn't overdo it this morning. You're looking a bit worn out."

"I'm okay." Maddie balanced her way through the children and Terry pulled out a chair for her. It was timidly accepted. Sitting in her chair all meek and quiet, she looked up at Terry.

His heart did a flip-flop when she gave him a smile.

A smile of his very own.

Nursing his java, he claimed the seat beside Maddie while Izzy served the cooled blueberry muffins. She didn't look paler than she had when he'd brought her home last night, so Terry gave it to the Lord and prayed it meant she hadn't cut herself again.

"Except for taking the last batch out of the oven," Izzy said as she handed out plates to the kids, "Madison made these all by herself."

"Is that so?" Terry slanted Maddie a look. "I'm impressed."

Her head bowed, Maddie smiled at the table and said nothing.

The children went into the living room, each with a muffin and half an apple cut into kidde-sized slices.

After seeing Maddie do nothing for a few minutes, Terry nodded to the table. "You haven't tried your coffee." He watched as she gingerly lifted the mug. "Blow first, so you won't get third-degree burns."

She blew at the steam, then tried a taste. Her eyes popped wide, then contorted in a look of absolute misery. Terry put the cup to her lips, and she spit out the coffee.

"Hmm," John said over the brim of his mug. "Not enough sweetener."

"I put in four sugars." Izzy gave Maddie a plate with two muffins and half a sliced apple. "It's all right, I'll get you some juice, instead."

"No," Maddie grabbed the mug, nearly sloshing it onto her sweater, which, come to think of it, was actually Terry's. She took a sip, grimaced but forced herself to swallow.
"That took guts." John leaned back in his chair and watched. "I remember our Abby's first taste of coffee. She begged me for two days to see what it was like, then when I let her, she took one taste and ran to the bathroom to throw up."

"I did not throw up."

"If you didn't, you were giving a good impression of it." John drank his java and Terry smiled.

"I remember."

"Did I throw up?"

"I have no idea, Abby. You wouldn't let us into the bathroom."

"I didn't throw up. Not over one sip." Abby shook her head, bit into a muffin and closed her eyes. "These are beyond good-- they're delicious. Mom, could you show me how you did it, sometime?"

"Of course, if you'd like."

"She likes," Jake put in, and Abby laughed.

Izzy sat down as the first of the triplets came back to ask for another muffin. Izzy cut one in half, and gave it to the girl. Next came Ricky, also hunting for seconds. "These are always a crowd-pleaser," Izzy said, as Abby cut a muffin in half and gave it to her little boy.

"They are, the way you and Madison make them." Abby kept eating while Terry watched Maddie work up the courage for another sip of coffee.

"You don't have to finish, if you don't like it." Terry started in on a warm muffin and found himself sighing. "These really hit the spot, especially on a freezing morning when your toes get cozy and curl up in your socks. Maddie, you don't have to drink that."

"But you do." Maddie stared at her mug as if she couldn't understand why he liked it, only that he did.

"Depending on how it's made, it can be an acquired taste."

"Is that a derogatory comment about my coffee?" John asked, and Izzy laughed as she tried to swallow breakfast without choking. "I was the one who set up the coffee maker last night."
"You know," Izzy smiled, "Terry has always liked my java better than yours."

"Jake likes to make the coffee in our house," Abby grinned. "He doesn't care for mine, either."

"You could always try tea," Terry said, as Maddie took another large gulp. "I hope you're not burning your mouth."

"Before I forget--" John paused between bites of blueberry muffin-- "Terry and I are finishing the repair work at his apartment, today, so don't expect us for lunch."

Terry glanced at Abby. John had said Jake would tell her about Victor's latest appearance, and Terry waited for a reaction. Abby grew quietly sad, but she kept eating and made no remark about his failed crusade.

Beside Terry, Maddie kept working up the courage to finish her coffee.

"Your muffin is getting cold," Terry told Maddie as the cell phone in his running pants pocket went off. He dug for the phone and Abby smiled at Maddie. Without even asking, Terry knew what his niece was thinking: that Maddie was a very sweet person.

He couldn't agree more.

When Terry answered the cell phone, he sat up straight when he realized it was Tom, calling to set up their appointment schedule.

"Would Mondays and Thursdays work for you and Madison?"

"Hold on a moment," Terry paused to think, "let me check my calendar." Terry punched the smartphone's calendar while Tom waited. "Yeah, okay. I think that'll work. What time would be good for Carol?"

"Six o'clock in the evening."

"Is she sure?" Terry winced, knowing what this would mean for Carol. "I hate using up her evenings like that."

"It's the only time Carol is available," Tom tried to explain, "and it gives her enough time to meet her obligations. Will this work for you and Madison?"
Terry saw Maddie swallow down her java, and put Tom on hold to ask Maddie about the schedule.

"Okay," she nodded, and pushed the mug aside for a blueberry muffin.

Quietly, Terry found himself wondering if she'd downed the entire cup.

"Tom, it'll work. Please tell Carol we appreciate it."

"Okay, then Carol will see you and Madison this Thursday, at six o'clock."

When Terry hung up, he made a reminder on his calendar, then put the phone to sleep. "It's all set. I have a strong hunch Carol is inconveniencing herself for us, but--" Terry stopped mid-sentence. Beside him, Maddie rocked back and forth while she ate. "As I was saying, Carol is going the extra mile for us, but it looks as though we have a schedule. I guess I'll be busy every Monday and Thursday evening."

"That sounds doable." John noticed Maddie, but made no comment.

"Dr. Jacoby will be glad to hear this," Jake smiled. "I'm glad it's working out so well." Jake's brows went up as Maddie tapped her hand on the table.

She just couldn't seem to hold still.

"Did you drink the whole mug?" Terry asked, and looked over to find it empty. "You're getting that much buzz from one cup? Maybe you don't react well to caffeine."

John sighed. "Looks like you're going to find out."

As Maddie wolfed down the second muffin, she fidgeted and looked about the kitchen like someone about to burst. Maddie winced, and before Terry could ask, Izzy spoke up.

"She took painkiller before she started the muffins. I made sure of it."

"Hey," Terry tried to get Maddie to look at him, but she wouldn't meet his eyes. "Are you doing okay?"

She scratched her head, nodded, and got up without finishing the apple slices.

"Where are you going?" Terry asked.
She didn't reply, but started for the living room with Terry on her heels. She looked about, hugged herself, and made her way to the office, only to double back and go to the front door.

"It's cold out," Terry warned, but she opened the door and stepped outside. "Maddie, you need a coat."

"I can't--" She rocked herself, looked about and then back at Terry. "I don't feel good."

"Feeling jittery?" he asked, and she nodded wildly. Terry coaxed her into the warmth of the house and led her to the couch. "Sit down, and we'll turn on the TV. Just try to stay calm, Maddie. It's only caffeine." The last thing Maddie had needed was a stimulant, Terry realized, and he clicked on the TV as she hugged and rocked herself on the couch. "You'll be okay. You only had one cup, and we're not going to make the mistake of doing this again."

She shook her head emphatically, looked up at him when he placed the remote on her lap.

"Terry?"

"It's okay, Maddie. It's just caffeine."

She squeezed her eyes closed, and kept rocking.

"Try to calm down."

"I can't."

While the children finished their breakfast on the floor, they watched the mini drama unfold.

"It's just coffee," Terry explained to the kids, and took the seat next to Maddie. He smiled when she reached for his hand. "The buzz will wear off, you'll see."

"When?"

"When it's worked its way through your system, I suppose." He looked up to see Izzy, John, and AJ crowded in the kitchen doorway. "Maybe some decaf tea would help settle her down?"

"I'll brew some chamomile," Izzy nodded, and disappeared behind the others.

"Well," John sighed, "we should postpone the workout for another day."
Terry nodded, and Maddie gripped his hand even tighter. She wasn't about to let go of him yet.

Turning the channel to something the kids would like, Terry made himself comfortable on the couch and held Maddie's hand. Predictably, they chose the cartoons over Maddie, and when the munchkins laughed, Maddie relaxed just a fraction.

The tea came, and Izzy waited for Maddie to turn loose of Terry's hand to take the cup.

"Come on," Terry coaxed, and Maddie obeyed.

He could easily imagine Maddie this jittery without the help of coffee, and he worked to stay calm, taking comfort that this time, the cause of her trouble was something as simple as French Roast.

She clutched the mug of chamomile tea, took a careful sip, and waited a beat as if she expected the brew to bounce her off the walls. She smiled when it didn't. Drinking a little more, she watched TV as Izzy spread a blanket over Maddie's lap. The way Maddie held onto that mug with both hands, the way those tremulous gray eyes watched the world around her, all made Terry want to give Maddie a sound hugging. He knew it would scare the peawaddin' out of her, and decided to sit still until she calmed down enough so he could leave.

"Terry?" She looked at him and smiled. "I feel better."

"I'm glad." He tried to watch TV while she stared at him, but it wasn't easy to pretend he didn't notice.

"Do I have to stay here when you go?" she asked.

"Go where?"

"To work on your apartment."

"Why, do you want to come?" Terry smiled when she nodded eagerly. "I won't want you standing around, wearing yourself out while John and I are busy."

"But can I come?"

"I suppose." Terry thought it over. "You'll have to wait in the car until I go though your apartment, as well as mine. I haven't had a chance to make them safe yet."
"Safe?"

Though he didn't want to explain, Terry turned up the TV's volume and spoke quietly so the munchkins couldn't overhear. "I haven't taken care of the knives."

"You don't have any, Terry. You gave them all to me."

He groaned, shut his eyes and mentally kicked himself. Hard. In the seat of his pants.

"It's okay, Terry. You didn't know."

"From now on, I'm taking better care of you."

"Then you'll take me with you?"

He smiled, folded his arms and tried to watch the cartoon. "Drink your tea."

With a satisfied little sigh, she cozied under her blanket and sipped the chamomile. His morning workout had been shot to pieces, but Terry promised himself he'd get it in, tomorrow.

Oh, how he loved that woman.

* * * *

After the chamomile tea, Madison's world smoothed out into calmer waves of emotions. It wasn't as if they'd been normal to begin with, but she felt she could at least breathe again.

So that was coffee? How could Terry and the others stand it?

The stuff was just plain awful, and it made you feel all jumpy inside. She was never, ever, in her entire life, ever going to try coffee again. Maybe Terry had worked up an immunity to it, or something. She'd tried so hard to like it for Terry's sake.

At least he didn't blame her for being stupid-- even better, he seemed content to sit with her as she calmed down. She couldn't expect to keep him all day, though. Her stomach hurt, and after making muffins and riding out her first cup of coffee, she didn't really feel like going with Terry to the apartment. Even so, she would go with him to the ends of the earth, if that's where he went.
The tea felt so good. She finished the last of it, and Terry took the mug and returned it to the kitchen. When Izzy came back with Terry, Izzy patted Madison's hand.

"I'm sorry that didn't go well."

"So am I," Terry said as he started for the hall. "I have to change out of these gym clothes. Do you still want to come, Maddie?"

"Oh, yes please."

Terry grinned, and left the living room with John as two of the triplets climbed onto the couch to watch TV. Ricky and the third triplet played with toys on the carpet, while Abby and Jake stayed in the kitchen and talked over their coffee, obviously enjoying each other's company.

After straightening the room, Izzy went back to the kitchen and Madison pulled out her treasure from under the couch. The girls beside her watched, but turned back to their show when they saw Madison wasn't doing anything of interest.

Unclipping the clicky pen, Madison opened her precious spiral notebook and started to write.

\textit{i don't understand what's hapening to me. is it normal to not want to be with someone and yet be happy when you're with him at the same time? sometimes, things get inside my head and it messes me up when i'm alone, but with Tery, it's sometimes better and sometimes worse.}

Madison sighed, gave her hand a rest before pressing the pen deep into the paper and pushing on.

\textit{i'm scared. i don't really know what love is, not the kind men and women have together like Izzy and John, but i'm scared it will happen to me. i think love must be a lot like coffee. its awful if you aren't used to it.}

"Hey Maddie?" Terry strode into the room in jeans and a heavy coat, a dark blue woolen cap pulled over his ears. "Are you ready? Where's your coat?"

"In the office."

"I'll get it," he nodded, and passed as John came into the room in clothes that looked like Terry's.

"We'll need to first run by the home center for some things--" John checked his back pocket for a wallet-- "so do you want to come now, or wait for us to pick you up later?"
"I'll come now." Madison pushed the notebook back under the couch, and started to look for her shoes. Awful or not, she wanted to go with Terry.

"Daddy, can I come, too?" The triplet on the floor-- Debbie-- got up and came to her father. "Can I, Daddy?"

"It'll be boring," he warned.

"I don't mind."

"You'll have to stay out of the way, so Uncle Terry and I can work."

"I can do that," Debbie nodded, and rushed off to get her coat.

"Can I come, too?" Lizzie and Ruthie said in near unison from the couch. They looked alarmed, as if they were about to miss out on something special. If their sister could go...

"Get your coats," John nodded, and they dropped off the couch to run into the hall. "It looks like you'll have some company, Madison. Do you mind them tagging along?"

Madison shook her head, and tried not to wince as she lifted her foot to tie a sneaker.

"I'll do that." John crouched to tie Madison's shoes. "Izumi," he called into the next room, "Terry and I are taking the girls with us."

"You are?" Izzy came to the kitchen doorway with a dishtowel. "I didn't know you were planning to make this into an outing."

"Neither did I." John smiled good-humoredly and got to his feet. "Once you say 'yes' to one of them, it's hard to say 'no' to the other two."

"Tell me about it," Izzy laughed.

"Which reminds me--" John folded his arms and looked serious-- "I heard the girls were with you last night on the floor. If I'd have known that, you could've slept in their room, on an actual bed."
"Thank you, but for now, I prefer to sleep in the living room." Izzy smiled as Debbie and Terry returned in their coats and hats. Then Izzy saw the little boy left alone on the carpet with his toy truck. "I think you've forgotten someone, John."

"Have I?" John looked down at Ricky. "I don't suppose you want to come, too?"

Like someone who'd just been invited to a birthday party, Ricky nodded excitedly, and ran into the kitchen to tell his mommy and daddy the good news.

"If all four are coming, Izumi, then I'm going to need more help."

Izzy eyed John playfully. "Don't tell me two grown men and a woman can't handle four small children."

"It does sound pathetic, doesn't it?" Helpless, John gave his wife a pleading look that had her promising to get her coat and shoes. "Thanks, Little Dove."

As Izzy left and AJ came through the living room on their way to the hallway to dress their little boy for the cold, Madison wondered something.

"Why do you call Izzy that? Do all husbands call their wife that?"

"What? You mean 'Little Dove'?" John scratched the back of his neck a moment. "No, I wouldn't say it's very common. It's a pet name I have for Izumi, that's all. When I met her, she reminded me of a dove. A defenseless dove that needed protecting, and a cute one, at that."

"Daddy," Debbie tugged at John's hand. "I have to go."

"Then you'd better hurry before we get in the minivan."

"You won't leave without me?"

John gave his girl a look. "Would I do a thing like that?"

Debbie burst into a grin, and ran off to use the bathroom.

If John had been the Dragon, Madison knew he would have done just that. She would be trapped in the basement with no food, and a chain only long enough to reach the bathroom or a bucket in the corner. Cold fingers crept up Madison's spine, and she tried to shake them off. The
memory had intruded on her spirits, but then Terry came back with her coat, and she felt safe again.

"What's this I hear about you bringing along all the munchkins?"

"I know." John shrugged. "I said 'yes' to Debbie..."

"So the others guilt tripped you into letting them come, too." Terry smiled as he helped Madison into the coat. "Sometimes, I think those girls have us wrapped around their little fingers."

"I know they do." John inspected his grandson as Ricky came into the living room with Jake. "Keep that cap over your ears," John told the boy. "Did your mom take your temperature this morning?"

"He doesn't have a fever," Jake said, stooping to bundle the scarf around Ricky's neck. "Is he going to be outside most of the time?"

"Not if I can help it." John watched as Debbie, Ruthie, and Lizzie came into the living room with Izzy. "I don't know what all the excitement is about. After the home center, we head to Terry's apartment, and while Terry and I work, you guys will be inside with Madison, probably watching TV. You could do that, here."

The words fell on deaf ears, and Ricky strained to get away from Jake as Jake made sure the cap was protecting his small ears.

"I guess Jake and I are going to have the house to ourselves," Abby said, coming to check on Ricky, then planting a kiss on the boy's cheek. "Don't wander off, and hold hands so you won't get lost."

Ricky nodded, and placed Firefighter Stan into his pocket.

"After the moving yesterday, I think Jake and I will take it easy. Maybe make some popcorn and watch a movie."

"You know where everything's at, so have a good time." Izzy zipped coats and made sure each of the girls had a clean handkerchief in their pocket. "Depending on how long the men take with the repairs, I think we should be back well in time for dinner."

"I'll make dinner," Jake volunteered.
"Isn't he great?" Abby smiled. "And he's all mine."

To Madison's amazement, Jake blushed. Men were aggressive monsters, but that didn't seem to hold true for these men.

After John said a word of prayer for the day, he and Terry went to move Ricky's booster seat from the truck to the minivan. In the kitchen, Izzy gathered a few items from her pantry and put them in a cloth bag marked "Groceries."

"There's no need to eat out for lunch," Izzy explained, "when I can just as easily use Terry's kitchen."

"You can use my place, if you want. I think I have more in my kitchen than Terry does." Madison felt oh-so-happy when Izzy accepted the invitation.

With so many boosters in the minivan, it left room for only one more grownup besides John and Izzy. It served no problem to Terry. He pulled his jeep beside the minivan, got out and opened the passenger door, as though he hadn't expected Madison to go with anyone but him.

It made her feel so special.

Music she couldn't hear with her ears, but only with her heart, rolled through Madison like a free flowing river that had no end. She got into the jeep, and forgot about her pain until she put on the seat belt and a shot of reality calmed her back down to a bubbling brook. Rounding the hood of the jeep, Terry climbed behind the wheel and waited as the kids in the next vehicle were strapped into their boosters.

"Could I ask a question?" Terry looked so thoughtful, it made Madison a tad uneasy.

"I guess."

"When you wrote those goals--"

"You're not still thinking about that, are you?"

"Maddie, they're hard to forget." He raised his hands. "I don't want to scare you again, I only want to know something."

"What?" She nibbled her bottom lip, not trying to make it bleed but dreading his question, whatever it was.
"When you were filling out your intake form--" Terry huffed out a breath-- "I have to know if you wrote what you did, before, or after, I told you about my step-father?"

"Before."

"Are you sure?" Terry turned to look at her. "You didn't write all that because you were sorry for me, did you? You didn't do it in a fit of pity?"

"No." She wished she could stop there, but couldn't. "I meant it." Ouch. That hurt Madison.

"Thank you." Terry inhaled, looked out the windshield and nodded slowly. "That's good to know."

"You feel sorry for me though, don't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You have fits of pity for me, all the time. So what's the difference?"

The question seemed to catch Terry off guard.

"I suppose you have a point." He turned the key in the ignition as John waved to Terry before climbing into the minivan. "I don't like the thought of pressuring you, that's all. Personally, I don't mind a little pity now and again, if it brings you closer to me."

The force of his words were probably more than Terry intended, for he winced, and seemed to rethink that last statement.

"I can't help the pity, Maddie, and neither can you. I just don't want to use it against you. Can you understand the difference?" He pulled behind the minivan, and followed onto the main road. "If it works in your favor, or mine, then so be it. The fact we have pity for each other, only means we care. But I don't want to use it like a weapon. If you do something, I want you to do it because you want to, not because you feel sorry for me, or feel forced."

She thought it over. "Have you been helping me because you want to?"

"Absolutely."

She nodded. "Okay."
"But you do feel sorry for me, don't you?" Terry asked.

"Yes."

Her honesty made him smile a little.

"I've noticed after people learn about me, they're usually nicer, and more polite. I just wanted to be sure those words had come from your heart."

"They did." Madison struggled against the tears she felt burning in her eyes. Her heart was such a traitor. Angrily, she brushed the wet away. It would be easier to not feel so much for Terry if she didn't like him a whole lot.

He reached for her hand, and like two magnets being drawn together, she took it without even thinking. She wanted to let go, but couldn't.

"I'm done for now," he said, and gave her hand a squeeze. "Don't be frightened, Maddie. I'm done."

She didn't answer, but held onto him and watched the trees pass by her window. As his thumb stroked the back of her hand, the music returned with the sweet strains of something wonderful.

Up until recently, she hadn't even known she had a heart, and now it was singing. If she wasn't careful, it'd probably shout something embarrassing at the top of its lungs, (if a heart had lungs), and Madison would have to stuff fingers in her ears to drown out her own noise.

Thankfully, the jeep rolled into the home center before she had time to get very angry with her heart.

The minivan parked near the entrance, and Terry found a spot nearby.

The munchkins had to be unstrapped from their boosters, and while their small noses turned bright pink from the cold, John made them pair up and hold hands. With all these kids, she thought they looked like a small preschool on an outing. Madison had seen something like that on TV once, and this family came close.

Not wanting to be left out, Madison moved closer to Terry and took his hand. She knew he was probably smiling ear to ear, but couldn't meet his gaze to check.
If the children got to hold hands, then so would she.

Rows of potted plants hung from racks outside the store's entrance, and Izzy paused to look them over. The whole group came to a stop, but Izzy shook her head, said something about not having enough time to care for a plant, and they went inside.

Someone asked if they needed help, but John and Terry knew what they wanted and just which aisle to look. With so many children along, they didn't walk fast, and it made things easier for Madison to stick to Terry's side. A woman moved past them, saw her and Terry holding hands and smiled. Terry didn't seem to mind, so Madison didn't let go.

She wished the woman hadn't smiled, though.

They came to the aisle John and Terry wanted, and after some debate, they chose two large cans of sealant. That was it. That was all they had come for, and with the children in tow, they moved to the checkout. Madison thought the little ones looked bored, but John had warned them it wouldn't be anything special.

"Can we go home now?" Ruthie asked, and Madison saw John and Izzy exchange patient glances.

The small preschool filed out to the parking lot, and everyone piled back into the minivan and jeep, to make the short drive to the apartment complex. The sky didn't hold any clouds today, though the air had a frosty bite to it that made the jeep's heater feel good.

Madison snuggled in the coat Terry had bought her, warmed her hands in its soft pockets.

Then she felt it, deep in the recesses of the pocket liner, and her heart slammed to a stop. Madison felt the wire bent closed, the unmistakeable shape of a safety pin. She swallowed hard. She'd forgotten she'd hidden one there.

The apartment complex came into view, and Terry found his usual parking space while the minivan pulled in beside them.

"Stay here until I come back," Terry said, and got out of the jeep with the heater still running.

She watched him go into her apartment, and knew what he was doing. Finding all the knives, and probably hiding them somewhere. Maybe even hiding them in the trash can. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the safety pin. She didn't feel like harming herself right now, but maybe she should keep it, just in case?
Just then, Izzy came to Madison's door, and knocked on the window. Shoving the safety pin into her pocket, Madison rolled down the glass.

"Terry's hiding the knives," she told Izzy before Izzy had a chance to ask.

"Oh. Well then." Izzy smiled, and folded her arms against the stiff breeze. "I'll go see if I can help. Roll this window back up, and stay warm."

Madison did as she was told.

She watched as John slid open the side door of the minivan, then helped the children out of their boosters. It seemed to be an awful lot of trouble to just tag along. But then, she had begged to come, too.

The door to her apartment opened. Terry came out with a trash bag wrapped around something. He glanced at her through the windshield, and went straight to his apartment, one door down from hers. She had to fight this. Terry was trying so hard to make her better.

Whether or not she was a lost cause, she had to try.

The safety pin shouldn't be in her pocket, so she took it out and stuffed it in a crevice of the jeep's upholstery. If she kept it, she knew she would use it, and Madison decided to search every pocket she had. To her dismay, she found two more safety pins, and quickly hid them around the jeep, hoping she wouldn't later remember where they were.

Izzy came out of Madison's apartment, waved to Madison to come, then went to the minivan for her cloth bag of groceries. All the while, John studied the wall Terry and Brian had power washed, while little kids ran about on the pavement, shouting "Tag, you're it!"

She got out of the jeep, waited a moment for the pain from the stitches to stop throbbing before she closed the door. The cold wind rushed about her, making it hard to suck in a breath.

"Well?" Terry asked, coming out of his apartment to stand beside John and stare at the wall. "Don't tell me it's too soon?"

John nodded. "After all that rain we had on Sunday, it's not dry yet. We could still paint the window frame, though."

"Aw, man. I hate to drag everyone out here for nothing."
"This wasn't for nothing." John bumped Terry's arm. "We have the sealant now, so we'll be ready when the bricks are completely dry. Besides, it was my idea to try today. Is the paint in the shed?"

"Yeah." Terry looked disappointed. "I'll get it. Maddie, hey-- come on, it's safe to go inside now."

Having finally caught her breath, she nodded to Terry and moved past the children.

The air felt warmer inside her apartment, mostly from not having to stand in the icy wind. Izzy had turned up the thermostat, and when Madison went to the kitchen, she found Izzy taking food from her cloth bag. Before she could ask if Izzy wanted a kitchen helper, they heard the front door open.

"Maddie? You have a delivery out here."

"I do?" Madison struggled to get out of her coat as she came to the door.

A uniformed delivery man with a medium-sized box under one arm, nodded to her. "Sign here," he said, passing her a slate. Madison did her best to scrawl her name on the screen. "Have a nice day," he nodded, and handed the package to Madison as Terry came closer to have a look.

Despite its small size, the box felt surprisingly heavy in her hands. She startled when Terry whistled in amazement, and of course John and Izzy came to see what was going on.

"Eighty-two dollars and forty-two cents." Terry shook his head and Madison struggled to find where it said that. "Someone paid an arm and a leg to get that package to you, Maddie." He leaned over, read the rest of the tag. "Mrs. Jack Snyder." Terry's eyes snapped back to Madison's. "These are the things she said you left behind."

"Who's Mrs. Snyder?" John asked.

"Maddie, she paid eighty-two dollars to get that here, overnight. She couldn't do anything Sunday-- when she talked to Sheriff Peterson-- so she had to wait until Monday to ship it. That's eighty-two dollars worth of overnight shipping and handling you're holding."

"Who is Mrs. Snyder?" Izzy asked.
"She's Maddie's former landlady." Terry folded his arms. "When Henry called to do a background check on Maddie, Mrs. Snyder said Maddie left some things behind-- even though Maddie doesn't remember any such thing. Do you, Maddie?"

Madison shook her head. She was scared to death Terry wouldn't leave, so she could open the box and find out what Mrs. Snyder had wanted to get off her hands so quickly.

"Well?" Terry prompted. "Open it."

Panic stopped Madison from making a reply. She hugged the box to her chest, and prayed with everything she had that Terry would go.

"All right," Terry sighed, "if that's what you want, I'll leave so you can open it in private." Standing outside on her front step with John, Terry turned to go, looked over his shoulder as Madison shut the door.

Thankfully, Izzy didn't say anything, but went back to the kitchen as children screamed and played on the pavement outside the apartment window.

Madison wished she were one of them, then she wouldn't have to open the box.

With a lump in her throat the size of the basketball in John and Terry's office, Madison carried the hefty box to her room. She shut the door, then hurried to the couch to look the package over. What could have been so important that Mrs. Snyder-- who'd never had a kind word for her in the past-- would spend eighty dollars on, just to get here so quickly?

Hands trembling, Madison tugged at the twine securing the box. She looked about, searching for the pair of scissors Terry had bought for her at the MegaMart. They were nowhere to be found, so Madison went to the kitchen.

"Izzy, Terry hid all the sharp things and I can't get the string off."

"I'll get something to cut it with." Izzy left the kitchen, marched through the living room and opened the front door. She waved to someone. "John, I need your pocketknife. Madison can't get through the twine."

"I'll help," Terry volunteered, but Izzy accepted the knife from John and closed the door.

"I'll help you get your box open, but then I'll leave. Is that okay?"
Madison nodded, and showed Izzy to her couchroom.

"Let's see now." Izzy opened her husband's pocketknife like someone who didn't usually handle such things, then daintily used the sharp blade to cut through the twine and tape. "There you go," Izzy said, and left without looking inside.

Madison's heart pounded in her ears as she went to close the door again. She moved back to the couch, sat down and tried to still her hands from shaking so hard. Whatever was in the box couldn't be good, not for Mrs. Snyder to be so scared. This package had fear written all over it. Saying a prayer, Madison lifted one flap, then another, only to find a stack of new, unmarked recordable DVDs still on the manufacturer's spindle. She'd seen lots of them in the Dragon's closet, but those had been labeled, and had been quickly destroyed.

A bunch of paper lined the box, and Madison pulled out a few sheets to look them over. These were important things, after all, but nothing to be scared of.

But that spindle...

Madison lifted it out, saw there were fingerprints on the topmost DVD and swallowed hard.

She didn't have anything to play the disc, but had a good idea of what she'd see, if she did.

So there had been more.

Madison wanted to weep out loud. She'd scoured the house from top to bottom to make sure she'd gotten them all, and there they were-- a few dozen, at least. Mrs. Snyder must have seen them, or at least one of them, to be so scared. As if her landlady hadn't already been frightened when she'd found Madison chained to the bed. After seeing this, Mrs. Snyder must've been terrified to have anyone find them in her house.

Feeling numb, Madison searched the room for a hiding place. She wanted to snap them in two, but there were so many and they'd make enough of a mess the others would know discs of some sort had come in the box.

She saw the dresser, and opened the bottom-most drawer. Shoving the spindle inside, Madison shut the drawer and prayed Terry would never see what was on those DVDs. Her body trembled, and she fought to keep from rubbing the stitches on her stomach so she could feel more pain. The pain inside her was so much worse than any outside wounds could ever be.

A knock sounded on her door.
"Maddie? Are you all right in there? I won't come in-- I just need to know you're okay."

She tried to breathe, and when she couldn't, she lunged at the door, twisted the knob, and wrenched it open. Not giving Terry a chance to brace himself, Madison threw herself into his arms. Those strong arms held her so tight, she wanted to hide there forever.

"It's okay, I've got you." Terry's voice sounded so good, it made her feel protected, even wanted in a good way. Not like the Dragon in the basement.

Madison leaned into all that strength and shut her eyes.

She could see the images in her head, the torture she'd had to live through for most of her life. If she moved away from the screen before the movie was over, the Dragon would hurt her even worse. She had to sit there, and not move a muscle until he was sure she'd seen the entire movie.

So many movies of her own suffering, it made Madison sick. She struggled to free herself from Terry, braced herself against the wall as she wobbled into the bathroom. The nausea churned in her stomach. She didn't make it in time, and what was left of her blueberry muffins spewed onto the bathroom floor.

Terry rushed in as Madison sank to her knees.

"Izzy? Izzy, we need your help in here!" He tried to lift Madison off the floor, but she sagged onto her side and lay at his feet.

In the back of her mind, Madison could hear Terry, but the images were so real, so forceful, she couldn't fight them. If she did, the Dragon would punish her.

The only way to survive, was to obey.

          * * * *

"I shouldn't have left her alone." Terry lifted Maddie into his arms, his poor sweet darling reduced to a rigid, wooden doll.

"What's wrong?" Izzy came running and gasped when she saw Maddie's ashen face.

"I think she's having a flashback." Terry lifted Maddie onto the sofa in the couchroom, kicked off the open box with his foot, and lay Maddie down on her back. He looked into her face, only to
see her staring blankly at him. It gave Terry an eerie feeling. He’d seen her do this once before, when he’d left her alone in his apartment only to come back and find her hiding in the storage room.

"Maddie." He lightly slapped her cheek. "Come on, Baby, look at me."

She blinked, but her breathing kept coming in shallow breaths and sweat beaded her forehead. "Maddie, you’re safe now. I swear before God, you’re safe. Look at me-- please Maddie, look at me."

Her eyes focused on his. She blinked, but wouldn’t move, and it scared Terry. "Here’s your glass of water," Izzy said, pressing a cold cup into Terry’s hand. "John usually asks for one when you have a nightmare."

"Oh. Right." Terry wet his fingers and flicked water droplets in Maddie’s face. Izzy nudged him. "John usually dribbles the water."

Groaning, Terry tried to follow direction. He couldn’t think straight. He slowly poured the water onto Maddie’s forehead and let it run down her cheeks. "Come on, Baby. Don’t do this again."

"She's done this before?"

Terry nodded. "I had a hard time pulling her out of the last one. Maddie, please!"

Those eyes blinked and then stayed shut.

"Terry, help," she whimpered.

"I’m trying to, Maddie. Hang on. It’ll pass, but you have to fight it." He leaned over her, touched his forehead to hers. "Please, God, pull her out of it. In Jesus’ name, amen." He grasped her hand, rubbed it between his own and kept praying, over and over, that the monster would go away. He kissed her forehead, and a breath gasped into Maddie’s lungs. Her eyes opened and she fought to get Terry’s face away from hers.
"Calm down, and focus on breathing. Here, sit up." Terry pulled her into a sitting position, then placed the cup to her lips. She took a sip, then another, until she could hold the glass, herself. "What happened, Maddie? What was in that box?"

Maddie shook her head.

He looked about, saw the box lying on its side on the carpet.

"May I look inside?" he asked.

It took a long hard moment before Maddie nodded.

As Izzy sat beside his darling, Terry picked up the box. Except for some paper, it was mostly empty-- nowhere near the three pounds the shipping label had claimed. Fighting back frustration, Terry pulled out the paper.

And gasped in shock.

Maddie's birth certificate. Behind the birth certificate was Maddie's Social Security card. And behind that was a fancy hospital issue birth certificate with tiny footprints in black ink. Folded together with these, were school registration papers, all the way up to the third grade. He couldn't find anything beyond that, and remembered Maddie had said she was eight years old when she went to live with the Dragon. After that, school must have stopped for her.

A sinking feeling came over Terry.

"Maddie, did your mother give you to the Dragon of her own free will?"

Clutching her cup, Maddie nodded.

"Are you sure? He didn't kidnap you?"

Slowly, Maddie shook her head. "Momma took me to his house. She said he had adopted me, that they had grown up together as children and that I would like him. I was going to live with him now, and I had to be good and do everything he told me. She said I was his, and not to call her because she was going away on a long trip and she wasn't ever coming back." The words fell from Maddie's lips like someone lost in a trance. She gasped, and the tears came with so much heartbreaking sorrow, Izzy was crying, too.

"There, there." Izzy hugged Maddie, and sent a look of stunned horror to Terry.
He knew. He was feeling the same thing.

Numb with shock, he reread one of the documents.

"The father given on the birth certificate is Harold Jones. Is that right? Is he your biological father?"

Maddie nodded. "He died two months after I was born."

"And Candace Jones. Is that your mother?"

Again, Maddie nodded.

"I have serious doubts the Dragon legally adopted you. When an adoption goes through, the official birth certificate is usually updated to reflect the new parents. Isn't that right, Izzy?"

"I don't know, Terry. I suppose that makes sense."

Terry pulled out his iPhone, punched something into a search engine and quickly found what he was looking for.

"Unless you have papers to show otherwise, Maddie, the Dragon never adopted you."

"Momma said he had." Maddie sniffed, but wouldn't let go of Izzy. "I don't understand."

"Is this the same birth certificate you remember seeing?" Terry held it in front of her. "Besides the one from the hospital, do you remember ever seeing another birth certificate with your name on it?"

Maddie shook her head. "It's the same one I've always had. He must have hidden them, because after he died, I never found either one."

"Are you sure, without a doubt, that your mother gave you to him?"

"I ran to the window and saw her leave." Maddie swallowed. "I hoped she'd wave to me, but she never looked back."

"Then it's her loss." Unable to think about it without boiling over in anger, Terry put aside the papers to tend to his loved one. He would not let the contents of that box upset Maddie-- not if
he had anything to do with it. The three pounds Mrs. Jack Snyder had paid eighty-two dollars and forty-two cents was nowhere in sight, and it didn't take a rocket scientist to understand Maddie was hiding it from him.

If only she trusted him more than that.

He sank onto the sofa, watched as Izzy held Maddie and told Maddie everything was going to be all right. How he wanted to be the one comforting Maddie, to hold her again the way she'd rushed out of the bedroom and into his arms. He wanted to make all the hurts vanish, to make her forget the Dragon ever existed, to wipe out the memory of her mother ever walking away.

He couldn't, and all he could do was sit on that couch while Maddie cried into Izzy's shoulder.

Maddie's hand blindly reached for his, and he took it with gratitude.

He held back from kissing her fingers, and knew in his heart, what that birth certificate and those other documents meant. He would no longer need to wait for Maddie's identification to be replaced, before they could get married.

Patience, he told himself, and yet his heart couldn't stop believing this wasn't a sign from Heaven. All Maddie had to do now, was say "yes." Not an easy thing for her to do, by any stretch of the imagination, and yet... here she was, holding his hand. Hope tugged at Terry so hard he had to bodily hold himself back. He had to wait. He must.

He had to fight this overwhelming urge to protect her at all cost, or risk losing Maddie. She needed him far too much, for him to scare her away. All the people in her life who were supposed to have taken care of her, had one by one, betrayed her. But he would not.

One day, Maddie would have a family again.

With him.

She would belong with him, and the Johanneses, and the Murphys, and his family and his refuge would become hers, for as long as they both shall live.

One day, Terry promised himself. One day.

"Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another
to help him up... if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken."
~ Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 ~
Chapter Twenty-six
Small Words

"The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel."
~ Proverbs 12:10 ~

He wasn’t her father. The Dragon hadn’t been related to her at all. She’d never considered him as her father, but it still jarred her. After so many years of believing that he was at least, by law, related to her, the truth came as a stunning shock to Madison. All those times he'd said he'd adopted her, had been a lie.

She felt stupid for ever having believed him, but even Momma had said it was so. An eight-year-old had believed the lie and had spent all those years thinking her father was having sex with her.

Izzy held and hugged Madison while Terry held Madison's hand. Though Madison couldn't stop crying, she felt some relief knowing she hadn't been the adopted daughter of that monster. He wasn't any relation to her. None at all. A tiny shred of relief came from knowing that. The knowledge, however, didn't go very far to dim the pictures crouching in the corners of her mind, waiting for a chance to take her over and finish the movie.

A part of her still feared that if she didn't, the Dragon would hurt her. He had tight control over her.

Self-inflicted pain gave her some of that control— the cutting pain, the kind that came from a razor or a knife. Even a safety pin. She couldn't control the abuse, but it was tempting to know she could control some of the pain, and make it stop; the cutting hurt, but she could make that pain stop. That was the one thing in her life she could control.

"Maddie." Terry's grip on her hand didn't let up. "Talk to me. I don't want you to get sucked into that flashback again."

"He usually kept a knife in the bathroom."

"Pardon?"

"The Dragon. He kept it under the towels, and when I was bad, he'd put it to my throat. The first time I found it, I used it to cut the rope, but I couldn't get away from him and he switched me to a chain."
"Maddie, let's talk about something else."

She nodded, didn't bother to dry the wet on her cheeks and kept going. "I tried to kill him once, but he wouldn't bleed as much as I thought he would. He beat me so bad my eyes swelled shut, and after that, I only used the knife to cut myself."

"Did he know you were doing that? Using it to hurt yourself?"

"As long as I didn't get sick and make trouble for him, he didn't care. Before he came to bed, he would put the knife out of my reach. He was afraid I'd kill him in his sleep."

"Maddie, think about something else."

"He didn't want me to get sick."

"Maddie--"

"Don't get sick, and don't get pregnant. If I ever needed to see a doctor in a bad way, he promised to kill me first."

"Do you want to move into the living room and watch TV?"

"I was so afraid of getting pregnant. Whenever he found out I was late for my period, or that I'd missed it altogether and had kept it a secret, he'd go ballistic, drag me onto the floor and kick my stomach."

For a very long minute, Terry said nothing.

"I wanted a baby, but each time my period started again, I tried to be glad. He would've only hurt it."

"Maddie, please."

"I want to stop remembering, but one thing reminds me of another, and they just keep coming." Madison felt desperately stuck, like she was made of the hardest, most heaviest kind of stone there was, a stone that could never be changed or moved. She feared she'd always be like this. "Terry, when will I forget?"

When Terry didn't answer, she smeared her tears against Izzy's shoulder, and looked at him.
Controlled rage simmered in Terry's eyes. His jaw muscles worked overtime, and his free hand kept flexing, as though he were fighting to not ball it into a fist. He was angry with the Dragon.

"Do the memories ever stop?" she asked Terry. "Will I ever forget?"

He groaned, as though he didn't really want to answer. "It's taken time--" he paused, then went on-- "I've learned I can live with the memories and not dwell on them whenever they're triggered." He squeezed Madison's fingers so hard they turned white. "Though I've never been able to forget that part of my life, that doesn't mean the abuser has to win. When we live our lives, they lose."

It wasn't the answer she'd wanted, but the way Terry had said it, made her feel hopeful. As though this was survivable.

"For now, I'm not going to ask what else came in that box." He eyed the opened package on the carpet like it was a snake come to life, one that could bite him without warning. "I want to believe you'll tell me when you're ready, but if you never do-- man, this is hard." He ran his free hand behind his neck and looked helpless. "You know I won't force you to tell me."

"Thank you, Terry. Thank you so much."

Turning loose of Madison, Terry nodded, and got to his feet. "When will lunch be ready?" he asked Izzy.

"Give me fifteen minutes." Izzy dried her tears and rubbed Madison's shoulder. "I can have it ready sooner, if needed."

"I'll tell John." Terry headed for the door, cast a glance at Madison, then closed his eyes as though what he saw was too much for him to take. "In times like this," he muttered, "I'm glad there's a hell." Terry pushed out of the room and soon after, the front door slammed shut.

Madison watched as Izzy put on a brave face, moved past the tears and got on with life. They had a family to feed. They went to the kitchen and started lunch, and while Madison helped make a curried chicken salad with the leftovers Izzy had brought, Madison thought about Terry.

All those memories about the Dragon made her think long and hard about men. Terry in particular. Men were still animals, people who couldn't be trusted not to hurt you. But. Some men were obviously different.
Though it pained Madison to on purpose remember the Dragon, she did, and placed Terry beside the monster for a side by side comparison of how they had treated her.

One had no mercy, while the other had more than she’d ever thought possible in a man; one hurt without thinking and did whatever he wanted, while the other was always careful to not inflict pain. One was an enemy, while the other was her friend; one beat and left bruises, while the other held her hand. One told her he loved her just to heighten his own pleasure, while the other had yet to say those words, let alone kiss her.

What was love, anyway? She’d always assumed love meant lust, just another way of a man saying he wanted sex. Love was a demand. It left bruises on your skin and left you feeling dirty, it turned you into someone’s toilet paper. Love made you disposable, not worth anything but to be flushed down the toilet with the rest of the filth.

One professed love but gave pain, while the other held back so he wouldn’t hurt her.

In Madison’s eyes, the contrast was stark, as different as night was from day. The arrival of that box was a reminder that not all men were the same. But what did that L word— love— mean? Love was supposed to be something good, wasn’t it? When God loved, it was good, but when man loved, it was not.

Unless love was more than what she’d thought it was. A deeply troubling thought. It challenged all she thought she knew about the subject.

When Izzy called the others to lunch, Madison took her plate to the couchroom to think. She didn’t want to talk to Terry right now, not while she was trying to figure something out. Something very important. Something that made her panic, and the only way she had of backing away from that panic, was to give herself room to doubt.

She wished she had her Bible with her, the one Terry had lent her. She’d had it on Sunday, but Terry had forgotten to let her keep it, and had taken it back after service.

Finishing only half of her lunch, Madison sat on the large couch in the makeshift bedroom and stared at the angel on the dresser. Panic wanted to bubble up inside her chest, and again, she told herself she could be wrong. For men, love was just another way of saying sex, that’s all. That’s all it ever meant.

Please, God, help me.

A knock sounded on the open door.
“May I come in?” Terry asked.

“I guess.”

“Are you doing all right in here?”

Madison shrugged.

“Thanks for helping Izzy. Lunch was good.”

Madison tried not to listen to Terry’s small talk. She didn’t want to believe a man could genuinely love her, or that it might be a good thing if he did. It meant she would have to give herself to such a man, and that, she refused to do. He’d have to take her by force, but that, Terry would never do.

“The window frame is painted,” Terry said as he came to the couch, “and Izzy and John are getting the munchkins ready to leave.”

Madison didn’t look up.

“Come on, Maddie, it’s time to go.” Terry took the plate from the couch and waited for her to stand.

She didn’t.

“Maddie, we’re leaving now.”

“I’m staying.”

“No, you’re not-- you’re coming with us.”

“Make me.”

Her defiance must have taken Terry off guard, for he went silent for several moments. “I’m not leaving you here by yourself, Maddie.”

Confused, she stared hard at the carpet. She wished Terry would let the argument snowball. It would be easier to not like him so much.
"Maddie, get up."

"No."

"Okay," Terry backed off, "you take a few minutes to think it over, and I'll wait for you in the living room. I'll tell the others we'll be home, later."

Didn't he ever give up? Madison groaned softly, leaned her head on the back of the couch and stared up at the ceiling. She heard Terry's footsteps, then the faint sound of voices as they talked about her in the living room.

They had to think she was absolutely nuts. Why not? She did.

"Madison?" Izzy came into the room with some pills and a glass of water. "Before we go, you'd better take your painkiller." Izzy placed the pills in Madison's hand, and Madison swallowed them down with cold water. "You take your time, and rest. Terry will bring you home when you're ready." Izzy gave Madison a kind smile, then took the empty glass and left the room.

Now Madison had guilt. Terry was saying nice things about her to the others, and that made Madison feel lower than the wall-to-wall carpeting.

Her problem wasn't going away, in fact, it was becoming worse. Everything in her life since coming to Three Mile Bay had been gaining momentum, and was now forcing her to think some very painful thoughts.

If a man's love was real, and not supposed to be a backhanded slap in the face, then the way Terry treated her was very likely... that awful L word. She found it hard to even say the word in her mind, let alone accept it in her heart. She touched her stomach, tried to feel the stitches through the sweater and the T-shirt. She couldn't, but the pain calmed her and she let her hand rest there until it hurt so much she feared she might hurt the stitches and had to pull it away.

God, please help me, she prayed again. I'm losing my mind, I just know I am.

"Madison?" Terry knocked on the still open door before he came in. "Do you want to go driving with me?"

She blinked at Terry.
"John and Izzy are gone, and I thought--" Terry blew out a sigh-- "I thought maybe we could drive around the bay and enjoy some peace and quiet. With so many kids around making noise, it's easy to feel overwhelmed. A drive might make you feel better."

This didn't help. Terry's sweet offer only made things worse.

Unable to turn him down, Madison nodded, and winced inwardly when Terry broke into a hopeful grin.

It was then that she knew.

She knew, without a shadow of a doubt in her heart, that Terry loved her. This had to be love. It brought tears to her eyes, but she palmed them away as Terry came in to help her into her coat.

"I can get it on by myself," she told him, but he wouldn't budge until both arms had slid into their sleeves, and he'd zipped up the coat.

"I wish you'd stop crying, Maddie." He sighed, and carefully walked her into the living room. "Now I know how John feels when he tells Izzy that when she cries, she breaks his heart. I see those tears, Maddie, and my heart breaks. Please, try to stop."

"I'll try." She was about to dry her nose on the sleeve of her coat, when Terry pulled out a clean handkerchief and gave it to her. His hand lingered a moment and touched hers with a heartbreaking caress. When her eyes met his, she saw him struggle to swallow.

If this is what love looked like, then she'd been right all along to never believe the Dragon. In all her life, no one but Terry had ever looked at her in just that way. She felt her face grow hot, and had to turn from those earnest brown eyes.

"I wish," Terry said quietly, as though he were afraid of breaking her if he spoke too loudly, "I wish I could tell you what I'm feeling."

She shook her head. "Please, don't."

"It's getting harder for me to keep quiet, Maddie." He went to the front door, opened it, and waited.

Head bowed, she moved past Terry and stepped outside.
"You don't feel like cutting right now, do you?" He looked at her before locking her door. "This conversation isn't making you want to cut right now, is it?"

She wanted badly to say she felt just fine, that the thought hadn't even crossed her mind.

"I don't want you to hurt yourself, Maddie. Especially not because of me."

"I know."

He sucked in a breath, and went to unlock the passenger door of his jeep. She climbed in while the wind tugged at her hair, and when the door shut, she leaned against the seat and tried to calm herself without cutting. She felt as though she were standing on the edge of a steep, sharp cliff, looking down at the waves thrashing the rocks beneath her, and knowing that her only relief would come, if she jumped. Jumping made about as much sense as the way Terry made her feel; to give in to either, would be suicide.

How those treatment goals haunted her.

"Maddie, try to relax."

"I am relaxed."

With a sigh, Terry started the jeep and said nothing as he pulled out of the parking lot. She forgot to look at his newly painted window, but it didn't matter.

For some reason, Terry seemed worse after this morning, as though he were fighting with himself to keep from speaking. She should've kept her mouth shut about the Dragon, and all those things she couldn't stop remembering. It had made Terry all the more protective of her, and that made her want to pull away so she wouldn't have to think about the L word.

She saw Terry's hand slip from the wheel, and reach for hers.

"Terry, I think I need to call Carol."

He sat up straight, flicked Madison a glance. "Is it that bad? You're going to cut?"

"Not everything has to do with cutting, Terry."
"I'm sorry, I'm just trying to understand what's going on." He slowed, pulled off to the side of the road then dug out his phone from a pants pocket. "I don't want to make things worse for you, Maddie. I'm just trying to do what's best for you."

"Then please call Carol."

"I am." Terry punched the screen of his iPhone, then waited for the number to answer. "Hello, Carol? I know you said not to use this line unless it's an emergency, but Maddie said she needs to talk to you. I think maybe we both do."

Madison squeezed her lips shut. She wanted to fight with Terry so he wouldn't want to take care of her so much, or look at her with such heartbreak in his eyes. She wanted to shout and yell and scream and make him not want her. But she couldn't.

"Thank you." Terry nodded, and kept listening to the phone. "I'm afraid Maddie is close to cutting again, and I'm probably the reason why. Yes, we can be there by one."

Madison reached for her stomach, but Terry caught her hand, held it, and wouldn't let go.

"We'll see you in an hour," Terry said, and punched off the call. Madison struggled to get free, but he would not let go. "Let's drive around, and in an hour, we can talk to Carol." He gave Madison's hand an extra hard squeeze. "Hang on, Maddie. She's with a patient right now."

"You didn't have to say that-- you didn't have to tell her I was going to cut again."

"Then don't reach for your stomach. Isn't there enough pain in your life, without inflicting more?"

"You don't understand."

"I'm trying to, Maddie. I'm trying." Terry let her hand go, started the jeep back onto the main road and blew out a sigh. "I'm sorry I said that about your stomach. I know you're trying, too."

The world buzzed around Madison, and she knew she was going to pass out. She hugged herself, rocked in the seat and winced when the seat belt hurt her stitches. Knowing Terry was watching, she stopped rocking and prayed for help.

"I can't remember," she whispered. "I can't remember the battle cry."
"Here." With one eye on the road, Terry took his cell phone out, turned it on and hit the screen before handing it to her. "You'll find it at the top."

Clutching Terry's iPhone like the old friend it was, Madison read the screen. She read the words, and her pulse steadied as the battle cry resounded in her heart. She could do this. She could hang on until one o'clock, and maybe even longer.

God bless him-- Terry had screens and screens of verses and Madison kept reading, kept praying them in her heart and doing her best to hold on. Terry's hand reached for hers again, but she couldn't take it and started rocking again. Fearing it would count as self-harm, she stopped and noticed with relief when Terry kept his hand to himself.

They drove in silence, neither one of them bothering to turn on the radio. Madison was busy holding on to what was left of her sanity, and Terry-- she didn't know what was going on with him. He kept driving, and didn't say a word more until they pulled in front of Carol's building and he shut off the engine.

"You ready to go in?" he asked, and got out of the jeep when she nodded, "yes."

She was as ready as she ever would be.

He helped her out of the jeep, said nothing when she hugged herself tightly as they went up the sidewalk to the entrance.

From the receptionist's desk, Tom looked up and nodded as they came in. "She's waiting for you," Tom said, and went back to work without commenting or asking questions.

"Thank you," Madison whispered so quietly, no one but she could hear the words. She was so grateful Tom hadn't asked why they were here. They'd been here yesterday, for Carol's evaluations, and here it was, the very next day, and they needed to see Carol again.

Terry held open the office door, let Madison inside, then closed the door after them.

At her desk, Carol sat typing into a laptop. She lifted a hand to acknowledge their presence, then requested "one more minute."

Shrugging off their coats, Madison took a seat in front of Carol's desk, and Terry claimed the chair opposite Madison's.
"So." Carol hit one last key, looked up at them and almost smiled. Almost, for she seemed to catch the tension in the air and leaned back in her chair as though thinking. "Who wants to go first?" she asked.

Terry and Madison raised their hands at the same time.

"I want to know what to do about Terry."

"And I want to know how long I should wait to tell Maddie how I feel."

"I already know how you feel." Madison folded her arms. "I figured that out today, and that's why I don't know what to do." She turned to Carol. "He loves me."

The words knocked the wind out of Terry, and he sat there with a stunned expression on his handsome face. He took a breath, and spoke. "How did you know?"

"Never mind that. I know." Madison squirmed in her chair and looked to Carol for help. "I don't know what to do about it."

"What do you want to do?" Carol asked.

The question made Madison squirm even more. "Whatever happens, I don't want sex."

"Let's go back a bit further than that." Carol looked at Madison kindly. "How do you feel about Terry having these feelings for you?"

"I don't want sex," Madison repeated, and Carol paused a moment as if in thought. Madison half feared Carol would bring up those treatment goals, and rub her nose in them and call her stupid. That was then, and this was now. Things were more dangerous than yesterday, and Madison found herself not caring what she had written down on the intake form. Terry loved her, and now she was in danger of all those things actually happening.

"You said Terry loves you." Carol looked to Terry. "Is this true?"

"It is." Terry answered without missing a beat, his tone so serious he might have been accepting a dangerous mission for the government, and not answering a question about that L word.

"How does that make you feel, Madison?"

"I won't have sex with him."
“Did he ask you for that?”

“No, but he loves me.”

“And what do you think love means to you? Tell me your definition of love.”

“Well,” Madison shifted in the chair, “it means some man wants to do me over.”

“I never said that.” Terry looked to Carol. “I never said that, or have ever used those words. Not even once have I ever said that to anyone, let alone Maddie.”

“He never said it, but he's thinking it.”

Groaning, Terry got out of his chair, paced in back of Madison where she couldn't see him without turning. “It's hard to talk to her while she's like this. I don't know what to say to her. I'm afraid if I say the wrong thing, she'll start cutting again.”

“Have you been cutting?” Carol asked Madison.

“Not exactly.” Madison tried very hard not to lie. “I thought about it. I touched my stitches to make them hurt a little, but I didn't cut.”

“I believe her.” Terry came to the desk. “If Maddie says she's not cutting, then I believe her.”

“I believe her, too,” Carol said, and gave Terry a kind look when he backed down. She turned back to Madison. “You've been around Terry, you were able to piece together how strongly he feels about you. What has he done to show you how he feels, that you like? Can you tell me?”

“He doesn't beat me.” Madison knew the question should be an easy one, for she liked Terry so much, a better question would be, what didn't she like? “He's a nice person, and he takes care of his family.”

“Is there anything else? Anything that showed you how much he cared?”

“He didn't yell at me when he found out I cut. He took me to a doctor, made sure my cuts had stitches and that I had someone like you to help me. When I'm hurting, he's always trying to make the pain go away, and when I'm sad, he's sad, too. I think I make him sad a lot, but he still held my hand, even when the doctor sewed me up and Terry's face turned pale-- Terry stayed
with me." Madison paused. "He's always trying to get me to eat, even when I'm not very hungry, but he's just trying to take care of me. That's not his fault."

"In light of those good things, what would you say is your definition of love?" Carol asked again.

"Well," Madison wrung her hands together, "I guess it means that you want to care for someone, even if that person doesn't do a good job of caring for you in return. You just do it because you care. You're not doing it for anything in return, because... that's what love is."

For a long moment, Carol let Madison's thought sink in.

"Now that you know how Terry feels about you, how do you feel about Terry?"

"I was afraid you'd ask that."

Carol smiled. "It's a good question, isn't it?"

Madison nodded.

"Take your time," Carol said, and leaned an elbow on the armrest of her chair.

"I don't know how I feel. I just want it to go away, so I don't have to think about what to do. It makes me feel like I have to do something, like I owe him something now that I know."

"Hey, wait a minute." Terry stood by the desk, his arms folded. "You don't owe me anything, and especially-- ESPECIALLY not love. Not the kind of love we're talking about here. You just said a moment ago that I've done all this without expecting a thing in return. Right?"

Madison nodded.

"Then take a cue from yourself, and believe me when I say I don't want anything from you that doesn't come straight from your heart."

Head bowed, Madison peeked up to see Carol. "See what I mean? Isn't he wonderful?"

"She does that to me a lot," Terry told Carol. "Maybe it's not actually said, but that look-- she does that to me, and I gotta tell you, it gets my attention every time. That breathless look that says she's feeling a lot, and at that very moment. I get a lump in my throat and I don't know what to say. It's wonderfully disconcerting."
"Is that a good thing?" Madison asked and Carol smiled.

"You know," Carol spoke as though she were choosing her words before she said them, "one of Terry's goals was to make you happy. Does he?"

Madison nodded. "He makes me happy because he cares if I'm hurting, or hungry, or cold. He's always trying to help me, even when I don't think I'm helping him very much. I don't see how I can be. I'm always falling apart, and he's always trying to piece me back together."

"How does that make you feel?"

"Like I'm a burden."

Terry interjected. "You are not a burden."

"Yes, I am."

"Maddie, I love you. You are not a burden."

Hearing Terry say those words for the first time, those small words that said so much, Madison wanted to cry.

"I wish I could love you. I really wish I could."

Terry gave Carol a frustrated glance. "What am I supposed to say to that? She feels something for me-- I know she does. I can feel it. Sometimes it comes off her in waves. Maybe I'm naive, or have fallen victim to wishful thinking, but I know she cares. I just don't know how much."

"But I do care."

"Then tell me how much." Terry folded his arms. "I dare you."

"I-- I can't."

"If I were hungry, would you feed me?"

"Yes."

"If I had no other place to go, if I had no roof over my head, would you help me?"
"Of course."

"If my heart were breaking, would you do anything you could to make me happy?"

"Terry, that's not fair."

"Would you?"

She sucked in a cautious breath. "Is your heart breaking?"

At this, Terry laughed in defeat, shook his head and flopped into his chair. "I don't know what to do, either."

"If your heart was breaking, Terry, I would help you."

"I know you would."

"Are you sure you really love me? Are you sure it's love?"

"What do you think?"

The taste of blood made Madison realize she was biting her lip.

"Before you guilt-trip yourself into saying something you aren't feeling, Maddie, I'll remind you I don't want anything that doesn't come from your heart."

"What if it did?"

"Then I would be interested to hear it."

She squeezed her hands together, took a deep breath and stepped off that fearful cliff. "I love you, Terry."

Even though he must have sensed the words were coming, Terry's mouth fell open. He looked stunned, as if he'd thought she would never admit it.

"Do you need a moment to breathe?" Carol asked her, and Madison nodded.

They sat in silence until Madison couldn't take the quiet a moment longer. "What am I supposed to do?"
"What do you want to do?" Carol asked.

"I've wanted to kiss Terry for the longest time, but he won't-- not unless we're married."

Grinning, Terry reached over and took Madison's hand. "Don't be too hard on yourself. You've made enough progress for one day."

"But it's not enough." Madison pulled away. "I still don't know what to do about you."

Looking happy beyond belief, Terry kept grinning as though he didn't have a care in the world. Madison found it very annoying. Here she was, confessing the most difficult things, and Terry was having a good time.

"I'm not complaining," he sighed dreamily. "Carol, you heard that, didn't you? It wasn't my imagination? Maddie said she loved me, didn't she?"

"She did."

"But what am I supposed to do about it? Terry, you could tell me. What am I supposed to do?"

"Maddie, I can't tell you that anymore than Carol can."

"But I want to kiss you." Madison gulped hard. "In the worst possible way, Terry."

Terry leaned forward in his chair, looked at Madison with so much hope in his face, she wanted to burst into tears and never stop crying. "We can do something about that."

She shook her head. "I can't."

"Why?" he asked. "Is it because you don't trust me?"

"I trust you."

"But not with sex."

The earnest feeling in Terry's face was too much. She had to turn away.

"I love you, Maddie. I wouldn't hurt you."
"You wouldn't do it on purpose, but it would hurt." Madison smeared her eyes. "It always hurts."

"What does?" Carol asked gently. "Do you mean intercourse?"

Madison nodded. "But it's not just that. It's letting someone touch me. He's big and has all those muscles, and I don't have any."

A pained look reached Terry's eyes. "Maddie, I would never, in a million years, do anything to harm you, or touch you in a way that was against your will. Never. I swear before God, I would not."

They were talking about marriage. Her world was tipping over but Madison hung on for dear life and forced herself to keep going. There was too much at stake here to not talk about it. She feared if she walked away and gave herself time, she might never have the courage to try talking about it again. And if Terry loved her, and they weren't married, then he wasn't as happy as he should be. He wanted that, and she wished dearly she could be the person he needed her to be.

Taking a deep breath, Madison plunged back in. "What if I try, Terry, and I can't ever have sex with you?"

The question took him by surprise-- she could see it in that wide-eyed expression. The fact she was even willing to contemplate it, seemed to stun him.

"So long as you agree to try, then I can live with that."

"But you'll be sorry you're stuck with me."

"No, I won't be sorry, and I won't consider it as being stuck. I'll know you tried, and I'll do my best to make our marriage work, no matter what."

He'd said the word she'd been skirting around-- marriage-- and it nearly stopped her cold. She'd already known Terry wanted marriage, but it didn't seem to bother him to discuss that possibility with her. He was serious, and Madison realized so was she.

"But what if I can't have sex?"

"Then I'll deal with it." His hands grasped the air as though he were pleading with everything he had. "I don't need all the other stuff to be happy, Maddie, but I do need you."

There. He'd said it. Terry needed her.
"But you want children."

"So do you."

"But what if--"

"Maddie, I love you. I'm not going to throw you away if you can't have sex. I want the other things-- yes-- but I don't need them to be happy. I just need you."

A tear slipped past Madison's defenses, and she hurried to wipe it away. "What am I going to do, Carol?"

Even though his name wasn't Carol, Terry leaned forward in his chair to answer. He touched Madison's shoulder with so much intensity, it frightened Madison.

"Give me permission to ask."

"Ask what?"

"I think you know."

"I don't."

"Maddie, I want to ask you something that will forever change our lives. For better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, I want to ask you a question."

She gulped hard.

"I don't want you to cut, Maddie. I need that permission, I need to know you're going to be all right when I ask that important question."

Desperate, Madison turned to the therapist for an answer. "What should I do?"

Carol paused before answering. "That depends on you. What do you feel?"

Thoughts buzzed through Madison's head like bees warding off an attacker. If only she could calm down.
"Maddie," Terry spoke in a low, gentle voice, "you don't need to have an answer to my big question-- not right away. I only want permission to ask it. Do you understand? You don't need to give me a 'yes' or 'no.'"

If Terry was going to put it that way.... it sounded harmless enough.

"I guess it's all right." Madison wiped her cheek dry. "You can ask."

"You won't cut, will you? Not because of the question?"

She shook her head. "If I don't have to give you an answer, then I'll be okay."

"Are you sure?"

She nodded, gripped the edges of her cushioned chair, squeezed her eyes shut and waited for it. The big, important question.

"Thank you, Maddie." Terry sighed, made a sound with the coat laying across his lap and said nothing.

"Terry?"

"I'm still here. You can open your eyes."

She did, and he was still there, just as he had said.

"Do you mind if I talk to Carol now?" he asked. "When we came in, you got to go first, and now I'd like to talk about my problems."

"I know, but--"

"So I can go next?" he asked, and Madison nodded numbly. He glanced at his watch, winced and turned to Carol. "I realize your time is limited, so I'll just cut to the chase. Everything else can wait. In your professional opinion, when should I pop the question? How long do you think I should wait before I ask her?"

"I would assume anytime you're ready," Carol said, and looked to Madison.

Eager to get it over with, Madison nodded "yes" wildly, then squeezed her eyes shut and braced herself.
"That sounds reasonable. Well, if Maddie's done, I think I'm ready to go home. I have a lot to think about, and there's probably others waiting to get in to see you. It was kind of you to let us come, and talk like this."

Puzzled, Madison opened an eye and found Terry getting to his feet.

"I can't speak for Maddie, but this session has meant a lot to me. Do we still have an appointment for Thursday?"

"You do." Carol nodded, stood and extended a hand to Terry, then Madison. "If either of you need me in the meantime, call. It's what I'm here for. Madison, do you have my cell phone number?"

"No, but Terry has it."

"I want that number in your cell phone, okay? Night or day, if you need me, call. That goes for the both of you."

"I'll make sure she has it," Terry said, and helped Madison up from the chair and into her coat. "I'm going to take good care of this woman, you have my word on it. I'll even try not to overfeed her when she turns down food."

Despite her confusion, Madison found herself wanting to smile. What about the question? Had he forgotten, or maybe Terry had changed his mind and wasn't going to ask? It felt as if he were hurrying her from the office, but why? And what about the question?

"Take care," Carol said, and sat back down at her desk.

As Terry and Madison left the office, another patient came in. He didn't look anxious about having had to wait, or that he had been in any sort of an emergency, but it underscored the fact Carol was a busy psychiatrist. After seeing that, Madison felt a bit guilty for having taken up Carol's time, and was glad Terry had let Carol get to the next patient. But what about the question?

With a wave to Tom at the reception desk, Terry held open the entrance door for Madison. Wind and sunshine greeted her, the one pulling open her coat, the other lightly warming her face. The sounds of a busy street, the crisp smell of an autumn day, then the comforting safety of Terry's jeep as she climbed in. One sense followed another in sweet succession, but still she couldn't figure out Terry.
He was going to ask, wasn't he?

She watched as Terry got behind the wheel, shut the driver's side door, then started the engine.

"It's cold out," she said, hoping the comment might spark him into talking.

"Yes, it is." Terry pulled onto the street as she carefully watched his face. "Do you want the heater turned on?"

"No." She sighed, adjusted her seat belt and tried again. "Now that we're out of the office, I guess this is a good time for discussing things."

His eyes tracked the road, he changed lanes and came to a stoplight.

"Terry?"

"Huh?"

"I said, this is a good time for discussing things. Things that are important."

He nodded absently.

"Terry?" Madison folded her arms. "Terry, are you listening?"

The light turned green, the jeep moved through the intersection, and all the while Madison tried to detect any sign from Terry that he was even following the conversation. He didn't smile, didn't frown, but kept his eyes on the road and his mouth horrifyingly shut.

"Terry, I don't think you're listening to me."

"I'm sorry, Maddie, I was thinking. What was it you just said?"

Her loud sigh only got Terry to slide a glance at her, nothing more.

"Don't you want to discuss anything with me?" she asked. "Maybe ASK ME A QUESTION?" She all but shouted it, and Terry only shook his head.

"I have to think right now."
Her small huff got the tiniest of a lift of one of the corners of Terry's mouth.

So he had been listening, after all. Two could play at that game, and she decided to let the whole thing drop. She wouldn't ask, wouldn't even act as though she were waiting, and then they would see who was more desperate to get it over with-- him, or her.

It wasn't going to be her.

* * * *

Stunned quiet joy thumped in Terry's heart. She loved him. She loved him. Distracted thoughts raced through his brain at the speed of light. Hopes, dreams, it all came down to this one person who now loved him. He gripped the steering wheel and forced himself to focus. If he wasn't careful, the emotion of the moment would override all rational thought. The woman he loved, loved him in return. Wow. That knowledge was powerful stuff. He could fly to the moon and back on that, and still have enough left over to break into song.

No song. No moon flying, and no grinning ear to ear. He saw his reflection in the overhead mirror and tried for a blank look, one that wouldn't drive Maddie out the door of a moving vehicle. Years from now, (providing she eventually accepted his proposal), they would look back on this day and marvel.

So much for waiting to propose until she was ready to accept. He slid a glance at his passenger and saw her staring out the window, nervously chewing her bottom lip. For her sake, he couldn't hold off the proposal for long. She wouldn't answer right away, of course, and if she did, he prayed it wouldn't be to turn him down.

Please, God, don't let her answer at all if it's going to be "no." Of course, if she'll say "yes," later, then silence could still be good.

As home neared, Terry hoped Maddie wouldn't fall apart before he had a strategy worked out. He wondered if a ring should be involved. How about flowers? And maybe a box of chocolates? And while he was at it, how about a fifty page letter pleading her to marry him? Ah, he was a lost cause. He couldn't spout poetry, but for her, he'd be willing to try.

The moment Terry stopped the jeep in front of the house, Maddie got out and headed for the front door. He sensed she was... what was the right word? Annoyed? But he wasn't ready yet. He had to read up on the subject, figure out what was expected of a man at a time like this, then do his best not to make a mess of it. Women remembered things like that, and when she was old
and living out her golden years with (hopefully) him, he wanted it to be something she could remember with fondness.

As Terry opened the garage, he noticed the minivan and car were gone. He hoped it didn't mean John wasn't home. He had at least wanted to talk to John, maybe ask some questions about proposing, but then remembered John hadn't exactly gotten down on one knee to Izzy. John had told Izzy they were going to get married, and Izzy had been more than happy to go along with him. That guy. John had had it easy compared to what Terry was up against.

After putting the jeep away, Terry went to the house, opened the front door and prayed for wisdom. This was turning out to be an important day.

His heart fell a little when he found Maddie curled up on the living room couch with a blanket. She looked a bit squashed, as though someone had stepped on her and had forgotten to peel her off the bottom of their shoe. Even worse, she wouldn't meet Terry's eyes when he went to her, and tried to make sure she was comfortable.

"Do you need painkiller?" he asked, hoping to solicit a smile or at least something that didn't look so very close to tears.

She shook her head, sniffed, then pulled the blanket over her head.

He wasn't ready. What did she want him to do-- blurt it out? To Terry's way of thinking, that wasn't very romantic.

"Hi, Uncle Terry," Abby came into the living room with an armful of clothes. "You missed a great movie. Jake was laughing so hard, he choked on the popcorn and-- Why is Madison under the blanket? That is her, isn't it?" Abby shifted her load, stooped to lift a corner of the blanket and smiled at Maddie. "Are you all right under there?"

"Uh-huh."

"Okay, let us know if you need anything." Abby dropped the corner, and started for the hallway. "I was just taking this laundry to the bedroom. I'm trying to catch up on some housekeeping before Jake and the others come home."

"Speaking of that, is your dad home?" Terry followed Abby into the hall. "I didn't see the car or the minivan in the garage just now."
"The car had a leak, so Dad took it down to Louie's to have it looked at. All the kids are with Jake and Mom, buying warm clothes for Ricky. The weather in San Diego was mild, compared to here, and Ricky needs some heavy pants and shirts."

"Do you know when your dad is coming back?"

"Nope, he didn't say." Abby shouldered open the bedroom door. "Before you change the subject, what happened to Madison? What did you do to her?"

"I didn't do anything, and I wasn't trying to change the subject." Terry sighed, went to go sit on the edge of his old bed as Abby started to fold laundry. "A lot's been going on, and I was hoping to talk to your dad or mom."

"Do you mind if I ask for details, or is it none of my business?"

"It's okay, it's not a secret." Terry paired two matching socks. "Maddie is waiting for me to propose to her, and I'm waiting so I can first do some research."

"You're proposing?" Abby's mouth dropped open, she leaned across the mattress and gave Terry a squeezing hug. "I knew it was coming, I just knew it! Congratulations, Uncle Terry!"

"She hasn't said 'yes,'" Terry warned, and Abby let go and looked at him. "In fact, when I propose, she won't be giving me an answer right away, so this isn't a done deal. But Maddie does love me."

"Of course she does!"

Seeing Abby's confidence in the matter, Terry couldn't help smiling. "I need to get into the office and start researching how to ask someone to marry me. I'd been hoping your father could help with some advice."

"You could always call him." Abby stacked a somewhat neatly folded T-shirt. "And of course there's me. I could help."

"Thanks, but I think I'll wait for your parents to get home."

"If you're hunting for some ideas, I have a few." Abby grinned. "You could hide a note somewhere for Madison to find, or maybe hire a skywriter to write it out in white smoke across the sky."

"Abby, don't tease. I'm serious."
"So am I," she said excitedly. "You could do that. If for some reason she couldn't go outside and see it, you'd have to take a picture before the smoke dissipated. And of course there's all that wind over Lake Ontario, so it probably wouldn't last very long."

Terry stared at his niece.

"Or--" she slapped his shoulder-- "you could take her to IHOP, and squeeze syrup on her pancakes so it reads, 'Will you marry me?' Or maybe they could make up a cake and pop the question in icing. I don't know. I think you'd be better off sticking with the note."

"Thanks for trying." Terry patted her hand. "I'll think it over."

Leaving Abby to her clean laundry, Terry went to the office, and dropped into his desk chair to do some planning.

He needed to propose before Maddie decided to take up permanent residence under that blanket, but he didn't want it to be something she'd cringe over when she remembered it years from now. Whether she ever accepted him, or not, he wanted it to be nice. Something she'd like.

Opening his laptop, Terry tracked to a web browser. A quick search for marriage proposals gave him two million results. He skimmed the first page and scrolled as he went. Twelve Ways Not to Propose, Five Stupid Things to Never Say During a Proposal, One Hundred Ways to Get a Yes!, The Mega List of Romantic Tips for a Memorable Proposal, and the pièce de résistance-- an archive of over one thousand proposals with starred reviews to show success rates, along with integrated Facebook comments, tweets, and links to social media in case one of your friends had a better suggestion.


The pancake and syrup idea was beginning to look better and better with every panicked, information-overloaded minute. Maddie was under a blanket. He didn't have time to wade through all this. He needed the perfect idea, and he needed it now.

Shutting the laptop with a groan, Terry opened the top desk drawer for a bottle of antacid he kept when things at work weren't going well. Next to the bottle, he saw the new Bible he'd bought for Maddie. Smiling, he picked it up, and beneath it, he found the answer to his unsaid prayers. The surprise he'd ordered at the same time he'd purchased the Bible, and had never given her.

Such a gift had risks, though.
He didn't want Maddie's emotions to run away with her, like when she'd watched *Pride and Prejudice* then looked so pale the next morning. But maybe this wouldn't hurt her. It might even be good for her, and if it started to make things worse, he could always hide it from her until she was stronger.

This would go over well with Maddie. Terry was sure of it. She already knew about the Bible, so he couldn't surprise her with that, but this... this could work. His mind busily churning to keep up with his heart, Terry took out a yellow legal pad and got to work.

Abby had given him an idea.

* * * *

The problem with hiding under a blanket, was getting enough air. She made a breathing opening that faced against the couch so she could get some air without Terry seeing her. He knew she was here, but that didn't mean she had to remind him of it. If she hadn't needed to hide so badly, she'd have tried to brave Terry's silence out in the open.

He was going to ask, wasn't he? After all that talk in Carol's office, with him coaxing and making promises, she'd have thought he'd have proposed the moment they left the building.

Terry, please don't forget.

At least the couch felt soft, and the blanket was comforting. Through her cubby hole, she could see the back of the couch, for her back was to the living room and she wanted to keep it that way. Terry wouldn't intrude on her cubby as long as she didn't attract attention.

Soon, all the quiet hiding made her sleepy. After some time fighting it off, she drifted, then fell headlong into a deep nap.

The next moment she knew, she woke to the sounds of people coming into the house. She could hear coats, shopping bags, and Izzy telling the girls to tidy their room before dinner. In the kitchen, she heard someone getting to work, and remembered Jake had said he would make dinner for them that evening.

The front door opened again, and John's voice filled the room.

"I'm home," he called, then hushed when Izzy spoke in a barely audible whisper.
"Madison is sleeping."

"Sorry." John spoke in a loud man-whisper. "The car's been taken care of. For all the trouble it caused, it wasn't much. Hey, Terry. When'd you and Madison get back?"

"A few hours ago." Terry's voice came to a hush. "You get the car fixed?"

"Yup, and then Louie stood around and talked my head off until I said I had to go home. Man, that guy can talk."

"Is Maddie still asleep?"

"She is," Izumi shushed them, "so would you both lower your voices?"

"Could we speak in the office?" Terry asked, and the three of them moved out of Madison's earshot.

Her imagination chased after them, and she guessed Terry wanted to tell them that she'd said she loved him. But was he telling them he would propose?

She strained her ears, heard nothing but children in the hall but refused to come out of hiding. So what if they were talking about her? Terry had said the things they discussed in Carol's office were private, so she knew he wouldn't say anything off-limits. Problem was, she knew what had been said in the office, and even she didn't know what Terry was going to do.

Doors opened and closed in the hall, Abby told Ricky to pick up his toys before someone tripped over them.

Madison's hip ached. She shifted on the couch, winced when pain shot through her side. She'd held one position for too long, and now that she thought about it, her stitches were hurting. Wet misted her eyes. Terry had forgotten about her. He'd changed his mind and didn't know how to break it to her, and that's why he wasn't talking. That had to be it. As soon as she left the shelter of the blanket, John or Izzy would probably break the news to her. Maybe even tell her she had to leave.

If only her hip didn't hurt so much. She shifted again, paused when something funny sounded by her ear. A crinkling sound.
Frowning, she felt about the blanket, then the couch, and discovered something wedged into the cushion above her head. Madison pulled it out. It was a sheet of yellow paper folded in half. Maybe Jake or Abby had left this behind when they’d watched their movie.

Not thinking it would hurt if she took a look to find out, Madison opened it, and found a line of neat, handwritten print.

Please find me in the middle top cupboard, behind the party glasses.

What an odd note. What did it mean, "please find me"? Forgetting to stay in hiding, Madison sat up, pushed off the blanket and read it once more.

What cupboard? What party glasses? She got to her feet, struggled against the ache in her hip and slowly made her way to the kitchen. That was the only room in the house where glasses were kept.

Jake stood at the counter, pressing dough into a pie pan. He tossed a look to her over his shoulder and smiled. "Have a good rest?" he asked, and when she only nodded, he didn't press for more and kept working.

The middle cupboard. She followed the line of cupboards above the counter. Jake turned the pie pan as he went, not knowing that he stood in front of the middle cupboard. She waited, and when Jake turned to wash his hands in the sink, she made her move.

The cupboard opened with a squeak. Madison held her breath. Behind some long-stemmed crystal glasses, she could see something yellow. Without bumping into the crystal, she took it out.

It was another folded piece of paper.

Closing the cupboard, she took her discovery into the living room, opened it and found another line of print, written in the same neat handwriting.

Please look for me behind the TV.

What did these mean? And who on earth could have written such a thing?

Deciding she had nothing to lose by checking behind the TV, Madison crossed the carpet to the large television. It was very dark back there, but a patch of yellow had her gasping in excited joy. She'd found another note.
She unfolded the paper, and read the same handwriting as on the others.

*I'm hiding in the garage door. Please find me.*

The garage? It didn't make any sense, but then, neither had the other notes.

Taking a deep breath, Madison went to the front door and paused when Terry strode through the living room, on his way to the kitchen.

"Put on your coat," he said, and disappeared into the kitchen.

Did she have to? She was only stepping outside, to look around the garage. Quietly, she turned the door handle, sneaked outside, then softly shut the front door behind her. This wouldn't take long.

As she made her way to the garage, Madison shivered against the sharp, cold wind. It had grown colder outside, and a strong gust had her hoping the note hadn't blown away. If it had, she'd never figure out why those notes were hiding everywhere, just waiting for someone like her to come along.

The garage was shut, but the handwriting had said in the door, not inside the building. She tracked the edge where the door nearly met the pavement, followed up one side and just a little above eye-level, she found it. Another folded piece of yellow paper, wedged snugly so the wind wouldn't carry it away.

Hands trembling, she opened the note.

*Please search for me in the office bathroom, under the wastebasket. Hurry, before someone throws me out!*

Oh no. She'd better hurry before someone thought it was trash.

Fighting the wind, she went back into the house, grateful no one had seen her go out with no coat.

Her teeth still chattered a bit as she went into the hall, then paused outside the office door. The door stood open, and inside, Izzy and John sat in matching chairs beside the exercise equipment, talking. Whatever Terry had wanted in the kitchen, he'd already found it and returned to the office, for there he sat, reading from a laptop on his desk. She hoped they were done talking.
about her, that whatever they’d decided about her could at least wait until she made it to the bathroom.

She was dying of curiosity to know what the next note said.

Sucking in a deep breath, Madison stepped inside and Terry didn't even look up from his laptop. She edged around his desk, past Izzy and John as they discussed something about the triplets, and made a beeline for the bathroom.

The instant she made it inside, she shut the door. Grateful no one had stopped her to talk, Madison breathed a sigh of relief. She needed more acetaminophen, but at least the pain kept her from thinking too seriously about cutting.

Thankfully, the wastebasket still stood where it always did in the corner of the bathroom. She carefully knelt, picked up the basket and looked underneath. Nothing. Her heart sank. She searched the floor, behind the clothes hamper, under the clothes hamper, but could find no yellow paper folded in half. It surprised her when disappointed tears stung her eyes. The strain of the day had become too much, and now she'd lost the next note.

Slumping onto the floor, Madison wiped her eyes on the shoulder of her sweater. The sweater that was Terry's. Though crying wouldn't do any good, at least in here, she could get it out of her system without anyone finding out. On her hands and knees, she crawled to the toilet paper holder and tore off several sheets. She blew her nose, wadded the paper and tossed it into the wastebasket.

A thought came to her. Maybe someone had found the note, and had thrown it away. The note had said to hurry. Maybe she hadn't hurried fast enough.

She sniffed back more tears, and crawled to the wastebasket for one more try.

Her wadded tissue sat on top, but she dug underneath and nearly shouted with excitement when she found a folded piece of paper. Madison's whole body trembled as she unfolded it, and read the handwriting.

*I'm hiding in the top drawer of Terry's desk. Please come get me, and I'll be yours.*

Though she had no idea what that meant, it sounded good. She found herself smiling as she dried her tears. Oh, she was a mess.
Getting to her feet, Madison went to the mirror and braved her reflection to see if her eyes were red. They were, but after washing her face with cold water, they didn't look so bad. Drying off with a soft towel, she went to the closed door and listened.

"Maddie?"

She jumped.

"Are you all right in there?" Terry asked through the closed door.

"Yes."

"Okay, then." Hesitation sounded in his voice, but Terry didn't ask anything else and Madison breathed in relief.

Her heart had nearly stopped, but she was all right.

One more check in the mirror gave her enough courage to open the door and peek out. No one would ever know she'd been crying, or crawling around the floor looking for mysterious notes. Stupid woman. Someone was probably playing a practical joke on her, or maybe those notes were intended for someone else.

Fighting a bad case of nerves, Madison stepped into the office. At John's desk, John and Izzy were reading something on John's laptop screen, while Terry sat at his own desk reading something from his own laptop.

There was an awful lot of reading going on.

No one looked up as she started for Terry's desk. The top drawer, the note had said, but which top drawer? There were two, on either side of Terry. Whatever Terry was doing, it seemed to own his attention completely. He kept reading as Madison inched closer behind his back.

"You feeling better?" he asked without turning around.

She nearly jumped out of her skin. How had Terry known she was behind him? Did he have eyes in the back of his head?

Madison fought back a wildly beating heart. "I'm better."
"Good." Terry kept reading, not looking up from his laptop and Madison took another step closer to the desk.

Since she was closer to the right drawer, she decided to look there first. Holding her breath, she reached for the handle, started to pull out the drawer when Terry's head turned. He saw her hand, and looked up to frown at her.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"I-- I--" she couldn't find the right words.

"Is this desk yours?"

"No."

He paused, looked at her longer and alarm came to his eyes.

"Have you been crying?"

"I'm all right."

"I didn't ask if you were all right, I asked if you've been crying." Not waiting for an answer, Terry got up and gave her that look that meant he was kicking himself again. "I didn't mean to make you cry. If I have, I'll never forgive myself."

"I'm okay, honest I am." The words didn't sound very honest, so she tried it another way. "I guess I cried a little, but I'm all right."

While Terry apologized for making her cry, Madison strained to glimpse the drawer without him noticing.

"Come on, I'm taking you back to the couch." Terry tried to lead her from the office, but Madison couldn't find it in her to budge. Not even an inch. "Maddie?"

She wrung her hands, glanced at the desk and wished the drawer would open on its own.

"Are you coming?" Terry asked, and Madison shook her head, "no." "So you just plan on standing there?"

She nodded, wishing the gleam that had come to Terry's eyes would go away.
He lingered by the door. "Are you sure?"

She nodded, and Terry came back to his desk.

"Suit yourself, but I still think you should be on the couch." Terry went back to his reading, and Madison prayed she'd have enough courage to open that drawer.

It wasn't like she was snooping, or anything. The note had said it was all right, and had even said something there would be hers if she found it. She looked to John's desk and saw Izzy and John still reading.

At least they weren't looking. Neither was Terry, and Madison steeled herself to reach for the drawer handle. At any moment, his eyes could fall on her, but they didn't, and she tugged out the drawer.

It gave a low squeal, but Terry kept reading.

Trying not to make any sudden movements, Madison leaned forward to peek inside. It held all kinds of envelopes and papers, and for a sickening moment, she thought she had the wrong one. Then she saw it-- a yellow piece of folded paper tacked to the cover of a thick, hardbound book.

Curious, and giddy with excitement, she pulled it out, looked timidly back to Terry and thanked God when he didn't seem to notice.

She slid the drawer closed, casually made her way to the office door with her treasure in hand. No one said a word as she left, and when she reached the hall, she limp-ran into the living room to collapse onto the couch. She'd made it, she'd actually made it!

Her breathing came in big gulps, her hand trembled as she pulled the note off the book's cover. She opened it, and read the words.

*Maddie, will you marry me?*

Her world held still. Absolutely still. She reread the words, and realized who had written all those notes. Terry. She stared at the words, unable to believe they said what they did.

"Will you?"

Her chin darted up, and she watched Terry slowly come into the room.
"Don't answer until you're ready, but please, Maddie--" He came to the couch, got down on one knee and pulled something from his pocket-- "please, marry me." He reached for her hand, and touched it so gently, she nearly went dizzy from nervous pleasure. Terry pressed something warm and smooth into her palm. "Izzy gave this to me as a stand-in. It's something you can hold onto until I get you something special of your own."

Dazed, Madison's mind refused to work. She drew back her hand, looked at her palm and saw a shiny gold ring.

"If you're about to say 'no,' then please don't say anything at all. I'm begging you, Maddie. We'll talk to Carol, and you'll have time to get used to the idea. But please, don't say 'no.' Not right now."

The world misted, and Madison was helpless to fight the tears.

"Please, don't cry-- I didn't mean for that to happen. I only wanted to make you happy."

Gasp...
She caressed the back of his head and he breathed out a long, long sigh.

"Think about it, but don't give me an answer yet. I'm afraid of what you'll say." Terry rubbed his cheek against hers, whispered in her ear. "I can wait. I've waited all my life for you, and I can wait longer." He planted a kiss on her forehead, pulled his arms away as though it were tearing him apart to let her go.

"I'm sorry, Terry."

"No-- don't. Don't talk like you're turning me down." He sucked in a sharp breath. "When you're ready to give me an answer, either put on the ring, or give it back. I don't think I could bear to hear you tell me 'no.'" He started to get to his feet. "Think about it, Maddie. Talk to Carol, pray about it, then decide what to do about the ring."

He stood, helped her up, then moved away as she looked at him.

Her heart cleaved to Terry.

"Think about it, Maddie."

She nodded, opened her hand and stared at the gold band with the smooth white stone.

"That's a pearl." Terry sounded so helpless. "It's Izzy's birthstone. John gave that to her a few Junes ago, for her birthday."

Not knowing what to say, Madison nodded, and fist her hand around the precious ring.

Someone moved in the hall behind Terry. Following her gaze, Terry turned and waved.

"It's all right, you can come in now. I asked her."

Wearing big smiles, John and Izzy came into the living room. They didn't ask what Madison had said to Terry's question, and Madison guessed Terry had already told them the answer would come later.

"Is it all right to say congratulations?" John wondered, and Izzy bumped her husband in the chest with an elbow. "I didn't actually say, congratulations, I only asked if it was okay to. There's a difference."
"Thanks." Terry smiled good-naturedly and folded his arms, as though he wasn't sure what to do with himself. "I'll let you know when we have any news to share."

"Does the ring fit?" Izzy asked.

"I don't know yet, she hasn't tried it." Terry sucked in a breath as Jake came from the kitchen, and Abby, from the hall. "Before anyone asks Maddie what she said--"

"Abby told me about your treasure hunt," Jake smiled. "If you can wait for an answer, then so can we. How did she like the prize?"

"It's a nice ring," Madison said, opening her hand to make sure it was still there. The ring wasn't hers, and she didn't want to lose it.

"No, I meant the prize at the end of the treasure hunt. What you found in Terry's drawer."

With a chuckle, Terry rocked back on his heels and looked genuinely happy. "I posted the last note on its cover, but I don't think she's opened it yet."

Puzzled, Madison stared at Terry. There was more?

The group waited as she went back to the couch, and picked up the book. In all the excitement, she'd forgotten it. It was hardbound, and fancy looking with gold letters on the cover and gold trimmed pages. She sat down on the couch and felt the textured cover with the impossibly decorative words she couldn't read.

"Maddie," Terry came to her, "do you need more acetaminophen?"

"Yes, please."

"The treasure hunt didn't hurt you, did it?" He looked on the verge of kicking himself, so Madison touched his hand.

"You're taking good care of me, Terry."

The answer seemed to satisfy him, and he went into the kitchen as everyone began to disperse. Izzy gave Madison an excited smile, glanced at the book in Madison's lap, then went into the kitchen with Jake and Abby. John went to sit in the recliner, while sounds of the children playing in the triplets' bedroom drifted down the hall.
Life felt really, really good. Madison cozied into the blanket to examine her book. She'd never held one so thick before, not one that wasn't a Bible or a dictionary. It was at least three inches thick, and when she opened it, the print was small. A soft red ribbon was attached to the binding to use as a bookmark, and when she turned the page, she saw a black and white drawing of a woman wearing a long dress, and a man with a tall black hat. It reminded her of the way the people in the *Pride and Prejudice* movie were dressed.

She closed the book to look at the fancy cursive letters printed in gold on the cover. All the flourishes got in the way of easily making out the words, but with some effort, she could read them.

*The Complete Novels of Jane Austen*

Madison's heart began to race. Jane Austen. She was the one who wrote the book her favorite movie was based upon, wasn't she? *Was it in here? Was Pride and Prejudice in here?* She opened the heavy volume, saw more drawings, then flipped to the front where it listed the included novels.

There it was. The real life book. She could read it, and hold it, and Terry had said it was hers.

She looked up to see him watching from the kitchen doorway, a glass of water in one hand, and pills in the other.

"Do you like it?" he asked.

"Oh, Terry." She set aside the book, pushed back the blankets, and went to give him a huge hug around the neck. "Thank you. Thank you ever so much."

He groaned contentedly, and when she pulled back, she saw his smile.

"I thought you'd like it. Here--" he handed her the pills, then the glass of water. "If that book starts making you feel like the movie did, to the point you have to cut yourself, I need you to promise me you'll say something. I'll hide the book if I have to, but--"

"Oh, please don't." Madison wiped her mouth, and gave him back the glass. "I won't cut. Please, don't hide it."

"Promise me you'll say something?"

She nodded, bit her bottom lip as a smile reached Terry's eyes.
"You're quite a person, Maddie."

"You are too," she smiled, and darted back to the blanket. She could hardly wait to start reading.

The world around Madison hummed with the noise of children, the busyness of dinnertime, the grownup talk she didn't bother following as she lost herself in a sea of bliss. The world she read was from another time, but the people were oh-so real.

As she turned a page, Madison remembered what had been written on the last note:

_I'm hiding in the top drawer of Terry's desk. Please come get me, and I'll be yours._

The playful words had an undertone of plea in them, one Madison couldn't dwell on without painful longing.

More than the book, Terry had been offering himself.

Unable to think about it without dissolving into more tears, Madison tried to let the characters pull her back into the novel. They had their problems, too, but life was so much easier when the problems weren't your own.

* * * *

Since Maddie had gotten so involved with the book he'd given her, Terry let her eat dinner on the living room couch. They had Jake's cherry pie for dessert, and everyone came away with a satisfied belly.

After dinner, Terry and John worked in the office to resolve a security problem for a client, and when they reemerged several hours later, they found AJ and the children had already gone to bed. A light shone in the living room though, and they went to see who was still up.

"What's going on?" John asked, as the men came into the room. "It's after midnight, isn't it?"

"Please, don't remind me," Izzy said with a wide yawn. She absently flipped a page through her magazine, then nodded to Maddie. "She begged to finish the chapter she's on, and I didn't have the heart to say 'no.' That was forty minutes ago."

"Maddie?" Terry waited for Maddie to notice him. He said her name a second time, and she finally tore herself away from the book.
"Hi, Terry."

"Hi, yourself. It's way past your bedtime."

Maddie smiled. "Izzy said I could finish this chapter, but then I will. I promise."

"Izzy said that was over forty minutes ago."

A pretty shade of pink tinted Maddie's cheeks. She was so beautiful, the sight of her made Terry ache all the way to his heart. "I guess I'm not very fast."

"How are you enjoying Pride and Prejudice? Are you able to follow the story?"

It was obvious she was, and the sparkle in Maddie's eyes did his heart good. "As soon as you get to a quitting point, turn out the light so Izzy can sleep."

Maddie nodded, went back to the book but called out as Terry started for the hall.

"Thank you, Terry."

"You're very welcome," he smiled.

Exhausted from a very full day, Terry turned into the hallway and passed the closed door to his old room. AJ and the children were sensible, they were sleeping, but not everyone else. Terry wanted to collapse in the master bedroom and get some shut-eye before the last of his brain cells screamed and gave up the ghost.

"Terry?" Maddie called again from the living room, and Terry hurried back to see what she wanted.

John was kissing Izzy good night, and Maddie looked embarrassed for having called out so loudly. After all, there were sleeping people in the house.

"What is it?" Terry asked.

Maddie bit her bottom lip. "I love you, Terry."

Her shyness, the genuine way she had said those words, knocked Terry's heart for a loop.
"I love you, too, Maddie."

She smiled, went back to her book, and Terry was left to shake off some of that happy delirium.

He felt like taking out a billboard and announcing it to the world—Maddie loves Terry Davis! He wanted to give her the world, for she had given him that, and more, with those few small words. Sometimes, the smallest words can make the biggest difference, and it had made all the difference for Terry.

As Terry lay awake in bed that night, with Ricky snoring softly beside him, Terry couldn't help but marvel. What a miracle today had been, what an absolute miracle.

Terry breathed in, breathed out, thanked God and closed his eyes to dream of Maddie.

"O LORD of hosts, blessed is the man [and woman] that trusteth in Thee."
~ Psalm 84:12 ~
Chapter Twenty-seven
The Strong of Heart

"Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer."

~ Psalm 19:14 ~

Dreams wore away at Madison. They took a little here, a little there, like waves carrying away earth as they weathered a helpless shore. She wanted to move, but had no legs, wanted to scream but had no voice. Even now, she knew they were only dreams. They had to be, or else Izzy wouldn't keep shaking her to ask if she was all right.

"Open your eyes." Izzy shook as Madison blinked and Izzy's face came into view. "Are you in pain? Do you want me to get Terry?"

"I'm... okay."

"You don't sound okay." The dim glow of the night-light wasn't enough to hide the concern in Izzy's face. "I know I haven't been your roommate for very long, but this is the first night I've had to wake you from bad dreams. Do you get them often?"

Not wanting to answer, Madison gave a noncommittal shrug. Honestly, she didn't usually get this many in one night. Of course, she also didn't usually sleep this close to someone who could wake her before the bad dream turned into a full-blown nightmare. So maybe that explained it.

And yes. Madison was not stupid. She knew the man sleeping in the master bedroom down the hall might have something to do with it. Her insides screamed that she was setting herself up for trouble. Only an absolute idiot loved a man.

Pain radiated from her palms and she found she'd been sleeping with her hands balled into tight fists. Her nails had dug hard into her skin and she wondered if she was bleeding.

As Madison tried to open her fingers, Izzy seemed to understand and took her hand.

"Let me see if I can help." Izzy pried the fingers open, turned the hand into the night-light then closed her palm over Madison's. "The skin's not broken, so that's a mercy. If I let you go back to sleep, do you think you'll stop whimpering?"
Wet gathered in Madison's eyes as Izzy un-fisted the other hand. She'd been whimpering? How pathetic could she get? And in front of Izzy?

"Now, now," Izzy patted Madison's cheek, gave her a kind smile that had Madison smiling through some freshly shed tears, "if you need me, I'll stay up with you until the dreams go away. Are you cozy enough?" Izzy smoothed the top comforter, pulled it up around Madison's shoulders then leaned around the couch and adjusted the hood to the night-light so it shone just a bit brighter.

"Thank you," Madison said quietly.

"Do you mind if I talk?" Izzy asked, and Madison shook her head.

"I remember once when Debbie had a bad dream-- a nightmare really, and she couldn't bring herself to close her eyes and go back to sleep. John was away on a business trip in Japan at the time, and the girls were missing him terribly. They were only two years old, and it was late at night and Debbie was too afraid to sleep in case her nightmare came back. I remember Terry carried Debbie to the rocking chair, held her like a baby and sang 'Jesus Loves Me' until she fell asleep. With Terry to watch over her, the nightmare didn't stand a chance." Izzy sighed, and squeezed Madison's hand. "I remember thinking those girls were so blessed to have Terry in their lives."

Calm settled over Madison. She felt safer somehow, and when Izzy asked if she could sleep without whimpering now, Madison felt she could, even though she hadn't remembered whimpering in the first place.

"Please, God," Izzy prayed as she took both Madison's hands, "don't let the bad dreams come back. Let her rest tonight. In Jesus' name, amen." Izzy brushed the hair from Madison's eyes, then tucked her in. "Try to get some sleep."

"Thank you, Izzy." Madison nestled into the blankets, reached for the book that had been pushed off to one side, and hugged it close. As she drifted off, her mind held the warm image of Terry as he rocked Debbie and quietly sang the lullaby.

* * * *

Dusky light filtered through the living room curtains the next time Madison stirred. Not far away, Izzy stood folding blankets, looking rested and like someone who knew who she was and what had to be done. Madison wished she could be like that. She admired such confidence.
Izzy must’ve sensed she was being watched, for she turned, and smiled at the couch.

"I'm sorry to see you're up. Since you've had such a rough night, I was hoping to let you sleep awhile longer."

"Sorry I was so much trouble."

"Nonsense." Izzy stacked the blankets. "I'm just glad I was there to wake you whenever you had a bad dream. The house is quiet, isn't it? Looks like we're the first ones up, this morning."

As Izzy let out the air before folding the mattress and setting it aside for the day, Madison propped her knees under her blanket and opened the new book. The red ribbon made it easy to find where she'd left off, and though she was eager to dive back in, the shiny item under her pillow wanted to be looked at again. She could almost hear it begging to come out and be held.

The moment Izzy went into the kitchen, Madison pulled out the golden circle and held it in her hand. Strange that such a tiny thing could be so very important.

It probably hadn't been such a good idea to give Terry permission the way she had. Now that he'd actually proposed, she had to do something about it. Which now more than ever, still left her feeling like she needed to do something about Terry, in general. In short, things hadn't gotten any better since she'd gone to see Carol that second time to ask what to do.

Madison wondered how she'd managed to get herself into such a frightening fix, and with the help of a therapist, no less.

There were a few ways to get out of it that came to mind, things she could do that normal women like Emily would never think to do, to save their lives.

First, she could run. Not that she had anywhere to go, but running away had to be better than a lifetime of sex and slavery.

Second, she could get a fatal disease and die and then Terry couldn't marry her. Of course, the most fatal thing around here that was catching was the flu, and even then, it seemed to be slowly going away.

Third, she could choose to not marry Terry. That would mean she'd actually have to turn him down-- something he'd told her he didn't think he could bear. She hoped Terry had meant that in a figurative way, like not being able to bear the flu or a toothache.
Then there was ugly choice number four. Marry him, try very briefly to have sex, then claim she
couldn't; he'd have to accept it and that would be that. They'd be married and Terry would be
stuck.

Madison groaned. Terry didn't deserve any of those choices. He didn't deserve her. He didn't
deserve Emily, either, but he didn't deserve a forever messed up loony like herself. She stuffed the
ring under the couch with her notebook, turned back to Jane Austen and stared again at the
words. If only her life wasn't hers, and she could be someone else. Anyone else, so long as she
wasn't her, and then Terry could marry that woman and everything would be fine. Normal
people didn't have problems, they just sailed through life without having to think too hard
about stuff Madison had to concentrate fiercely on, just to figure out even a little.

A door opened in the hall. She could hear men talking, a little boy in the background, then
moments later Terry strode into the living room dressed in slacks and a pullover sweater. His
brown hair was lightly messed and looking like he'd just pulled on that sweater. The sight of him
made Madison go weak inside. He looked good, the way food made you feel when you saw it on
TV and you hadn't had anything to eat in days.

"Hey there, beautiful." Terry's lopsided grin had more confidence to it than usual, and it made
her want to scoot back further into her blanket so she could hide. "I see you're getting an early
start on your book." He came to the couch, bent to get a look at something. "Did you sleep
well?" he asked absently.

"Did you?" she asked, not wanting to answer the question.

"I did all right." Hands in his pockets, Terry leaned over the couch, trying to get a better look at
her book for some reason.

"You too, Terry?" Izzy laughed as she came into the living room. "I would've thought you'd be
sleeping in, this morning."

"Yeah, well..." he sighed, flashed a tired smile at Izzy before turning his eyes back at the book,
"falling asleep wasn't as hard as staying asleep. I kept waking up."

"I hope you weren't having nightmares." Izzy moved the folded bedding off to one side of the
room. "Madison had one bad dream after another, and I had to keep waking her. Are John and
Ricky up? I might as well start breakfast if everyone's awake." As Izzy spoke, Ricky trudged into
the room in his PJs and gave his grandma a sleepy grin. "Good morning, Sweetheart," Izzy said,
and scooped the boy up in a big hug. "Ready for some breakfast?"
Terry frowned. "She had bad dreams?"

"I'm afraid she did." Izzy put Ricky down, ruffled the boy's hair and started for the hall. "Each time Madison cried in her sleep though, I woke her and she finally had a good stretch of rest. Girls?" Izzy disappeared into the hall, and Madison could hear Izzy opening the triplets' door. "Time to get up, girls."

Terry looked to Madison. "You had nightmares?"

"So did you."

"No, I said I had trouble sleeping. I didn't say a word about nightmares."

"Neither did I. Izzy said that." Madison dearly hoped God didn't consider that a lie. It was true, she hadn't told Terry they were nightmares. Exactly.

Frowning more deeply, Terry glanced back at the book.

"They were bad dreams, though, weren't they?"

She was forced to nod "yes."

A door in the hall opened, and moments later John sauntered through on his way to the kitchen. He, too, was dressed, though unlike Terry, he'd bothered to run a comb through his blond hair.

"Good morning," John smiled to Madison. "Any news to announce yet?"

"John--" Izzy gave her husband a look as she came into the living room with the girls, and John ducked into the kitchen as Izzy pushed in after him.

With a sigh, Terry lingered over the book Madison held, and she wondered why all the curiosity over Jane Austen. Maybe he'd never read her before.

Then it hit her. The ring. He was getting a good look at her hand.

"Breakfast," Izzy called from the kitchen, and the triplets and Ricky scampered off in a mad dash of feet and giggles.

"Maddie, the reason I had trouble staying asleep--" Terry paused as Jake made his way through the living room in crisp blue jeans and a bright red flannel shirt.
His head slightly bowed, Jake gave the impression of someone who knew he was intruding. "Morning," Jake said, a smile softly playing around the corners of his mouth. Jake pushed through and into the kitchen while sounds of breakfast filled the house.

Turning his back to the kitchen, Terry lowered to a near-whisper. "I kept thinking about you, Maddie, and I--"

"Hey, Uncle Terry. Good morning, Madison." Abby strolled through the living room as she bound her long black hair in a bright scrunchy. "My guys don't have a fever this morning, and neither do I. Jake didn't even feel nauseous when he woke up. Isn't that great?"

"That really is, I'm glad you're all feeling so well." Terry smiled, nodded to Abby as Abby went into the kitchen. Terry rubbed his forehead and looked all cute and handsome and uncomfortable as he tried to pick up where he'd left off. "Once I started thinking about you, I had a hard time stopping. It's like this is too good to be true, but this is real, Maddie. This is going to work. You'll see."

With a sigh, Madison looked down at her hands-- she didn't know for sure which one wore the ring, but knew it didn't matter for she'd never put it on to let him know she'd marry him. To her this all seemed like a lost cause.

"Do we have to have sex, Terry?"

"Man." Terry glanced at the kitchen, shook his head and paled. "Could you speak a little lower? My family's in the next room."

"Do we?" She grabbed his wrist, tugged his hand and he took a seat on the edge of the couch. "Please, Terry--"

"Whisper," he pleaded, and she nodded.

"I can't do it, Terry. Not ever. I could promise I'd try like you asked, but then you'd be stuck with me when it didn't work and that's not fair so couldn't we just not try?"

He looked flustered. "What?"

"Terry, do we have to have sex?"

He held up both hands. "Stop. Please. After breakfast, we'll take a drive, take a walk-- take a hike-- go somewhere-- anywhere but here, and talk about this. Okay?"
She nodded.

"Let's just stay calm and not panic." He took a deep breath and held it for the longest time.

"I'm sorry, Terry."

"We haven't decided anything, Maddie." He rubbed his face with both hands. "We agree not to talk about this at the breakfast table, right?"

"Right."

"That's good." Terry got up, ran a hand through his hair and started for the kitchen. "I shouldn't have sat on your bed while you're still in it. I need more distance than that."

She didn't want to think too hard about what that meant. She hurried out from under all her blankets, put on the robe and went to go use the office bathroom. If Terry was willing to consider not trying at all, then she wanted to talk about it before he changed his mind.

As Madison washed her hands at the bathroom sink, someone knocked on the door.

"It's Izumi. May I come inside?"

"Uh-huh." Madison turned, saw the towels draped over Izzy's arm as she came into the bathroom then shut the door.

"Before you change for the day, it's time you had a shower. Would it be all right if I led you through the master bedroom, or do you need Terry for that?"

"A shower?"

"It's been a while," Izzy smiled, "and it'll help your wounds heal. Come on, I'll get you through the master bedroom, then you can have that large bathroom all to yourself."

Oh no. Arms hugging herself, Madison wondered if she could still run away. Was that option still there?

Izzy held out a hand, smiled when Madison didn't take it. "Do you want me to get Terry?"

"I can't."
"Not even for Terry?"

"I-- I can't."

"You could close your eyes."

"Please, Izzy. I don't stink that bad, do I?"

"Let me talk to Terry." Izzy left the bathroom while Madison hugged herself and tried hard not to touch her stomach. She tried hard.

A few minutes later, someone knocked on the door and Madison jumped.

"Maddie? It's Terry. Are you dressed? May I come in?"

"I'm dressed." She was in her PJs and robe, but she was dressed. She braced herself as Terry opened the door. She didn't smell that bad. She'd sniffed her armpits and things weren't so bad she had to go through the master bedroom.

"So." Terry came inside while Izzy kept behind him with the towels. "It's for your own good, Maddie."

"You're not going to force me to get clean, are you?"

He gave a "Oh, come on, give me a break" kind of look, and it made her smile. Kind of. "You'll shut your eyes tightly, and I'll get you to the bathroom safe and sound, just like before."

"But--"

He nodded to the door. "Get your clothes."

"But, Terry--"

"You trust me to get you there safely, don't you?"

"Yes, I do." She stared down at the tiles. "I still can't go into that bedroom with you, though."

"Why not?"
Madison edged her chin up long enough to give Terry what she hoped was a hard look. "Not while we're fighting over what to do about you-know-what."

"Ouch." He gave a hurt half smile but held out his hand anyway. "We're not fighting, and besides, that other talk has nothing to do with this. I may be a man, but you need a shower, plain and simple."

He was a man, all right, but this wasn't plain and it sure wasn't simple. It didn't feel that way to her. She was going into enemy territory with, well, with one of the enemy.

"Come on, I'm getting old." Terry beckoned to her as though he didn't have the time to wait while she made up her mind to take the few needed steps with him to the master bathroom.

She struggled not to take his hand. She tried, and startled herself when she did.

He gave her fingers a quick squeeze. "Get your clothes."

He waited as she picked out a clean shirt, some jeans, then privately stuffed some underthings into the wad.

Retaking his solid hand, Madison followed Terry, and Izzy followed behind Madison.

They made their way down the hall, and before they even came to the dreaded bedroom, Madison squeezed her eyes shut. He must have seen she was prepared, for he didn't say anything, didn't give her warning, but kept going until she felt the bathroom tiles beneath her socked feet and heard him say it was all right to look.

"You made it," he said, and shut the door as he left.

Then Izzy came in with the towels, and helped Madison to clean her stomach the way the doctor had said. By the time Terry was called back, Madison was dressed and smelling like citrus shampoo and clean soap. Clean didn't only smell good, it felt good.

Squeezing her eyes so tightly shut it hurt, Madison clung to Terry's hand and he led her back through the awful place.

"You can look now."

When she did, she found him smiling.
"Everyone's had their breakfast but you," Terry said, and tugged Madison toward the kitchen.

He watched as she ate her cereal, made sure she at least gave her toast a few nibbles before giving up, and cleared his throat when she forgot to drink her calcium-fortified milk. She just didn't feel very much like eating right now. Her milk mustache was hardly dry when he took her by the hand and led her into the living room.

"Terry, about our fight--"

"I wish you wouldn't call it that." He brought her to the couch, sat her down and she noticed Izzy had put away all the bedding. "We're not having an argument, Maddie. We're just working it out, that's all. But we'll get to that later."

From the armchair, Jake did something with a large pad of paper.

"Here, I've been wanting to give you this for a while." Terry placed a leather book with a rich burgundy cover on her lap. "Besides the fact it's not my old Bible, it's just like mine, and if you take good care of it, it'll last just as long." He sat down beside her, opened the Bible to the first page where he had written something in the neat handwriting she now recognized as his.

For Madison
From Terry, with all my love

"I've been highlighting verses, some passages I thought you might like. I know you said you enjoed that about my old Bible."

She traced a finger over his words, looked at Terry and saw him swallow hard.

"You want to go for that walk now?" he asked.

She nodded, and carefully set it on the end table where Izzy had placed the volume of Jane Austen. Her treasures were multiplying so fast it amazed her. This was so much more than she had ever owned while with the Dragon.

* * * *

An early October sky spread over their heads as Terry took Madison outside. He'd bundled her into a coat, had borrowed a scarf and mitts from Izzy and hoped that would be enough to keep Maddie warm. The wind was sharp, but they were together and he felt they could brave anything.
Anything but maybe this discussion.

"Are you sure you're up to this?" he asked.

Blonde hair flew behind her, but she nodded and stayed close to his side as they slowly made their way around the house toward the beach.

"Do we have to have sex, Terry?"

"I've got to hand it to you--" he let out a small laugh that sounded more frightened than he cared to admit--"you certainly don't beat around the bush."

"Please, Terry."

"Did you like the Bible?" He turned, saw the question had taken her off balance.

"Yes, I did. Thank you."

She sometimes had a simple way of conversing, of making him feel special, of making him feel he was the only one in the world she was speaking to. Of course he was. He was the only one out here-- who else would she be talking to? Yup, he was a lost cause.

"Do we have to, Terry?"

He stooped, picked up a few smooth stones and looked out over the bay. This was no good. Flinging the rocks at the water, Terry headed toward the road and trusted Maddie to follow.

A little exercise would do her good.

A backward glance and he slowed his pace until she caught up and was able to stay at his side without breathing too hard.

"Terry?"

He decided not to answer.

"Maybe we should just go back to being friends, Terry."

"I don't know about you, but it's too late for that."
"It is?"

He stopped, looked at her and she was unable to meet his gaze.

"What's your favorite color again?"

Her head bobbed up. "What?"

"Your favorite color. What is it? I'm guessing pink, am I right?"

She nodded.

"I knew that." He started walking again as cars moved past them on the main road. They were heading in the direction of the Old Mill Campground, and not wanting to give Maddie unpleasant memories, he crossed the road, and started back in the other direction.

"Terry?"

He smiled. At least she was keeping up.

"What about what we were talking about? Do we have to?"

A neighbor waved to Terry, and Terry waved back. He slowed his pace a little more so he wouldn’t wear Maddie out completely. Wind came through the trees, rustled the leaves and raked Madison's scarf-bound hair in golden tendrils. He reached for her hand, easily took it in his and breathed in the cold pure air.

"Terry, I think you're ignoring me."

He raised their clasped hands, then shot her a look.

"You keep changing the subject."

"And you keep pressing for an answer." Terry watched the traffic, then guided Maddie back across the road. "I don't have all the answers, Maddie. I never claimed I did."

"But--" she sighed, rested her cheek a moment on his shoulder-- "you're Terry. You know everything."
"Don't kid yourself. Only God knows everything. The rest of us have to struggle along with what we've got. All I know is that I love you, and I'm not giving you up without a fight. If I can help it, I'm not giving you up at all."

Though he wanted to head into town, he could tell Maddie was tired, and steered their walk in the direction of the house.

"I love you, too, Terry."

"Then let's drop the question of going back to the way things were, okay? Neither of us wants it."

She sighed, hung on to his hand and didn't seem to want to go inside as they got close to the front door. When had the sunlight turned so golden, or the sky so blue it hurt his eyes? Amazing what the company of one special person did to the outlook of your life. It was the same sky, the same sun shining down on him as last year, and yet life had a factory-fresh scent about it that made Terry feel he was just beginning.

Life was just getting started.

Beside the house, he saw the triplets' swing set. He and John had handcrafted it a few years ago in a fit of do-it-yourself zeal and had worn out three days into the project. But they had persisted, and the result was a swing set that would still be around when they were stooped, gray-headed old men laughing about what a pair of idiots they had once been.

Feeling silly, Terry tugged Maddie onto a seat.

"Have you ever flown?" he asked.

She looked absolutely bewildered. The fact he was crazy probably had something to do with it.

"Give me your hands." He placed her mittens around the thick chains of the swing. "Pick up your feet or this won't work."

She lifted them a little, and looked up at him with a nervous energy he could only take as excited fear.

"Haven't you ever been on a swing before?" he asked incredulously.

She shook her head, and he didn't give her a chance to get all wide-eyed and frightened. He gave a small push to her back and she let out an equally small cry.
"Just keep your feet from dragging the ground and I'll keep you going." Terry pushed again, this time a little harder, and her mouth opened but nothing came out. Was she having a good time? Higher, and higher still, and now enjoyment shone in her eyes. She wasn't pumping her legs, but the wind was in her face and she was flying.

A giggle had him laughing.

"Tired? Do you want me to stop?"

She shook her head, leaned back and stared up at the sky, then at him as she glided back. He pushed her by the shoulders and she closed her eyes and kept sailing. His arms began to tire, but he kept pushing and reveled in her presence. Her eyes opened and he smiled at her upside down face.

How he wanted to tug her out of that seat and hold her. He wanted to kiss that mouth and know what it was like to love a woman and to be loved by her.

She looked away, sat up in the swing and no longer seemed interested in flying.

Idiot. Silently kicking himself, he guided her to a gentle stop, then leaned against the swing set's wooden A-frame to study the breathtakingly blue sky. He slanted her a look and smiled, as though he hadn't been thinking about her at all. "Beautiful day, isn't it?"

She nodded.

"Are you ready to go in?" he asked, and she got to her feet.

"Terry?"

"Why do I have a sinking feeling I know what you're about to ask?" He chuckled as he helped her around the house. "What is it?"

"Do you remember yesterday? You said you didn't need all the other stuff to be happy, that all you needed was me."

"Yes, I remember."

Her silence seemed to imply, "Then, isn't that enough?"
Terry sighed. He could see this wasn't an easy thing for her to cope with.

"I want you to be happy, Terry."

"I appreciate that."

"You deserve to be happy."

"I don't know about that," he smiled, "but I won't labor the point."

"I want to make you happy."

"You do." Terry gave her a hug, then reached around her to open the front door. "I've worn you out enough for one morning. Why don't you read until lunch?"

They went inside, and he struggled with sadness as he helped her out of the coat, the scarf and mittens, watched as she eagerly curled up on the couch to first read her new Bible, then pick up where she'd left off with *Pride and Prejudice*.

From the recliner, Jake got up with his drawing pad.

"Abby said you were feeling better," Terry smiled. "You must be, to be drawing again."

Stepping around Ricky on the floor, Jake carefully tore off the top sheet from his drawing pad and handed it to Terry.

Curious, Terry moved to the window to look at Jake's handiwork in full light. It was a simple pencil sketch, but one very close to Terry's heart. It was Maddie of course, and she was cozied on the couch with her book and looking beautiful and happy.

"I started it yesterday evening," Jake said with a shrug. "It's not very good."

"No, it is." Terry swallowed hard. "This is very like her, thank you."

Jake glanced at the couch, came closer to Terry and lowered his voice. "I'm afraid we might be getting in the way."

"You aren't. In fact, I'm grateful you're here." Terry couldn't stop looking at the sketch. "It's not only good there's so many people in the house to be chaperones, but..." Terry sighed. "I guess it's
just good to know you and Abby are in the house. I keep thinking if you two could work it out, then so can we."

"Madison isn't me," Jake warned.

"I know."

"You're going to have to find out what works, and what doesn't. It won't matter what worked for me, you'll have to find what works for her. That's all that matters."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

Jake smiled. "Hopefully, it'll encourage you not to compare us too much. We're apples and oranges."

"Aside from the fact she's prettier, who's the apple, and who's the orange?"

Though Jake smiled, he didn't laugh. "Just don't get too disappointed when things don't work out the way you thought they should. Madison is different from me, and I'm guessing we've been through different things. She's going to heal differently, too."

"I hear you." Terry nodded to the drawing. "Thanks for this, and thanks for the caution. I'll keep it in mind."

With a nod, Jake left with his sketch pad.

"What did he mean?" Maddie asked from across the room.

It startled Terry, and he realized she'd been following the conversation.

With a smile, Terry went over, tossed the coats off to one side, sat down beside her and showed her the drawing.

"That's me," she said with surprise. "I've never been drawn before. What did he mean about comparing me to him? Is it because he was abused, too?"

"Yes, but Jake meant more than that."
Taking a deep breath, Terry folded his arms and started in on the story of how Jake had come to be a part of their family. When Terry reached the part of Abby and Jake deciding to marry in name only, Madison's interest spiked through the roof.

"How did that work out for them?"

With a laugh, Terry pointed to the little boy playing on the carpet. "He looks a lot like his daddy, don't you think?"

"But..." Maddie looked severely let down, but Ricky was on the floor right in front of her. She’d known about him. In the excitement of the story it seemed she’d forgotten that Abby and Jake had a child.

Her rain cloud came back out, and Madison picked up her Jane Austen.

"The point is, Maddie, they did work it out. Eventually."

Curling onto her side, Maddie propped the book half against the couch, half against her knees. "Have you read this story?"

"Pride and Prejudice? Of course. When I was a kid, it was standard high school fare." He was about to add something to that thought, when he caught her triumphant smile.

She had changed the subject.

Oh, she looked almost smug.

"Did you see what I wrote for you in the book?" he asked, getting to his feet with Jake’s drawing. "I wrote something for you on the front blank page of Austen."

She flipped to the front, and her lips slowly moved as she read the words. A quick intake of air told him they were making an impression.

He picked up their coats and left Maddie to her reading.

* * * *

Taking in each word as it came, Madison reread Terry's handwriting. She hadn't gotten very far in the story, but she recognized the quote as being from *Pride and Prejudice*:
"My dear, dear Lizzy, I would-- I do congratulate you-- but are you certain? forgive the question--
are you quite certain that you can be happy with him?"

"There can be no doubt of that. It is settled between us already, that we are to be the happiest couple
in the world..."

"... And do you really love him quite well enough? Oh, Lizzy! do anything rather than marry
without affection. Are you quite sure that you feel what you ought to do?"

Dearest Maddie,
There are no previous loves between us, no turned down proposals (besides the one on my side). It's
just me and you. You love me, but do you love me well enough? God willing, you will say yes, but
even after you do, love me, Maddie. And it will be enough.
Terry

Closing the book, Madison set it aside and tried to think. From the floor, Ricky made truck
sounds as he pushed a fire engine across the carpet. Abby came in with a laptop, sat down on the
end of the couch and opened the computer.

"Let me know if I'm bothering you, and I'll work somewhere else," Abby offered.

Since Abby was here, anyway, Madison decided to take advantage of the timing. "Could I ask
you something?"

"Sure."

"Terry said you and Jake married in name only."

"Yup, that's how we started out."

"Did you love Jake?"

"At the time? Not officially."

"Did your parents try to stop it?"

"They sure did." Abby typed into her keyboard and talked at the same time. "I'm fairly certain if
I'd been in love with someone else, like Tyler, Dad and Mom wouldn't have let me get away with
it. But they knew Jake and I were good friends, and Jake needed me pretty bad. It worked out."
"Who's Tyler?"

"It's a long story."

"If it _had_ worked out differently, and you knew you loved Jake, but you also knew he could never, ever have sex--" Madison prayed Abby wouldn't hit her for asking the question this way-- "do you think you would have married him, anyway?"

"Yup, I would. Why do you ask?"

"I'm trying to figure something out."

"If you're thinking what I think you're thinking, it has a harder time of working out." Abby shook her head. "Men are wired differently. It's one thing for Jake to theoretically keep his distance from me, another thing entirely for you to keep your distance from Uncle Terry. Men see, they want. Us, on the other hand, we can take it or leave it a lot easier."

"So men are trouble?"

"More or less."

"But that's what I've been thinking for all my life. That men are monsters."

For a moment, Abby regarded Madison. "That's pushing it to the extreme, don't you think? I mean, I've been known to leave the toilet lid up once or twice, myself."

When Abby saw how hard Madison was trying to overcome that prejudice-- and Madison knew it was a prejudice-- the humor died from Abby's eyes. Abby seemed to think better of her words, sighed, and shut the laptop.

"Look, I'm not a great expert on relationships. I know more about fish, than I do people, but it seems to me if you like someone-- I mean really like someone, then you could probably do worse for a choice of husband."

"I love Terry."

"Well, there you go."

"But he--" Madison stopped. This was getting way too personal.
"Maybe you should talk to Mom." Abby sounded as though she were trying hard to be helpful. "She's into all this touchy-feely girl stuff more than I am."

"But aren't you? into feely stuff? I see you with Jake, and you're a natural."

"With Jake, yeah, it's easy, but it wasn't always that way."

"It wasn't?"

"Don't look so shocked. I told you I wasn't touchy-feely."

"But did it get easier for you? Of course it did, because you and Jake are really good together--"

"Thank you," Abby smiled.

"But, I mean, over time," Madison tried to fit her question into a way she could get an answer, "did it get easier to show your emotions to him? To be with him?"

"The trouble of being intimate was more on his part than mine, but yeah, it's gotten easier to show my emotions with Jake. Especially the softer ones. I've learned to tone things down with him, and I've learned to love cuddling."

"You had to learn to love cuddling?"

"Yeah. So?"

"I hate it, too. I hated it when the Dragon's hands were all over me."

Abby winced, cast a look in Ricky's direction but didn't yell at her for trying to get out what she was feeling.

"That's not exactly what I meant by cuddling, but if you're married to a cuddler, touching can be a problem." Abby gave herself a moment to think. "Jake learned to go with the flow, and he's very much a cuddler. I'm not, but I have to say, cuddling does have its advantages."

"What are they?"

Casting a glance at Ricky, Abby opened her laptop, typed something on her screen, then slanted the laptop at Madison.
Sex, and emotional bonding.

Madison shuddered, and picked up her Jane Austen. "Thanks anyway."

Even though Abby didn't look as though she understood, Madison opened the book to read Terry's words again.

"Hey." Abby tapped Madison's foot and Madison looked up. "The way I see it, the difference between a man and a monster is self-control. I don't care what a man sees or thinks he wants, if he has no self-control, then he really is a monster. That doesn't describe Uncle Terry."

Madison nodded, and Abby faced her computer again.

"Now to start chipping away at all this email. I called my boss and told him I was getting back to work this morning. Easy to say, but it's going to take a bulldozer to get through all this."

"Mommy, look." Ricky held up his truck and Abby smiled.

What Abby had said made Madison think.

Words had power. Madison understood that. They had weight that you couldn't hold but could feel deep in your heart. Whether someone spoke them or you read them from a page, they could have impact. Over and over that morning, she had been struck by the force of words and now they had left her to once again face a decision.

* * * *

He sat staring at the pencil sketch on his desk, lost in thought. He should've been helping John go over some code for an old client, but here he was, unable to get his mind on anything or anyone but Maddie.

John seemed to understand, and was working like a dog to get it done, himself. Which only made Terry's guilt worse. He could put Maddie out of her misery. He could race into the living room and tell her she didn't have to try-- that he'd be happy without even that much. That had been enough for Abby and Jake to get married on, and there, Terry saw the trap of comparing too hard.

Apples and oranges, Jake had said.
So what would work for Maddie? Terry figured the answer would always be different as he moved to the next question in his relationship with her, but at present, the one staring him in the face was the most pressing. Would she say "yes," and try to have a family with him?

Pulling out a phone book, Terry located what he wanted and punched the number into his cell phone. As he waited for the number to answer, John strolled into the office with a plate of sandwiches. For a hungry, brief moment, Terry thought the food was for him, but John went to his own desk, woke his laptop, prayed, then dug in while he worked.

Hey, John was the one working while he was not. Only fair.

"Hi, could I have two dozen roses sent to a home address here in Three Mile Bay, say within the hour? I don't mind the cost, but can you do it? And they need to be pink."

His mouth bulging with food, John looked up from his laptop and gawked at Terry. John had heard him right. Roses. Two dozen of 'em. Pink.

Swiveling to face the wall so he wouldn't have to endure that stare, Terry pressed on and gave his credit card information, the address where to send the flowers, and a romantic but to-the-point note he could dictate over the phone and still face John with manly dignity when he hung up.

When Terry did, John had yet to swallow his food.

"Flowerth?"

Terry grimaced, and John swallowed and chewed until he could speak.

"Flowers, huh? I don't know, Terry. That's setting the bar kind of high. Do something like that, and Izumi will be expecting roses from me, or at least daisies."

"Hey, I'm doing everything I can think of." Terry spread his hands. "I've written her a short love letter (of sorts), I've tried a thoughtful gift--"

"And now you'll ply her with flowers." John shrugged. "There's always candy."

"You think I should?"

"If she won't eat it, I will."

"Thanks."
"Anything for a buddy," John grinned, and went back to his laptop and sandwiches. "Hang in there, Terry. We're praying for you."

He knew they were, and he appreciated it.

Terry pushed out of his chair to go check on Maddie. Had she taken her painkiller, was she eating lunch like she was supposed to, was she getting enough rest after all he'd put her through that morning?

He stalked through the hall, peered into the living room, and saw her on the couch eating sandwiches with Abby and watching TV.

She was all right.

Thinking better of barging in, he went back to the office, found his jeep keys, coat, and waved to John before John had a chance to ask where he was off to.

If he was going to pull out all the stops, Terry figured he might as well go all the way.

* * * *

As Madison finished her lunch, Terry walked through the living room with his coat and keys. He gave her a tentative smile, paused a moment as if he were wrestling on whether to say or do something, then left without speaking at all.

Well, it had come down to this pitiful situation.

She would die if she married him, and it appeared he would die if she didn't, so if one of them had to kick the bucket, she made up her mind that it should be her.

After all Terry had done to help her, it only seemed fair.

The problem was, actually getting the words out of her mouth. More specifically, THE word.

She could put on the ring like Terry had said, and then he'd know and it wouldn't be a big deal. However, she would probably need to say it anyway, because he would ask if she meant it-- she knew Terry well enough to know he would want to make sure-- and if she kept silent, the ring probably wouldn't count.
Funny how hard one word was to say, when it came attached to so much. She could blurt it out, whisper it, or write it out on a note like he had done with his proposal. And of course, she could always change her mind at the last minute and not say the word at all. That was always an option.

No, if she intended to go through with it, she would have to put on the ring, and say the word.

She would have to fight against all her instincts about men, and actually say it. It would take a lot of faith on her part, not only in her belief in God's mercy, but also in Terry's.

The minutes slipped past Madison. Someone turned off the TV and Abby took Ricky to Terry's old room so they could have a nap. Jake went out for a walk to get some air, Izzy cleaned the kitchen, John worked in the office, and the triplets napped in their room.

The house had settled into a quiet, ordinary-feeling afternoon.

The front door opened.

Terry came in, avoided all eye contact with Madison, and hauled a fancy shopping bag with a pretty logo through the living room and into the hall. A large shopping bag.

Not thirty seconds later, the doorbell rang.

"Someone get that?" Izzy called from the kitchen. "I'm busy in here."

The doorbell rang a second time.

"John? Madison? Would someone please answer that?"

"I'll get it." Madison got up from the couch, ignored the stiffness in her hip and tried to see who it was before the doorbell sounded again.

Too late. As she reached for the handle, the bell rang a third time.

"Madison?"

"I got it," Madison assured Izzy, and opened the door.

A young man stood on the doorstep holding the largest bunch of roses Madison had ever seen in one place, in person, in her entire life.
"Delivery for Miss Madison Ladyfair," the young man said with an absolutely straight face. "Are you Miss Ladyfair?"

"I-- I'm Madison."

"Then these are for you." The man passed her the flowers, which rapidly filled Madison's view, for they were tall and there were a lot of them. They were also very heavy. "Have a nice day," the man said, and then Madison heard footsteps as he left.

"Yes... nice day," she mumbled, too dazed to know what to do.

Her hands felt a chiseled thick vase but she couldn't see it and she couldn't see where to put it down. Lady-fair? The rich perfume of pink pink roses, the sprays of green, the delicate baby's breath-- it all overwhelmed her and she sank onto the carpet to put the vase down before she passed out.

It was all so beautiful, like the flowers had been picked by an angel.

She saw a small white card, pulled it out from the leaves and tried to stop trembling long enough to read the words.

*Please, marry me.*

She looked up, saw Terry watching intently from the hall. She was vaguely aware of the others, but Terry was the only one she focused on. Could she remember that one word she had made up her mind to tell him? This would be a good time to get it out.

Her tongue wouldn't work, so she got on her hands and knees, and crawled to the couch.

He took a few steps toward her. "Are you all right?" he asked, then stopped when she nodded but still couldn't speak.

She reached under the couch for her stash of hidden treasure, through the dust bunnies and around her spiral notebook, until she finally found what she was looking for. She pulled it out, her hands trembling so violently she dropped it and had to pick it up twice.

Smearing her eyes, she forced her fingers to lock onto the smooth ring, and slid it onto a finger. There. It was on. She looked up at Terry and saw him cross the room to her.
He knelt and spoke softly. "Are you sure?"

She pushed out the word. "Yes."

He paused. "Do you agree to try?"

"Yes." That one especially, had hurt, but it was out and she tried not to faint now that she'd said it.

"Maddie, I don't want to pressure you. It's important that we get this right. Are you sure?"

"Yes." She couldn't say anything else, and when he helped her to her feet, she could see Terry was trying desperately to hold back.

"You'll marry me?" he asked again, as though he wanted to make absolutely certain he wasn't dreaming.

"Yes."

His breath caught, and a smile started around the corners of his mouth. He fisted a hand, slowly pounded his leg and nodded. He looked caught somewhere between shock and sheer joy.

"Do you mind if I give you a hug?" he asked.

"Yes."

He looked surprised.

"I mean, no."

He swept her up and crushed her against him in the tightest squeeze she'd ever had that wasn't against her will. Fighting back a flood of unwelcome emotion, Madison closed her eyes and willed herself to not pull away. A hand moved between her shoulder blades and it was too much-- she pushed at Terry's chest and for a moment, he wouldn't let her go.

He did, and she stumbled back, gasped for air and had to hug herself.

"I'm sorry, Maddie. What did I do wrong?"
She shook her head, stumbled to the couch as Izzy came into the living room and gave Terry a great big hug. John quickly followed with a hearty hug and a slap on Terry's back.

"Now, I can say congratulations!" John hugged Terry again for good measure as Izzy came to the couch and took a seat next to Madison.

"Are you all right?" Izzy asked quietly.

Madison nodded and kept hugging herself.

"May I?" Izzy asked, and gently took Madison's right hand. "The ring belongs here." Izzy switched the ring to the fourth finger on Madison's left hand. "You have such slender fingers, even though mine are smaller, the ring almost fits. Is it too tight?"

Madison shook her head.

"Welcome to the family, Sweetheart." Izzy gave her a small hug-- not at all crushing like Terry's, then kissed Madison's cheek. "Calm down a bit, and I'll put your lovely flowers on the end table where you can enjoy them. Aren't they stunning?"

Sucking in a deep breath, Madison rested her head against the back of the couch and watched as Izzy lifted the vase. It towered over Madison with rich pinks, so deep and velvety, they made her want to touch those delicate blooms and rub them all over her face. Madison felt so completely overwhelmed, she didn't know her own thoughts and half wondered if she might die. But it was too soon for that.

"Abby," John called down the hall, "you're going to want to hear this. Kids-- Ruthie, Debbie, Lizzie, get in here. You too, Ricky. Your uncle has an announcement to make." John pulled out his cell phone. "I need to call Jake."

"I think he's taking a walk," Izzy said, adding a few last touches to the floral arrangement. "Did these come from Eva's, Terry? I recognize the vase. She carries the loveliest crystal vases in her flower shop. Long after these flowers fade away, Madison, you'll have this vase to remember them by."

As John called Jake, Abby and the children piled into the living room.

"What's going on?" Abby asked.
The question flew by Terry. He didn’t answer, his entire being trained wholly on Madison. Even from the couch, Madison could feel his concern.

"Wait until Jake gets here," John requested, and Izzy smiled with a nod of agreement.

"Abby, aren’t these lovely?" Izzy turned the vase so the best side showed toward Madison. "They’re from your uncle."

"Wow, I didn’t know Uncle Terry was such a romantic at heart." Abby came to admire the flowers and gave Terry a smile.

Terry, however, kept watching Madison.

"Let me see, please." Lizzie climbed onto the couch, crawled over Madison’s lap and buried her face in the blooms. Lizzie looked over her shoulder and beamed at Madison. "They’re pink!"

"Yes," Madison said, and realized she’d almost been saying nothing but that one word ever since Terry had proposed again. She looked back at him and saw him still watching.

He gave a small test smile, as if to see what she would do, and Madison lowered her eyes and smiled back. Yes, she still loved him.

Before Madison knew it, Terry had claimed the seat beside her and was pulling Lizzie off Madison’s lap. Madison breathed a sigh of relief, for Lizzie’s small knees had been bumping into her stitches.

"Jake will be here in a minute," John said, putting away his cell phone. "Izumi, do we have any fizzy apple cider, something to celebrate with?"

"I’m afraid all we have is ginger ale."

"That will do," John nodded, and marched into the kitchen. "Where are the glasses? The good ones?"

"Middle cupboard, second shelf," Izzy called back.

"Where?"

"I’m coming," Izzy said, and went to help her clueless husband.
Picking up Ricky, Abby carried him to the armchair, hugged him on her lap and smiled at the couch. Madison knew Abby had already guessed what had happened, even though Abby didn’t say.

Terry sat with his hands clasped in his lap, his face a study of quiet, barely contained joy.

The door opened and Jake came in. Jake took one reassuring look at Ricky and Abby and calmed down. "Dad said it wasn’t an emergency, but what’s going on? Is something wrong?"

"No, not exactly." Terry’s smile spread across his face now. "I have some news--"

"Not yet," John cried from the kitchen. "Five minutes."

Abby smiled at Jake and Jake began to smile, too.

"Would you take some pictures?" Terry called to his friend in the next room.

"Good thinking," John called back. "I'll snap a few with my iPhone."

"Did you see the roses?" Abby asked Jake as she hugged the little boy on her lap. "They’re from Uncle Terry."

All the pent up excitement in the room, made Madison want to find a small place somewhere and hide. She timidly peeked up and saw Jake looking over the elegant profusion of roses, greenery, and baby’s breath. Cocking his head, Jake read the card, looked at Madison and smiled warmly.

"Welcome to the family," he whispered, and went to go stand next to the armchair. Jake and the family had known about Terry’s proposal yesterday, but now John was calling everyone together, and talking about pictures and fancy glasses, and Madison’s head began to spin.

Terry looked at Madison, smiled hard, and very carefully, very cautiously, took her left hand. He touched the ring, inhaled deeply, and let their clasped hands rest on her lap.

Her heart skittered. She edged their hands off her lap, and onto the couch cushion between them.

To her relief, Terry gave her hand a small, reassuring squeeze.
When John and Izzy came from the kitchen, there were tears in Izzy's eyes. Izzy brushed them away, passed out fancy long-stemmed crystal glasses with ginger ale to Madison, Terry, Jake, Abby, and to each of the children. And now the children were getting into the excitement.

After John pulled out his iPhone to take some pictures as the moment unfolded, John grinned broadly. "Okay, now Terry has something he wants to tell us."

Terry gripped Madison's hand so tight she gasped a little. He was so strong, she had no doubt he could pop off all her fingers if he wanted, and she hoped he wouldn't do it accidentally.

"Maddie has done me the very great honor <photo click, click> of accepting my proposal. I guess you could say, both of them. So we're getting married."

"Congratulations!" sounded around the room, and the children got to drink their ginger ale.

"Daddy," Ruthie asked, "what does this mean?"

"It means Madison is going to be a part of this family."

"I thought she already was."

"She is," John smiled, "but getting married means Madison will be an even bigger part of our family."

"Why?"

"Because Uncle Terry will love her more, and we'll love her more, and that means she'll love you even more than she does now."

Smiling, Ruthie drank the last of her ginger ale and seemed satisfied with her answer.

Abby passed Ricky to Jake, then came to the couch to give Terry a hug, then Madison. To Madison's surprise, there were glimmers of wet in Abby's eyes.

"I wanted to say something really nice," Abby shook her head, "but I can't think of anything besides, I love you. I love you both."

For that, Terry got to his feet and hugged Abby again, and Jake came to congratulate Terry, and then John again, and Izzy had to find a handkerchief, while Ricky asked for more ginger ale. Madison sat quietly in the corner of the couch, grateful when they didn't tug her into more hugs.
Her insides were already trembling.

"Emily will never believe this," Izzy laughed through her tears. "The set of dishes I ordered for her wedding will be delivered today, and she'll only think I'm joking."

"We're giving Emily and Brian dishes?" John looked impressed.

"Please, please," Abby gave Terry another hug, "promise never to move away."

"Nothing short of dynamite could get rid of me," Terry grinned. "You have nothing to worry about."

"I have to tell Agatha." Izzy went to find her cell phone. "Everyone will want to know, and Terry-- have you and Madison set a date yet?"

"A date? Already?" Terry looked overwhelmed. "We just got engaged."

"Let me know the minute you have a date," Izzy said with a nod, "and if you'd like, I'll be more than happy to help plan the wedding."

A wedding. Madison sure hoped the butterflies in her stomach would either stop flapping around, or hurry up and die off.

"Maybe you and Madison would rather elope," Abby suggested.

Izzy looked crestfallen.

Standing beside the couch with his hands in his slacks pockets, Terry shook his head. "It's too soon for dates or plans. I can't do anything without talking to Maddie first, and I don't want to drown her with decisions. I'm doing good she said 'yes' at all, let alone this. I have to give her time."

"Of course she was going to say 'yes.'" Abby tried to sound confident, but even Madison sensed a twinge of doubt in Abby's voice. After their conversation this morning, Madison guessed Abby had a better idea of the struggle it had taken her to accept Terry's proposal.

"Whatever you and Madison decide," Izzy smiled, "please, let me help plan the ceremony?"

"Count on it," Terry nodded, and Izzy went to get her cell phone.
"If there's anything we can do, let us know," John said, and gave Terry another slapping hug. "Congratulations, Buddy. This is a big day for you."

Terry grinned and Madison closed her eyes. The perfume of the roses hung heavy in the air, and it clung to her senses like Terry's crushing hug. She felt the ring around her finger and prayed she was doing the right thing, that she wasn't being more cruel to Terry by saying "yes," than by running away.

The children scattered, the world dimmed until a male voice sounded above Madison. She jerked awake, gulped in air and grasped the cushion beneath her.

"Easy, Maddie." Terry backed off a step and she let go of the cushion. "I didn't mean to scare you."

She nodded and hugged herself.

"Agatha's coming over in a minute, even the Doyles will be here soon, and I thought..." Terry pushed out a sigh. "You look worn out."

"I'm all right."

"Maddie, I'm really sorry for scaring you. I guess I got carried away with that hug."

She shook her head. "It's okay."

"Still, I apologize."

She sighed and didn't know what to say.

"I was thinking," Terry sounded as though he were trying for a more upbeat tone, "after they get here, if it gets too much for you, you could always go into the office and shut the door. I'll make excuses for you, and tell them how tired you are. They'll understand."

"Thanks, Terry."

He smiled a little. "Are you sure it's still a 'yes'? It's not too late to back out. There's a lot of time to change your mind."

"I'm sure."
"Okay." He grinned and took in the roses. "We're getting married-- I can hardly believe it." He gestured to the blooms. "There's more in the office, you know."

"More?"

"You'll see when you go in there, later." Terry picked a lone petal from off a couch cushion, caressed it and held it like it was something special. "With everyone coming like this, I guess it's a good thing you had that shower."

Madison couldn't help her smile. Oh, how she loved him.

"I don't want to mess this up, Maddie." He looked up, held her eyes and gave a softly lopsided smile.

The high pitched sound of a vacuum had Terry shaking his head, and he stepped away so Abby could do a last minute clean before their company arrived.

Izzy came in and tidied the room, then went into the kitchen and came back with a glass of water and some painkiller for Madison.

"Once news spreads that you're engaged to Terry," Izzy explained, "people will want to congratulate and hug you. Probably even look at your ring. Until the excitement wears down a little, you might want to brace yourself."

Madison nodded, gave the glass back to Izzy and felt her own hand vibrating like a small earthquake. Unlike Izzy, her nerves were a wreck.

"I'm so happy for you," Izzy smiled, and took the glass back to the kitchen as the doorbell sounded.

"I'll get it," Terry said, stepping around the vacuum.

The woman at the door greeted Terry with a cry and a hug.

"I had to come over as soon as Izumi called," Agatha said, beaming ear to ear with eager excitement. She looked around Terry and waved to Madison. "Congratulations, dear! Oh, this is such good, good news. And what an answer to prayer." It seemed Agatha knew better than to ask Madison for a hug, though she came in and sat down next to Madison and started talking about wedding plans as though it were the most natural thing in the world.
And this was from Agatha, Izzy's down-to-earth close friend. Madison half expected a reaction like this from Lauren, Terry's superintendent, but Madison was beginning to understand what Izzy had meant about bracing herself.

"Is it going to be a large wedding, or just a few friends and family?" Agatha asked, and waited as though Madison could start spouting details at the drop of a hat. It seemed Agatha had just dropped a hat.

"We're still in the planning stages," Terry intervened, and moved toward the end table.

Agatha's eyes followed and her mouth dropped open.

"Oh, Terry." Agatha shook her head and looked on the verge of tears. "What beautiful roses. I knew God had someone especially planned for you. It's this sweet woman sitting right here, the one who's been making you smile so much lately. All these years, I didn't want to make you feel as though you were missing out on something, so I kept it to myself, but I knew God had someone special waiting for you. I knew it in my heart of hearts, so I've been praying. And now look-- you're in love, and buying roses, and I'm about to cry."

Izzy came forward with a big box of tissue. "I couldn't have said it better, Agatha."

As Izzy moved aside, Terry stepped close and gave Agatha a hug. "Thank you for the prayers. They were answered in a big way."

"You're a good man, Terry." Agatha patted Terry's arm, smiled at him as he straightened. "It's good that you're happy. After all you've done to help others, Madison is your reward. Or part of it-- here on earth, anyway."

Terry smiled and looked at Madison. "I'm well aware I'm being blessed."

The gentle intensity of Terry's stare made Madison's heart beat fast. She looked down at her lap, played with the edge of her shirt and then the doorbell rang.

This time John went to answer and Dick and Sara Doyle rushed in with cries of congratulations, and of course great big hugs. Agatha got up to join in the conversation, Abby set aside the vacuum as Jake came in from the hall, and for a while it seemed everyone talked at the same time.

"We were in the area when Jake called us," Dick laughed, "so your timing couldn't have been better."
Hiding beside the tall vase of roses, Madison tried to make herself invisible. Dick, however, made a beeline for the couch, took off his sunglasses and reached out a hand. At least it wasn’t a request for a hug, Madison thought, and timidly accepted the teeth-rattling handshake.

"Congratulations, God bless you both," Dick grinned. "Sara, would you look at these roses! When Terry does something, he does it right. So, have you set a date?"

Unable to get out anything but a stammer, Madison shook her head.

"That’s okay, I can get all the information I need from Abby." Dick gave a good-humored smile. "I’m about to go speak to Terry and the others, but before I do, may I have your blessing to throw a combination welcome home party for AJ and an engagement party for you and Terry? I’m not family of course, and I wouldn’t want to do anything without your say-so. All you have to do is shake your head, and we’ll let it drop."

The offer floored Madison. She was being treated like family by someone who was, by right, more family than she was.

"Is it all right with you if I make the offer to the others?" Dick asked.

Madison nodded and Dick broke out into a wide grin.

"Thank you. This means a great deal to Sara and I." Dick touched Madison’s shoulder, then went to go talk to Terry, and the doorbell rang yet again.

Her courage failing fast, Madison got up from the couch, crept around the back of the gathering and made it into the hall without being hugged or drawn into the conversation.

Once inside the office, she shut the door and slid onto the floor to catch her breath. All the people had been so very kind, she needed some rest.

* * * *

As Dick explained to Terry and Izzy the party he wanted to throw, John answered the doorbell. There was so much going on around Terry, he barely registered Emily’s voice.

John waved to Terry, and Terry excused himself to find Emily standing at the door in nothing heavier than a sweater, fighting off the wind and cold but sparkling nonetheless.
"I can't come in because of the flu," she apologized, brushing the hair from her eyes, "but Izumi called with the good news and I had to come over. I'm so happy for you and Madison. Please tell her I wish her every joy, and you, too. May God bless you both so very richly. Oh, Terry, this is just so wonderful. We're both getting married! Can you believe it?"

"It is amazing," Terry grinned, who wasn't used to seeing Emily so sparkly, so effervescent. She normally had both sensible feet planted on the ground, and to see her now dancing on air-- it was something to behold. "Thank you for coming over like this, I'll be sure to pass your message along to Maddie." He paused. "Have you gotten your wedding gift?"

"No, not yet. Why?"

"Nothing. You'll see it when it comes later today." Terry laughed to see Emily's eyes widen with wonder. "Izzy said it was due today, so be on the lookout for the delivery person."

"I will. Oh, Terry! God is good, isn't He?"

"He certainly is," Terry sighed. "He certainly is."

"I have to run, but congratulations again. I hope no one has the flu when you get married, so we can come!" Emily waved, and hurried home to her father before she turned into an ice pop.

Terry shut the door, took in a deep breath and saw John had overheard the whole conversation.

"What a morning, huh?"

"You said it," John chuckled, and got tugged back into Dick's talk with Izzy and Abby over the engagement party.

As Terry braced himself for another round of party preparation plans, he cast a glance at the couch. He wasn't surprised to find Maddie wasn't there. Agatha caught Terry's hand, pulled him toward Sara and started talking about the benefits of not having a tiny wedding.

"Just because Abby and Jake had a small wedding, with hardly no one at all invited, is no reason you should. And I know John and Izumi all but eloped, but it's time this family had an honest-to-goodness wedding, don't you think?" This from Sara Doyle, Dick's wife, the one who was planning to play hostess to an as-yet determined number of guests who would flood their very nice house. "I don't know about Agatha, but I'm going to be very disappointed in you and Madison if I don't have an invitation to this wedding."
"You tell him," Agatha nodded.

"This is Terry Davis we're talking about," Sara went on, almost as if Terry wasn't standing there, "and everyone-- I mean everyone in Three Mile Bay and most of Chaumont is going to want to be there."

"That's stretching things a bit," Terry objected, but Agatha shook her head in disagreement.

"There isn't a man, woman, or child in the area who doesn't know you by name."

"Well, yeah, but it's a small area." Again, Terry was overruled, and he decided to keep his mouth shut.

The ladies were too excited by the prospect of his wedding to do anything but plan, and since they didn't need him for their conversation, Terry edged out of it until they were talking back and forth and leaving him out of it altogether.

Whew.

Now to find Maddie. It shouldn't be too hard, he'd told her to go into the office.

"Hey, Terry." Dick looked about. "I don't see the blushing bride anywhere around. Is she feeling all right?"

"She's just tired," Terry smiled, and backed toward the hall. "I'm going to check on her now. Thanks for stopping by, and for the party. We'll be looking forward to it."

"I'll be in touch with you and Madison about the guest list," Dick laughed, and let Terry go with a wave.

Man, what a day. This was only getting engaged, and Terry felt like he'd happened onto a parade only to find he was part of the main attraction. He hoped he could survive a full-blown wedding, one like Sara and the women were getting so excited about.

More importantly, Terry hoped Maddie could survive one. That could be a problem.

"Maddie?" Terry moved into the office, closed the door behind him and looked about. The bathroom door was shut so he went to knock on the door. "Hey, Maddie? You okay in there?"
"Don't you ever get tired of asking that question?" answered a small voice, and he grinned, leaned his forehead against the door and again thanked God she had said she would marry him.

"Are you okay?" Terry pressed.

The door opened and he backed away. His gaze fell to the tile floor where Madison sat reaching up to use the door handle.

"What are you doing down there?" He squatted, looked into her face and was grateful that though she looked tired, she didn't look pale. She hadn't cut-- or at least, not in a big enough way he could notice. "Maddie, Maddie. What am I going to do with you?"

"If you don't know, then you probably shouldn't have asked me to marry you."

"That was a rhetorical question." Terry took a seat on the carpet outside the bathroom door and smiled. "People usually don't expect an answer to rhetorical questions."

She leaned against the doorjamb and closed her eyes.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm just tired."

"If you had cut yourself, you'd tell me, right?"

"I guess."

"Maddie?"

"I would tell you."

Terry breathed out a sigh. "Emily said to tell you that she wished you every joy."

"She did?" Maddie looked a bit repentant. "It's hard for me to understand her, but I guess she's nice. I hope she's happy with Brian."

"I believe she is." The thought ran through Terry to pull Madison onto his lap, but he shoved the thought aside. "Are you sorry you're marrying me?" he asked.

Madison stared at the floor and dark lashes batted her cheeks before she looked up at him.
A shy smile parted her lips.

"Do you still love me?" he asked, and she nodded. He sighed deeply, and hoped his grin didn't frighten her silly. "Did you see what was in the shopping bag? That was for you."

She shook her head.

"Wait here." He got to his feet, went around to his desk and picked up the bag. "I might have overdone it, Maddie, but you have to remember--" he hefted it over to the bathroom door and took heart when she looked curious-- "I didn't know if you'd have me or not this morning, and if the roses didn't work, I wanted something in reserve."

"In reserve?" She still leaned against the doorjamb but when he opened the bag, her face had the curious look of a child on Christmas morning.

"This is what was going to convince you into marrying me if the roses didn't do the trick," Terry said, and took out a heavy candle in a fancy jar. "It's Roses and Buttermilk or something-or-other, but it's supposed to smell nice when it's lit, and more importantly, it's pink. Your favorite color, right?"

She smiled, and he handed her the candle.

"And if I struck out with that, I was going to try this." He pulled out a porcelain doll wearing a long, lacy pink dress with blonde hair and blue eyes that closed when you laid her down. "I bought all this at an antique gift store, but I don't know if it's an actual antique. When I saw her, she reminded me of you." He gave Maddie the doll, and noted her wide-eyed pleasure.

The doll was about two feet tall, had a soft body but a porcelain head and hands that gave it an old-world feel.

"She's wonderful, Terry."

He grinned. "If that doll failed to duly impress you, I was hoping this would." He took an antique teddy bear from the bag-- a long teddy with long limbs, a soft body and a frank expression on his furry face.

"Mine?" Maddie asked, and Terry gave her the bear.
"And if that wasn't enough to forever win you over, I bought this." He tugged a large flat box out from the bottom, and showed it to Maddie. "It's supposed to be a Lavender and Sage gift set. That's what it says, anyway." He put the box on the floor next to her. "It has soap, some sweet smelling stuff to help you relax. If there's anything there you can't figure out, ask Izzy-- she'll know what to do with it. John gets her stuff like that all the time."

Maddie didn't say anything, but held her doll and teddy close and looked at Terry with wide gray eyes.

"John says with triplets, you have to take good care of your wife or she'll go insane, and then you'll have to make all the meals and clean the house, yourself." Terry smiled. "That was a poor attempt at a joke. But it was his joke, not mine. Just so you know."

Maddie hugged her doll and bear and hid her face in their embrace.

"I'm going to take good care of you, Maddie. You'll see. I know I'm not an old hand at this like John, but I can learn. Just give me a chance, and I promise you-- I give you my word I'll do the best I can to not let you down."

One arm cradling her friends, Maddie crawled to Terry. He didn't want to scare her and held still as she leaned into his shoulder.

"I don't have anything to give you."

"Pardon?"

"I don't have any presents," she sniffed. "I don't have anything for you at all."

"Maddie," he lightly stroked her hair, hoping it wouldn't drive her away, "I don't need any presents. You said 'yes,' even before I gave you this, so I'm happy." He wanted to tell her that she was present enough, but he didn't know how that might sound to her.

She cast a small glance up at Terry. "I made up my mind before I even saw the roses."

"You did?"

"You went to all that trouble and spent all that money for nothing, Terry."
"I wouldn't say that." He inhaled the air around Maddie and nearly went dizzy with pleasure. "Maybe you could scoot back. I need to breathe." She obeyed, and hugged her doll and bear and leaned against the office wall while he gathered his senses.

"I'm sorry I don't have any presents for you, Terry."

"Now you can cut that out." He passed her the bag in case she wanted it to store her goodies. "This isn't a gift exchange. We are even. Okay?"

She didn't look satisfied.

"Maddie? I don't like the fact it's taking you so long to answer."

"Maybe I could get a job, make some money and buy you things."

"No, bad idea. Very bad." Terry ran both hands through his hair and groaned. The last thing he wanted was to discourage Maddie by seeing her go into the workforce. As if she could stand up to a job right now. She'd be crushed in a heartbeat.

From the intensity on her face just now, he knew she wasn't at all dissuaded.

"I'll tell you what." Terry got to his feet, headed for his desk and made a move out of pure desperation. "If you want a paying job, I have one. Vacuum the floors, dust the furniture once a week, help Izzy with the laundry, help her in the kitchen, help out around the house wherever possible, and I'll pay you..." he paused to do a quick tally. Too little, and it would be as if he didn't trust her; too much, and she could get into trouble, for after seeing her react so over-the-top to the little he'd given her in the past, it was clear she wasn't used to having money at all. "This job will net thirty dollars a week."

"Thirty dollars?" Maddie struggled to get up but couldn't with her doll and teddy bear. He was about to go help her up when she managed on her own. "You mean it, Terry? You really mean it?"

"I do." He pulled out his wallet. "To start things out, I'll advance you thirty now. But I'd like you to promise not to spend this all on me."

"But I thought you said this was mine." Maddie sounded disappointed. She came to his desk with her doll, teddy, candle, and the bath gift set and struggled with the bag at the same time. He had difficulty not letting her handle things the way she wanted, to let her do it, herself. "Is this like an allowance?"
"No, this is like a job. Do you want help with that?"

"I have it," she said, and slid the gift set into the bag so hard it nearly split the bag. "If this money is really mine, then I can spend it the way I want, can't I?"

"I suppose." Terry winced at the thought of what she might do with it, but then, who was he to talk? There was that porcelain doll, the teddy bear... man, if John found out, he would never hear the end of it. Especially after all those pink roses.

"Just try not to spend it all on me, okay?" he stuffed thirty dollars into her hand and put his wallet back. The way Terry looked at it, this was his way of helping Maddie learn to be responsible for money. She'd never had any, and this would be a small step in that direction.

"I'm going to show Izzy my doll," Maddie said, placing her bag by his desk for safekeeping, and starting for the office door. "Thank you, Terry."

"Thank you for marrying me, Maddie."

She stopped in her tracks, turned to look at him and he could see he'd gotten her attention--maybe a little too much.

"I'm not marrying you because you'll give me stuff, Terry."

"I know."

"Or because I need a roof over my head, or someone who might feed me. You're not going to replace the Dragon. I'll run away from you before I let that happen. I mean it, Terry. I had no choice with him, but I have one with you. I won't be your punching bag, or your sex slave."

It half sounded like an accusation, and before Terry rose to his own defense, he forced himself to wait.

"I didn't say 'yes' because I'm selling out," she pressed on, "I said 'yes' because I love you and you deserved to hear it. That's all."

Terry wanted to remind her of her treatment goals, that aside from her thinking he deserved it, that she'd already admitted a lot, even to the point of wanting a baby. Instead, he nodded that he understood, and smiled when she hugged her doll and left the office.
With a groan, Terry sank into his desk chair. She'd nearly provoked him, and he realized he hadn't been on his guard. He'd seen her jaded side before, but not from such a close and personal vantage as this. Being married was going to have its challenges. It had taken time for Maddie to be the way she was, and it would take time for her to change.

She hadn't gotten this way overnight, and she wouldn't change overnight, either. Common sense only told him that.

God, help him.

As Terry left the office and prepared to join the others, he prayed. He prayed for a strong heart, a persevering heart, one that would beat strong and true for Maddie, no matter the hurts that came along for the ride. He was in over his head-- it was true-- but he had faith that God was stronger, that God was wiser than even their most difficult problem.

The bittersweet ache in Terry's heart gave way as he came into the living room and found Maddie on the couch beside her roses, showing Izzy her new doll.

When Maddie saw him, she sent him a smile that warmed Terry all the way to his heart. She loved him, and they were getting married.

Even in sadness, Terry could find joy.

"Wait on the LORD: be of good courage, and He shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the LORD."
~ Psalm 27:14 ~
"A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold."
~ Proverbs 22:1 ~

The doll sat on Madison's lap like a tiny princess surveying her new domain. Her pink gown had tiny bunches of red roses, strings of fine white pearls, and had delicate lace in so much abundance it gave her a very soft feel. And when you lifted her petticoats, Madison found real leather shoes.

Everyone in the living room noticed Madison's doll, even Dick, who exchanged glances with John.

"What are you going to name her?" Izzy asked.

Madison looked up in time to see Terry come into the room, and she sent him a smile. "I'm going to name her Terry."

"Girls spell Terri with an I, you know."

"Come on, Mom," Abby came to the couch with a laugh, "what difference does it make to the doll? The fact Madison is naming it after Uncle Terry, is compliment enough."

"Isn't she nice, Abby?" Madison held out the doll, and Abby nodded and smiled.

"That's a lot of lace."

Izzy rolled her eyes, Madison giggled and Abby laughed at her own remark.

She was so lovely, Madison ran her hand over the gown and played with the large frilly hat perched on Terri's blonde curls. John and Dick exchanged another look, but they said nothing and Terry seemed relieved when John changed the subject.

"I tell you, everyone's going to show up in our living room, if Izumi keeps calling people."

"I only called Agatha." Izzy stopped and made a face as Agatha laughed. "And Emily."
"And the Doyles," John nodded to Dick and Sara.

"Actually, Jake was the one who called us."

"And I might have called our pastor," Izzy added with a sheepish smile. "Well, it isn't everyday Terry gets married."

"He's not getting married today, Izumi."

"I know, but I couldn't help it."

"Oh!" Ruthie came from across the room, climbed onto the couch, squeezed between her mom and Madison and got as close as she could to the Terri doll. "Where'd you find her?"

"Terry gave her to me. Isn't she wonderful? Look--" Madison laid the doll on her back-- "her eyes close."

"Can I hold her?"

"I-- I guess so." Madison lied her precious Terri, but Izzy shook her head.

"She's made of porcelain. You could break her too easily."

"But I'll be careful."

"It's okay, Izzy. She can hold her." Madison waited for Izzy's nod, then laid the doll in Ruthie's lap. "Please hold her gentle so she won't break."

"I'll be gentle." Ruthie stroked the lacy gown, lifted the shawl on the back of Terri's dress, and started to play with something.

Madison began to grow uneasy. The other two girls came to the couch and leaned in to get a closer look at the new doll.

Everyone in the room seemed to watch them, but Madison sensed they were watching her, more than the girls. She wondered what they were thinking, seeing her with the doll, the roses, the triplets cooing over the doll and Terry standing over them with that smile that said so much.

Giving Terry a shoulder bump, Dick joked in a light whisper. "You're going to spoil her-- but then, every woman needs a little extra attention now and again."
Out of the corner of her eye, Madison saw Terry shake his head. "It's hard to spoil Maddie. She has so little to begin with, and still needs so much, it's hard to overdo anything. Especially, love."

It was Lizzie's turn to hold Terri, and the girl stroked the dress like her sister.

"When I get married, I want to have a doll, too," Lizzie told Madison in a very grown up voice.

Pushing up to the couch, Ricky got a close up view of Terri. He scowled, and went back to his daddy as if to say, "Is that what all the excitement is about?"

"My turn, I go next." Debbie rubbed her hands on her clothes to make them clean, and the precious doll was delivered to the last triplet.

"Look what's on the back." Ruthie turned the doll over in Debbie's arms, then the girls' heads blocked out all view as they did something.

Fighting back panic, Madison looked to Izzy for help.

Izzy tapped Ruthie's head.

"What are you doing?"

"There's something under here."

"Leave it alone."

"But--"

"Leave it alone. Give her back to Madison."

An unexpected strain of music stopped the men's conversation.

"Where's that music coming from?" John asked.

"I don't know. I think it's coming from the doll." Izzy parted the girls, picked up Terri and turned her over. "It's playing music." Izzy looked the doll over, then smiled at Madison. "It's a music box doll. Look-- there's a small winding key hiding under the shawl."
"There is?" Terry came forward, took the doll from Izzy and gave the key another turn. "I didn't know it played music. They did a good job of padding the box with all that material, because I hadn't noticed it earlier." Terry looked it over, as if to figure out what else it did. "Is it playing what I think it is?" The doorbell sounded, and Terry passed the doll to Madison.

"I wonder who that could be," John smiled, as Terry went to answer the door.

Madison hugged her Terri doll, the one who was now playing music. "What's that song?" Madison asked as Izzy got up from the couch.

"Don't you know?"

Madison shook her head.

"That's 'Jesus Loves Me,'" Izzy smiled. A man's voice sounded at the front door, and Izzy didn't look at all surprised. "And that's our pastor and probably his wife. If you don't feel like talking, Agatha and I will keep the conversation going. You don't have to worry."

The other two triplets climbed onto the couch, and Ruthie smiled at Madison.

"But that doesn't sound like what I thought it would," Madison sighed as Izzy went to greet their guests. "Isn't it supposed to go--" and Madison hummed it the way she thought she remembered the lullaby.

Ruthie shook her head. "That's 'Rock-a-bye Baby', not 'Jesus Loves Me.'"

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, yes." Ruthie looked quite sure of herself, and Madison was left to take the word of a four-year-old.

Whatever this new melody was, Madison decided that since it was Terry's doll, she was very happy that it was playing his song.

The house quickly became crowded after the pastor and his wife came, and the Doyles left soon after. Since Madison didn't know the new people anywhere near as well as she knew the Doyles, she spent the next hour hiding next to the roses, hugging her Terri doll, and thanking God that when dinner came, everyone would have to go home.
And they did go home. Even though Izzy invited them to stay, they left when Agatha did, and the house breathed a collective sigh of rest.

Eager to start earning her pay, Madison went into the kitchen to help Izzy with dinner and left her Terri doll on the couch beside the real Terry— a fact he didn't seem to appreciate, until she smiled "thank you" and that lopsided grin of his filled his face.

It made Madison all warm inside, like someone had turned the heat on too high in the house. Love could do nice things to you.

"Before we wash the vegetables," Izzy said as Madison came to the kitchen sink, "it's probably best if you get in the habit of taking off your ring. Always, always put it in the same place, so you'll never forget where it is. When I remember to take them off, I keep mine here, see?" Izzy took off her rings and placed them in a small ceramic box on the counter.

Nodding, Madison took off her ring. Or she tried to. She tried to very hard.

"Here, let me." Izzy sniffed, as though this were nothing at all, took Madison's hand in her own small one, and gave a tug.

Nothing happened.

Izzy tried again, but the ring would not move.

"Is it hurting you?" Izzy asked, and Madison nodded.

It hadn't been hurting, but the tugging was beginning to change that. Izzy tugged, and Madison tugged, and the thing simply refused to come off. Madison was beginning to wonder if she'd have to wear this ring for the rest of her life.

"John?" A trace of panic had crept into Izzy's voice. "Would you come here? We have a small problem."

A very small, very pretty problem that was beginning to make Madison's finger swell. Madison hoped Izzy didn't mind if she never got the ring back.

"What is it?" John came into the kitchen looking as though he were about to ask what was for dinner.

"The ring."
“What about it?” John asked.

“It won’t come off.”

John frowned. “Would this be the same ring Terry gave Madison?”

“Yes,” Izzy held up Madison’s hand, “it won’t come off.”

“Then I’ll get some wire cutters, and we’ll clip it off.”

Madison nearly fainted.

“I meant the ring——we’ll cut off the ring.”

“But you could hurt Madison.”

“Not if we’re careful.”

“Careful about what?” Terry came into the kitchen, and like John, looked as though he were about to ask what was for dinner. “What’s going on?”

“Oh, Terry.” Madison held up her hand as she fought back the tears. “I can’t get it off.”

“Okay.” He looked too composed, as though he were trying to find a way to talk her back into something. “Maybe we could wait a little longer. We were going to talk to Carol tomorrow, anyway——”

“I can’t get the ring off!”

“I know, but you’ll get used to it over time.”

“Terry,” Izzy shook her head, “the ring’s too small. I thought maybe it wasn’t, but it is. We’ve been trying to get it off, and now her finger is swelling.”

“Butter.” John went to the fridge and pulled out a tub of margarine. “We’re going to get it off, Madison, don’t worry. Your knuckle doesn’t look very big.”

“I’m sorry, Terry.”
"The ring is stuck?" Terry came over to Madison, saw the ring for himself as John took her hand and started to rub cold margarine all over her finger. "Don't panic, Maddie. After the day you've had, this is nothing."

It sure didn't feel like nothing. She leaned against Terry as John worked the cold slippery butter around the ring, then Izzy tried to rotate the ring, and it hurt. Madison tried not to whimper, but it hurt.

"Maybe God doesn't want us to get married."

"Don't say that." Terry peered down into Madison's face. "Don't even think that."

"But maybe it's true."

"And maybe the ring was too small and your finger swelled." Terry touched her arm. "Just take it easy. We'll have this ring off, and then you'll forget all about it."

"What's all the commotion about?" Abby came into the room, moved around Terry and Madison, saw John and Izzy working on Madison's hand, and Abby's eyes grew wide. "Have you tried ice? Isn't ice supposed to make swelling go down? Jake, get in here!"

"What?" Jake strode into the room and stopped when he saw the swollen finger. "Oh, man."

"It's never coming off, is it?"

"Easy, Maddie." Terry rubbed her arm. "We're going to handle it-- sorry, no pun intended."

"If you don't mind the damage, you could cut it off," Jake suggested, and Madison's knees gave way. "I meant the ring," Jake quickly added, and Terry had to help Madison to a chair.

"I think she knew that." Terry rubbed Madison's other hand. "You knew that, right? Jake meant the ring."

Madison nodded, and John pulled out another chair to look over the hand.

"The swelling is getting worse. I say we get out some cutters, then take the ring to a jewelers to get it repaired."

"Never mind the jewelers, just get it off her poor finger." Izzy sighed. "If cutters are the quickest way, then do it, but are you sure it won't hurt Madison?"
"Not if we're careful," Terry answered, and Madison again felt woozy. "Hey," Terry rubbed her good hand, "it's okay. It'll be over before you know it."

When would that be? exactly?

John went to get the cutters, and Abby scooted the curious children out of the kitchen. Madison only wished she could be one of them, and come back when it was over.

Still holding her hand, Terry took a seat at the table next to Madison.

"What if--"

"Don't."

"But, Terry--"

"It's not a sign. This isn't even your ring, Maddie."

She looked at him, and he smiled.

"It's Izzy's ring, remember? It's only a stand-in until I can get you the real deal. Which, after this, had better be pretty soon. I don't want you going around ringless. Some guy's going to think you're available, then I'll have to win you back from him."

"Oh, no, Terry. No one could ever take me from you."

He grinned, and squeezed her good hand. "That's more like it. Sit tight, and we'll get that ring off you."

"But what if God doesn't want us to get married?"

Terry shook his head. "I thought I just told you, this isn't your ring? The only thing it's a sign of, is that it's too small and that it's Izzy's."

"But--"

"God wants this, I want it, and so do you, so please sit still before my heart sinks any lower and your finger swells any bigger."
Madison swiped at the tear slipping down her cheek. "It hurts."

Bending over, Izzy gave her a hug. "I'm sorry my fingers are so small. Terry, I think you and Madison should go shopping for an engagement ring, and I think you should do it, tomorrow."

"I've never bought a ring before."

"There's a first time for everything."

"Maybe you could come with us?" Terry asked, then looked to Madison.

Madison had no idea what to say or think, only that the ring on her finger was too small.

"Do I get to come, too?" John asked, as he came in with what Madison supposed were the wire cutters. John made a test cut, and Madison closed her eyes.

She did not want to see.

"Dad, are you sure about this?" Abby asked.

"All this confidence is inspiring, but yes, I'm sure..." John's voice trailed off, then a clip sounded.

Madison opened her eyes.

"It's off." John held up a ring bent open, and handed it to Izzy. "We'll get it repaired, Little Dove, good as new."

"At least it's off," Izzy nodded, and set it aside to look over Madison's swollen finger. "This doesn't look as bad with the ring gone. I'll get an ice cube and a paper towel to help bring the swelling down. Then I'll start dinner while you take it easy."

"No, I have to help." Madison pushed to her feet, the meaning of the stuck ring not at all forgotten, but for the time being, set aside. "I have to help you, and earn my salary."

"Your what?"

"Terry gave me a job." Madison smiled as she rubbed her sore finger, looked over to the table, and noticed Terry seemed a bit sheepish.

"We can pay her for helping out in the kitchen," John said. "It's only right."
"No, you don't understand--" Terry started to say something more, but in her joy, Madison cut him off.

"He's paying me thirty dollars a week." Madison took the money from her jeans pocket to show John. "See?"

John looked to Terry. "We can afford more than that."

"No, you really don't understand." Terry got up, took John by the arm and led him from the kitchen while Izzy and Abby exchanged glances.

"Isn't thirty dollars good?" Madison asked.

"I wish I had that much money to spend on just Ricky every week," Abby smiled, and went to put the butter away. "Mom, do you really think a jeweler can fix your ring?"

"Yes, I do. In fact," Izzy smiled at Madison, "when we go shopping for Madison's engagement ring, I think that'll be the perfect time to have it repaired. Madison, would you please get the lettuce from the fridge, and I'll get your ice?"

Happy to start earning her thirty dollars a week, Madison got to work while Abby took a lesson from her mom on how to cook. Jake sat at the table and kept them company, and though Madison didn't feel outright happy, she did feel hope.

It felt hopeful to be doing something that was valuable, something that meant you were a little more closer to being like everyone else.

To being normal.

* * * *

"I still say we should be the ones paying her." John's voice echoed in the garage as he put away the cutters. "We all benefit from a clean house, and I'll point out Jake had a decent paycheck when he was our housekeeper and Izumi had to have bed rest while carrying the triplets."

"I appreciate the thought, but Maddie can't do what Jake did." Terry moved aside as John lifted the tool chest back onto its shelf. "She'll be learning a lot from Izzy, and--"
Okay, I get your point." John backed off. "You don't have to convince me. Madison is going to be your wife, not mine. I just don't like thinking we're taking advantage of her."

"You're not."

"Then I'll take your word for it." John sighed, and switched off the garage light as they left the building. "No offense, Terry, but she's like a--"

"A puppy?" Terry offered.

"Yeah, kind of. A stray puppy who's not used to kind words, and expects the heel of your foot every other minute." John paused at the back kitchen door and looked at Terry, his gray eyes almost black in the gathering dark. "It'd be so easy for her to get hurt, or for her to be misunderstood, or for one of us to do something that might hurt her." John shook his head. "I'm not saying this the way I want. What I mean is, I'm trying to be careful. So is Izumi, and Abby, and Jake goes without saying."

"Thanks, I appreciate that."

"Whatever you decide is best for Madison, is what we'll do. You'll have our support."

"That's putting a lot of confidence in me."

"That's putting a lot of confidence in God," John smiled. "He's the one Who picked you for Madison. That said, I want you to know you have some help, whenever you want. All you have to do is ask."

"Thanks."

"I mean it."

"I know."

"Whatever you need, I'm willing to help."

"I appreciate it."

"Even on stuff that seems out of my league-- I'd do it if you needed me to."

"Okay..." Terry paused.
"All you have to do is ask." John looked at him intently and Terry had no idea what to think. "My time is yours, Terry."

"Thanks."

Here they were, standing on the back step in below freezing temperatures, in driving wind, without their coats, and John was speaking in riddles.

"I don't claim to be an expert, but I could do some research, tonight. Maybe give you an idea of what to look for. After I finish that code you left me to do--" John emphasized the last few words and Terry winced, "my time is yours. I figure I can have the code done before dinner."

"I'm really sorry about that."

"I'm not looking for an apology."

"Then what are you looking for?"

"An invitation."

"To what? The operation when my doctor has to amputate what's left of my frostbitten toes? Could we go inside?"

John leveled Terry a look. "May I come with you tomorrow, or not?"

Blowing out a sigh, Terry grabbed the door handle around John. "Of course you can come. You didn't have to go on a fishing expedition, just for an invite. You could've showed up without one, and it would've been fine with me."

"I didn't want to intrude." John followed Terry into the mercifully warm kitchen.

Teeth chattering, Terry shut the door, went to the stove where Madison stirred a sauce pan over a burner. "John's coming with us, tomorrow. Any objections?"

Maddie shook her head.

"See?" Terry turned, flashed John a grin as John went to stand beside Izzy next to the sink. "Maddie doesn't mind."
Shivering, John sidled closer to Izzy. "I wasn't on a fishing expedition."

Terry reeled in air and John had to laugh.

"The offer to help wasn't an expedition-- I meant every word."

Abby gave a curious look to Jake, and Jake only smiled.

"You need help, Terry--" John moved so close to Izzy, she began to shiver-- "all you have to do is ask."

"Thanks," Terry nodded, and moved closer to the stove, "I'll keep it in mind."

"You two are crazy." Izzy looked up at John and sighed. "You should have worn your coats. Even the girls know better than that, and they're only four." Izzy didn't object though, when John wrapped his arms around her and hugged her from behind while she worked.

Terry couldn't help watching, even though Maddie kept her distance from John and Izzy. Maddie kept stirring, kept adding things to her pot until Izzy told her to do something else. Just standing next to Maddie made Terry warm all over, and he tried to catch her eye, to get her to smile, but she kept turning away from him, and kept turning away from John and Izzy as John hugged, and Izzy worked.

The stuck ring annoyed Terry.

Did Maddie really think God didn't want them to get married? Just because a borrowed ring got stuck on her finger? Frustration nipped at him and he pushed away from the stove to go find his laptop and work at that code John had been slogging his way through.

He wanted to work, to get his brain moving so it couldn't dwell too long on Maddie. He'd had a long day, and so had she, and they needed to rest. They just needed to give it a rest and get used to the idea awhile.

She needed to calm down, that's all.

Not wanting to work in the confines of the office, Terry took his laptop into the living room where the kids were scattered all around. Sitting on the couch, Terry didn't mind their noise, or the way Ricky bumped against his side as he ran his truck on the back of the couch. Terry usually needed quiet to concentrate, but tonight, he welcomed the familiar chaos. He hugged it around him until the ache in his heart began to ease away.
"Uncle Terry?" Ricky waited until Terry looked up from his work. "Is Madison going to be my aunt?"

"That's the general idea," Terry smiled.

"But the triplets are my aunts."

"Yes, they are."

Ricky looked more than a little confused.

"Maddie will be like an honorary aunt."

"What's honorary?"

"It means special."

A deeply thoughtful look crossed Ricky's face. "Are you special, too?"

"Well, I--" Terry didn't want to lie and say he was a blood uncle. Still... "I guess you could say I'm special."

"Then she'll fit with you."

"That's certainly what I'm hoping."

Since Terry worked in the living room, John worked there as well, until the call to dinner came and the computers were put away in favor of food. Terry's heart felt lighter, more buoyant after being with the children; then he saw Maddie at the kitchen table, her head bowed, her hand rubbing her sore finger, and his heart dipped.

No one spoke about rings or weddings, or anything related to Terry and Maddie over dinner. In fact, Terry noticed Izzy made a concerted effort to make things as normal as possible--not an easy feat, considering the events of the day.

Maddie kept quiet and ate very little, Terry said more but ate even less, and John left the table before everyone else to go work on their client's code. Since John had said he wanted to fit in some research about engagement rings before bedtime, he needed to really hustle and get that code finished.
No, for all of Izzy's efforts, the evening felt anything but normal.

When Terry admitted that he couldn't finish his dinner, he went to the office and buried himself in work. As he sat at his laptop steeped in lines of code, Maddie ducked into the bathroom.

She came out a few minutes later in her PJs and robe, and moved to Terry's desk to get her bag of goodies.

"Good night, Maddie."

She looked up at Terry, her bottom lip pinched between her teeth. He knew she was thinking something over.

"Maybe God doesn't want--"

"Good night, Maddie."

"Good night," she mumbled, and left the office with her bag.

From John's desk, Terry heard the tap tap of John's keyboard come to a stop. Terry looked at John, and John looked at Terry.

"If we stay up late, I think we can have this code knocked off before morning."

Terry couldn't help groaning. "What happened to 'I can have it done before dinner'?"

"So I was mistaken. It won't be the first time."

With a chuckle, Terry went back to work and was grateful when John didn't ask what Maddie had meant about God not wanting something. Terry was too tired to think very hard about anything other than the task at hand. One thing at a time, he kept telling himself.

He needed to get this coding done so John could come with them tomorrow morning, to hunt for a ring. With Maddie acting the way she was right now, Terry could wish their appointment with Carol wasn't for the evening.

* * * *
Maybe she should have left the bag in the office. Somehow, it didn't seem right to take these things when maybe everything was wrong. She was so tired she couldn't think, and when she tried to, all that came out was tangled up doubt and the need to curl up and disappear.

Wow, this bag was heavy.

She hauled it around Izzy’s bed, and boosted it onto the couch.

"What's that?" Izzy turned off the lamp. "Is that from Terry?"

"Uh-huh." Madison opened the bag and took out her teddy bear, gave it a hug and tucked it under the blankets beside her doll. She put the bag on the floor, looked at Izzy and saw her smiling.

"He's falling for you hard, I hope you know that." Izzy waited a moment, as if to make sure Madison understood, and Madison nodded. Izzy sighed, and coaxed Madison out of her robe.

The covers felt cold and yet snugly warm, and Madison slid under them to cuddle with her doll and teddy bear.

"Leave it to Terry to think of something like this." Izzy tucked the blanket around the two new additions, then around Madison. "If he gets you anymore of these, we're going to have to buy another couch. I hope there aren't anymore in the bag?"

"No, just candles and stuff."

"Oh, Terry." Izzy hugged Madison, took her hands in hers and said a quiet prayer. "Please, God, no bad dreams, tonight. Not after the wonderful day you've given them." Izzy finished the prayer, then wound the back of the doll and "Jesus Loves Me" began to play in a soft music box tune.

This time, instead of delighting Madison, it made her think of the stuck ring.

It was Terry's doll, playing Terry's song, and it nearly squeezed the breath from Madison's lungs. Hugging her doll and teddy, she wondered again if the ring had gotten stuck on her finger for a reason. As Izzy went to bed, Madison stared up at the ceiling where the night-light shone dimly. The more she thought about it, the more something formed in her mind.

After having spent nearly all her life with the Dragon, (which to her count, added up to about twenty-six years), she decided that the reason why being ugly, felt ugly, was because it WAS ugly.
And maybe, just maybe, the reason the ring had gotten stuck on her finger, was because God was trying to tell her something.

Maybe God didn’t want her to be ugly again. Not even for Terry.

* * * *

By the time John and Terry knocked off for the night, their brains were running on the pitiful fumes of what was left of a very draining day. They fell into bed on either side of Ricky, didn’t bother to change into pajamas, and pulled the heavy blanket over their tired bodies without commenting on the time. What had started out an innocent favor for an old client had turned into something more complicated, and without Terry, John would have been working on that favor for the next two days. At least.

Rolling onto his face, Terry fell asleep without even trying.

The taste of cloth and something else made the gears of his mind start to work. Detergent? Terry’s tongue moved and he realized he was tasting the pillowcase.

"What time is it?" Terry pushed onto his side, looked over his shoulder and saw the back of John’s head. "Hey." Terry reached over the blanket, nudged the head. "Wake up."

"Why? Go back to sleep."

The man had a point. Terry yawned, scratched his sweater and saw the light coming in around the curtains. It was day, all right. Hard to deny the fact when it was staring him in the face, but how to face getting out of bed when every cell in his brain pleaded to stay where he was?

Then he remembered her, and nudged his buddy.

"We have to find a ring."

"Oh, yeah." John rolled onto his back, looked at the bed between them and frowned. "Where’s Ricky?"

"I hate to break it to you--" Terry nodded to the clock-- "but it’s nearly eight."

"Oh, man." John pushed himself up and looked about as unshaven and grungy as Terry felt. "Why didn’t you wake me sooner?"
Grabbing his pillow, Terry hurled it at John. John ducked, laughed, and got out of bed as someone knocked on the bedroom door. Terry climbed out of bed in his rumpled slacks and sweater, and called for the person to come in at the same time John did.

The door opened and Izzy stepped inside. "Good, you're awake."

With a stretching yawn, John smiled. Then John straightened, looked at Izzy and then Terry noticed, too. Something was wrong.

"Did you finish your work?" Izzy asked.

"Never mind that-- what's going on?"

"Before you get alarmed, Terry, I've got Abby in the living room watching Madison." Izzy closed the door behind her, and Terry became alarmed.

He started for the door, but Izzy stopped him.

"She's had a hard night, but she didn't hurt herself. I made sure of it. Terry, please, just sit down a moment and calm down. I told you-- Abby's watching her, so sit down and give me a chance to tell you what happened before I start to cry."

Sober, Terry obeyed.

"Did you get any sleep last night?" John asked, and Izzy shook her head.

"It's not important."

"Yes, it is." John went to Izzy and held her. "What's going on? What happened with Madison?"

"To be honest, I don't know." Izzy looked to Terry. "I tucked her in last night, went to bed, and about a half hour later, I woke up to the sound of her crying."

"Crying?" Terry stood, but Izzy gave him a look and he forced himself to sit. "Why didn't you come get me?"

"Because you and John were already busy, and at first I wasn't sure if they were tears of joy or something else. I heard you two talking while John was getting the wire cutters last evening, and I thought maybe this had something to do with that. So I coaxed and comforted, but she just
could not talk to me. I asked if she was all right, and she nodded that she was. I really, really wanted to believe her."

"What happened?" Terry could barely hold still.

"I went back to bed, but felt uneasy about going to sleep. She was so restless, like she couldn't get comfortable. Then she started to cry again. This time, she was so quiet, I wouldn't have heard her if I hadn't been awake. I wanted to say something, but I was afraid of making things worse for her if I did. She'd waited until I was asleep, and I didn't have the heart to let her know I was still awake."

Izzy covered her mouth, shook her head and looked at Terry. "I stayed awake all night. I hated mistrusting her-- it felt incredibly disloyal, but I had this feeling that if I went to sleep, she might hurt herself. If she did, I wouldn't be there to stop her, and when I heard you and John go to bed as late as you did, I knew you'd need your rest to deal with this later. It seemed best to let you get your sleep." Izzy looked helpless. "I've been praying all night, and through the morning. I didn't know what else to do."

Fighting to gain his thoughts, Terry nodded. "Is she in the living room?"

"Yes." Izzy leaned into John. "She's dressed and I made sure she's had her breakfast. Now that you and John are up, I can get dressed, too."

"You're going straight to bed," John whispered.

"Thanks, Izzy, you did good." Terry planted a kiss on Izzy's cheek, opened the bedroom door and pushed into the hall. He passed the triplets' room, saw Jake standing in the doorway as the girls and Ricky played a game on their Mac.

"Abby's with her," Jake said as Terry passed, and Terry nodded his thanks.

Terry ducked into the office for something, then headed into the living room with a silent prayer on his lips.

On the end of the couch near the roses, he found Maddie curled up with her back to the TV. Abby sat next to her.

When Abby saw him, she mouthed the words, "Should I stay?"

Terry shook his head.
"Thanks," Terry told Abby, and he noticed Maddie's head turn a little at the sound of his voice. He waited a moment for Abby to leave the room, took a deep breath, then went to take Abby's seat next to Maddie.

Tucking her long legs closer to her body, Maddie said nothing and Terry didn't try to invade her personal space. He let silence speak for him, then sighed, and saw Maddie peek at him from around her teddy bear.

"I had no idea you'd like that teddy bear and doll so much," he smiled, "or I would've gotten them, sooner."

She remained silent.

"Izzy tells me you had another hard night." Terry folded his arms. "You want to tell me about it?"

She didn't move.

"Maybe you'd like to talk it over with Carol?" He reached into his pocket, pulled out his phone and handed it to her. "I've programmed her number into your phone, but you can use mine. Here, take it."

Maddie's eyes locked on his.

"Come on, help me out." He nudged her arm. "I'm not going anywhere, so you might as well talk to me, or call Carol, or tell me to get lost. Something. Something besides sit there and stare at me and drive me crazy."

Silence.

"Maddie, say something. Please. Tell me what you want, and I'll get it."

"A knife."

"No. Anything but that." Terry gripped the phone. "Come on, Maddie, you've got to fight this." He paused, looked at her. "The movies-- are you fighting those movies in your head, again?"

She shook her head, "no."
"Is it because you need--" he sighed, and again, she shook her head. "Okay, this isn't physical, but I don't understand. I'm trying to, but I don't understand." He saw her fingernails scrape her arm, saw the red streaks and realized Izzy hadn't been able to keep Maddie from completely harming herself, after all.

He gently reached over, took Maddie's hand, and after a moment of resistance, slipped a rubber band over her wrist.

She glared at him, he ignored it, snapped the band and heard her gasp.

"That has to be better than scratching yourself silly."

"I am not silly."

"I wasn't trying to say you were." He took a deep breath, paused a moment and braced himself. "Does this have anything to do with the ring getting stuck?" He shook his head when he saw her hide behind the bear. "Maddie, I told you-- that wasn't even your ring. How many times do I have to tell you that before you'll believe me?"

She turned away, buried her face even deeper into the doll and teddy and by the heave of her shoulders, Terry knew she was crying.

"I'm sorry." He touched her shoulder, but she shrugged it off. "Maddie, I'm sorry." He sighed, leaned his head on the back of the couch and stared up at the ceiling for a long, long moment. "Do you want to talk to our pastor?" He turned, saw her shake her head "no" into the teddy bear.

Mentally, Terry called himself every name he could think of without treading into curse word territory. He'd made her cry. How low could he go?

"If you had another ring," he tried to push on, "one that fit you perfectly, would you believe me when I say God wants us to be together?"

She turned a little, and he wondered how she managed to cry without making hardly a sound. Her eyes, though reddened from a sleepless night of tears, were as beautiful as ever.

"No, Terry."

Beautiful even when she was turning him down.

"Why not?"
"Because it's ugly, and feeling ugly like that isn't good. God doesn't like it."

"What's ugly? The ring?"

"No. Sex."

"Okay, give me a moment to catch up." Terry sighed, ran a hand over his grungy hair and tried not to panic. At least she was talking. That had to be good. "Sex is a part of life, Maddie. Without it, there wouldn't be any new people in the world."

"But God doesn't like it. He doesn't want me to be ugly anymore."

"I'm sorry, Maddie, but that doesn't make any sense. If He didn't want you to find me, He wouldn't have sent you to Three Mile Bay."

"But when I do it, it feels ugly."

"That was with the Dragon. I'm not him." Terry fought hard against frustration. "At least give me a chance to prove we can be different before you give up."

"But how can something so ugly, be different? Even with you?"

A flood of thoughts overwhelmed Terry to the point of needing to stop. He put his head in his hands and prayed for wisdom and patience. On the surface, this seemed so simple, and yet, he hadn't been the one chained to a bed for all those years.

"Maddie, I love you." He turned on his phone. "Do you believe that? Do you believe me?"

She spoke in such a low whisper, Terry almost missed it.

"Yes."

"Do you believe God sent you here, to me, so we could find each other?"

There was a pause-- a longer one than Terry liked-- but she finally sighed, and nodded, "yes." The rubber band around her wrist started snapping, and Terry had to squeeze his eyes shut and force himself to calm down.
He thanked God, and Izzy, for letting him have that morning's sleep. Without it, he would've been toast.

Toast. He was hungry.

The rubber band kept going, and he claimed her hand to stop the pain.

"There's a verse in Genesis, let me find it--" Terry scrolled through his notes-- "'Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.' Hear that? What you had with the Dragon was ugly-- I'm not trying to tell you it wasn't. But what we want, what this verse is talking about is something else, entirely. And that, Maddie, isn't ugly."

He saw her finger the rubber band around her wrist, but she didn't pluck. Maybe because he was holding her hand, or maybe because she was calming down, little by little.

"It'll feel ugly."

"Maybe so, but only because the Dragon took something that wasn't his, and made it that way. Give us a chance to make it work before you give up, Maddie. That's all I'm asking."

"I don't have a ring," she whispered.

"I know." He sucked in a deep breath and held it until his heart thumped to a steadier rhythm. "We'll fix that. We'll do that, today."

"If I don't have a ring, does it mean we're not engaged, anymore?"

"What do you think?" Terry looked at her until her cheeks turned bright pink. "You're as engaged as a woman can get, and still be single. There's no getting out of it now, Maddie."

"There isn't?" She looked a bit frightened, and he had to backtrack.

"I was being figurative, not literal. We aren't married yet." He looked down at their clasped hands and prayed. How he wanted this to work. Maddie needed a home where she could feel safe, and be loved, and he dearly wished it could be with him. Even if it meant never holding her, Terry knew in his heart he would still marry her.

With a sigh, Maddie scooted over, and leaned her head against his shoulder.
He let out a deep, contended breath.

"You think God wants me to be with you?"

"After we're married. At least to try."

"And if I can't?"

Terry squeezed her hand. "I'll still love you."

Even though his stomach urged him to go look for breakfast, he scrolled through the notes on his phone. With her head tucked against his shoulder, he began to read to her. Just a few verses, some things he'd written down, but sitting there on the couch, holding hands and feeling her head against his shoulder, made Terry the happiest guy on earth. A simple pleasure that had him wondering if John went through life feeling this way.

Oh, it felt good.

When Terry peeked down into Maddie's face, she seemed more at peace than he'd seen her in the last forty-eight hours. She was lovely, she was quiet.

She was asleep.

Terry turned off his phone, smiled when he saw Izzy come into the living room with John, Abby, and Jake.

"Is she all right?" Izzy whispered, and Terry gave a very careful nod, one that wouldn't jar Maddie. "Sleeping?" Izzy mouthed, and Terry smiled, and looked down at the face cuddled against his shoulder.

He looked back to Izzy and saw Izzy's great relief.

Poor Izzy. She'd done the best she could, and Terry wanted to go over and give her a great big hug. Thankfully, John did it for him.

Even though Izzy was dressed for the day, John pulled on Izzy's arm in a quiet coax to get her to go to bed, but Izzy shook her head, and went into the kitchen.

Smiling, Abby gave Terry a thumbs-up before Jake and Abby went back into the hall.
With a sigh, John sank into the recliner and watched the nearly muted television. They sat that way for awhile, until a loud ringtone came from John's pocket.

Maddie stirred. She looked up at Terry, and Terry smiled.

Head bowed, Maddie moved to the other side of the couch and Terry called into the kitchen,
"She's awake, Izzy."

"I'm getting your breakfast," Izzy called back.

"Mine too?" John called as he tugged the cell phone from his pocket.

"No, I was thinking of letting you fend for yourself."

John grinned, and answered his phone.

Snuggling next to the roses with her doll and teddy, Maddie went back to sleep. The TV kept going, John talked with a fishing buddy on the phone, and Terry didn't bother to quiet the house.

He knew Maddie wouldn't be asleep for long. After breakfast, Terry had plans and they included her.

* * * *

Someone tugged her hand, she struggled against the touch of it until the sound of, "Maddie, it's me," cut through the panic and she opened her eyes and saw Terry.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

She blinked, and tried to figure out why he looked different than the last time she'd seen him. His hair was combed, his face was shaved, and he wore a coat like someone who'd either just come home, or was about to leave.

Madison's heart choked in her throat at the thought of being left home without him.

"I know you're probably tired, but this can't wait." Terry went over to the recliner, picked up her coat and brought it to her. "Come on, get up. Daylight's burning."
"Is she awake?" Izzy came into the living room in slacks and a warm top, her hair pinned back in a way that made her look very elegant. Izzy shook her head. "Are you sure about this, Terry?"

"Sure about what?" Madison asked, letting her Terri doll and teddy bear sit without her while she got up and steadied herself against the armrest of the couch.

"Look at her--" Izzy sighed-- "she'll be fighting to stay awake the rest of the day."

"So will you, and you got even less sleep than she did." Terry held open the coat. "Come on, Maddie."

"Maybe we should postpone this for another day. This isn't an emergency."

"Oh, yes, it is." Terry jiggled the coat. "Maddie, would you get into this thing, before it walks away without you?"

"This isn't an emergency," Izzy said, as John came into the living room with Izzy's coat and purse. "We don't have to rush things."

"The house might not be on fire, but it's close enough. Maddie, would you please put on the coat?"

"I have to use the bathroom."

"Then why didn't you say so?"

Madison lifted one shoulder, shyly waited until Terry gestured for her to get going.

"Don't take all day."

With a wild gulp, she moved as fast as her aching hip could carry her, limp-ran into the hall and almost bumped into Jake.

"Getting the ring, today?" Jake asked, and she nodded as she ducked into the office.

She was still a bit dazed by the lack of sleep and all the hurry to keep up with Terry. Madison was a mess of tangled thoughts and even messier emotions, especially after last night's confusion, but somehow, the world had righted itself.
How had Terry managed to make sense of it all? She still didn't know how, only that he had. It made her want to curl up and die. In a purely good sense. Pure joy-- sheer joy-- what did normal people call it when joy overpowered them like this? Or maybe only insane people were ever this happy, because everyone else knew better, and knew enough to not be so happy.

Maybe crawling out of a hole and seeing the sunshine for the first time had its upside.

Then again, maybe joy like this only led to craziness, because none of it made any sense. Did it? Or maybe she was having a lucid moment and should be paying attention and taking notes.

Did normal people have thoughts like this, or maybe she was normal and just didn't know it? Her head hurt, it hurt to think, and nothing made much sense, only that Terry wasn't leaving without her and she was happy, even though she desperately wanted to sleep.

Leaving the bathroom, Madison thanked God for Terry. Sometimes, she wanted to scream at the top of her lungs and give up trying. Not that she wanted to die, but that trying to figure out things took so much energy. Especially when she was so very tired.

She moved into the hall and saw Abby coming out of Terry's old room with Ricky.

"Go easy on yourself," Abby said as Madison passed, and Madison didn't even stop to wonder what Abby had meant.

Hurrying as fast as she could into the living room, Madison heard Izzy tell John that Abby and Jake would be watching the kids while they were gone for the day. A jolt of alarm went through Madison. They were leaving for the day?

"Have fun storming the castle," Abby smiled as she came into the room with Ricky. "Make sure you pick out a nice ring, and don't fall for the first thing you see."

That sounded like a good idea to Madison, and she looked to Terry. Terry must have caught the look in her eye, for he shook his head, opened her coat and helped her into it with a solid,

"NO. We aren't coming back until we find the perfect ring."

"It doesn't have to be perfect."

"If it isn't-- if it falls off your finger, you're going to think we aren't supposed to get married." Terry zipped up her coat. "If the diamond falls out, you're going to say God is trying to tell us something. Oh, no, we are not going to rush this."
"But Terry, I'm so tired."

"You can sleep after you get home."

"But--"

"Do you want me to leave without you?" He waited a beat and she shook her head. "This ring will be for your sanity, as well as my own."

"It's too late to save my sanity, Terry."

"Now you tell me." He grinned and held out his hand, as though not at all afraid of her. "Come on, I'm getting hot in this coat."

Biting her lip, she took his hand and heard John say a prayer asking for God's blessing.

Then Izzy called out a goodbye to the triplets and they came running for their kisses.

"This will probably take a while. Order take-out if you can't make dinner," Izzy instructed, and Abby rolled her eyes as Jake came into the living room. "I mean it, Abby, I didn't have time to prepare anything easy, and Jake's been doing enough work in the kitchen."

"Mom, how am I supposed to learn how to cook, if I don't actually cook?"

"I thought the goal was to learn while I was around," Izzy said as she stooped to kiss Lizzie, Ruthie, Debbie. "Order take-out, and I'll pay you back when we return."

"I think I can handle dinner."

"Handle it however you like, just remember there's always take-out." Izzy kissed Ricky, then planted a kiss on Abby's cheek and Abby laughed.

"Anyone would think you're going into New York City. This is only Watertown, right?"

"Abby--"

"There's always take-out," Abby nodded, "and there's always Jake."

At this, Jake grinned as he got a hug from Izzy. "Don't worry, Mom, I'll make sure they eat."
As John, Izzy, Terry, and Madison stepped outside, a delivery truck pulled up to the house. Jake paused closing the door, and everyone watched as a man in a brown uniform rummaged around in his vehicle, then got out with a large box, and came up to the house.

"Terry Davis and Madison Crawford?" the man asked, and Madison noticed Terry flinch at the sound of her last name.

It was the last name of the Dragon, after all, and she wasn't his adopted daughter. Her rightful name was Jones, but even then, Madison wasn't eager to use the name of the momma who'd given her away. Neither last name was a good one. No wonder Terry had playfully called her Madison Ladyfair when he'd sent the roses.

Terry signed the slate, accepted the large box and smiled when he read the label. "It's from Brian and Emily-- I should've guessed. Whatever it is, it's been overnighted."

"I knew you shouldn't have given them the dishes." John shook his head at Izzy. "Now look what you made Brian and Emily do. They had to give something big to Terry and Madison, and they had to overnight it, to boot."

"I didn't know Terry and Madison were getting engaged so soon." Then Izzy saw the playful twinkle in John's eye, and swatted John's arm.

"We'll have to open this later." Terry passed the large box to Jake through the open door. "Madison and I have a session with Carol this evening, so we'll be back later to drop off John and Izzy."

"See you then." Jake hefted the box onto the living room floor. "Try to have fun."

"You're not going to open it now?" Izzy looked disappointed, but John tugged Izzy back and waved to Jake to hurry and close the door.

"If we don't get out of here now, we never will," John said, and Terry laughed in agreement.

Terry, however, had no need to pull Madison away.

She didn't really care about the gift.
The box was big, but it was from Emily and Brian-- two people Madison didn't especially like. They might have been nice in their own way, but one had chased after her, and the other had chased after Terry. Not exactly people Madison were eager to call friends.

At least they weren't chasing them anymore. That at least was a relief. They hadn't needed to send a gift, or overnighted it, or anything. Just Brian and Emily stopping, was gift enough.

"You're scowling," Terry held open the passenger door of the jeep for Madison, and she scowled a little harder. "I'm not asking you to hold your curiosity for very long. You can open the present when we get home."

With a laugh, Madison put on her seat belt without comment and Terry shut the door. She watched as he rounded the hood, heard John and Izzy climb into the back of the jeep.

The driver's side door opened, and Terry peered inside a moment before getting behind the wheel. "Okay, you're not dying of curiosity."

Madison folded her arms, winced when it hurt her stomach some.

"Is this because I'm making you stay awake?" The jeep shuddered as Terry jumped inside, then shut the door. "Sleep, you can catch up on, but this is important." Terry started the engine and from the living room window, Madison noticed Ricky climb up on something-- probably the large box-- and wave at them with a huge Jake-like grin.

She waved back.

"God willing, you're going to wear this ring for the rest of your life-- though not because you can't take it off-- so follow Jake's advice, and have a good time."

She smiled.

"This isn't about the ring, either. Is it?"

"It's okay, Terry."

"No, really--" Terry shot her a glance as he pulled onto the main road-- "that smile looks fake."

"It does?" She tried to lean into the mirror to see what a fake smile looked like.
"Hey, are you thinking diamonds or something else?" John asked from the back seat. "I need to know what to Google."

"What?" Terry looked in the rear view mirror. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing? Research." Madison twisted in her seat to see John tapping into his smartphone. "I didn't have time to do this last night, and it slipped my mind this morning."

Izzy sighed. "You didn't have to tell him that."

"Well, it's the truth." John thumbed his screen and glanced up at Madison. "So do you want a diamond, or something else?"

"I got it!" Terry slammed the wheel with his palm, and Madison jumped. "Brian and Emily."

"What do Brian and Emily have to do with the stone? I need to know what to search."

"This is about Brian and Emily." Terry shot Madison a somewhat annoyed glance. "They're my friends, Maddie."

"I'll just go with diamonds then," John said, and Izzy shushed him. John didn't seem to be listening though, and mumbled to himself as he tapped something into his phone.

"They're good people, Maddie."

"Do you want a gold and platinum, or an all-platinum setting?"

"Brian is a decent guy, he's been a good friend for as long as I've known him, and unless you put up a fight, he's coming to the wedding."

"Wait, there's a diamond tutorial here."

"Emily's coming, too. And so is her father. If you have a problem with that, speak up...."

The phone in Madison's pocket rang, and she pulled it out while Terry went on about how Emily took very good care of her father. Izzy's name lit up on the screen, so Madison flipped open the phone.
"It's me," Izzy said in a near whisper. "Tell Terry to leave you alone if he becomes too much of a handful. The men are having a good time and are acting like boys." Madison looked into the back seat and saw John give Izzy a pained look. Izzy kissed John, coaxed him back to what he was doing and smiled at Madison. "If you need to, take a nap."

"Okay."

"Who are you talking to?" Terry glanced at Madison, and she put her phone away. "Was that Carol? Are you feeling badly, again?"

"No, it was just Izzy."

Frowning, Terry shot a look at the rear view mirror and kept driving. "Well?" he asked Madison.

"Well, what?"

"Brian and Emily-- may I invite them to the wedding?"

"Of course."

"But I thought--" Terry pushed out a sigh as Madison tried to get comfortable for that nap.

"Okay, do we care about clarity?" John asked from the back seat, and Terry groaned.

In that groan, though, Madison heard the fun in Terry's voice, as well as John's. Izzy was right. Incredible as it seemed, the men were having a good time.

Hugging her arms around her middle, Madison closed her eyes and let the motion of the jeep lull her to sleep. She smiled. For all of Terry's smarts, he could sometimes be clueless. She liked playing his guessing game, though.

It was fun.

* * * *

What had just happened? Terry tried to backtrack their conversation, but couldn't find out where he'd gone wrong. Sometimes, women were a mystery to him. What did he mean, sometimes? If they weren't a mystery, he probably would've been married by now. One look at the woman napping in the passenger seat though, and Terry was thankful for that mystery.
Maddie had been worth the wait.

A little puzzling at times, and not without her moments of heartbreak, but all those years of being single had been worth it for Maddie.

"Hey." John tapped Terry on the shoulder. "From what I can tell, all that’s really important is that you like the ring. As long as you’re happy, and you don’t give up any major body parts paying for the stone, then you’re good."

"Don’t you mean, as long as Madison is happy?" Izzy asked. "She will have to wear this ring, not Terry."

"You might have a point." John grinned and went back to his phone. "Like I was saying--" and laughed as Izzy swatted his arm-- "the main thing that’ll cost you, as far as I can tell, is the carats. The more carats, the bigger the price tag."

"Carrots?" Maddie came awake. "Are we going to the grocery store?"

"No-- that’s carats, as in precious stones." John held up his phone so Maddie could see. "We’re nearly there, and I’ve done as much reading as I can. Farrington’s will have a good selection, though. I get all of Izumi’s jewelry there, and that ring I had to cut off your finger."

"I’m sorry about the ring."

"It’s no problem." John put his phone to sleep. "They can get it fixed all right. Terry, you have a ballpark figure you’re aiming at?"

"Not really."

"That’s asking for trouble." John patted Terry’s shoulder. "Go in there, know what you want, what you’re looking for, and what you’re willing to spend. That way, the salesperson can’t talk you into anything too painful."

"Maddie doesn’t know what she wants."

"Yes, I do. I want you." She blinked at Terry, and Terry couldn’t help feeling ten feet off the ground.

"Thanks for that, but I meant, what you want in a ring."
"I just want to go home."

"This first, Maddie. It's important."

She nodded, and looked through her rolled up window like a lost puppy looking for home. Man. He had to get that puppy comparison out of his system, or it would go on breaking his heart.

"A ballpark, Terry. You need one."

Terry breathed deeply, still heady over Maddie's saying that she wanted him. He wished he'd had a recorder on him, so he could play it back when things got rough.

"Two thousand?" John asked.

"Let him decide when he gets there," Izzy said, and John sighed, and put his phone away.

"Terry?" Maddie sounded timid. "Did he mean, thousand? as in dollars?"

"Yup."

She hugged herself and went silent.

The road wound into Watertown, and Terry headed toward the brick and mortar building with the elegantly scrawled Farrington's logo over the door. Terry pulled into the parking lot and Maddie started to rock against her seat belt.

He put out a hand, and she stopped.

"Have you had any painkiller?"

"I gave her some this morning," Izzy said, as Terry took his hand away to park the jeep. "As long as we're here," Izzy sounded upbeat, even perky despite the fact she hadn't gotten a wink of sleep last night, "we might as well try to find some wedding bands."

A monumental lump squeezed down Terry's throat. He looked at Maddie and saw her chewing her bottom lip without mercy.

"Maddie, stop." He nudged her elbow. "Just calm down a little, and you'll be all right."
For Maddie's sake, he wished he'd parked closer to the entrance. John and Izzy started to get out of the jeep, and Terry followed example. He prayed he hadn't made a huge mistake by dragging Maddie along.

Before Maddie had a chance to clutch up, Terry hurried from the jeep, helped her out, then secured her hand in his and made sure she was tucked at his side and not trembling like a baby chihuahua without a sweater.

Aw, there was that puppy image again. He really needed to stop that.

Standing in Farrington's parking lot, Terry had a moment of surreal pleasure. They were there--not for a friend, and not to help John pick out something for Izzy, but for Terry.

To get an engagement ring for Maddie. Wow.

He sucked in a breath, tugged Maddie's hand and started for the store. She followed at his side, and John and Izzy came behind. He wished someone would see them, recognize him and ask why they were there. See this shy, pretty woman next to him? She had actually agreed to marry him. Miraculous, wasn't it?

Thank You, God. God had definitely pulled some strings to make that happen.

Terry opened the door, held it for Maddie but she refused to go in first. John nudged Izzy in, then Madison was willing, and Terry and John exchanged small smiles.

Glass displays with bright lights and black velvet, lots of expensive looking jewelry, watches, and other impressive looking items lined the showroom. Terry felt Maddie crowd into his side, as though she didn't want to go any further.

A saleswoman came up to them, smiled, and asked if she could help.

"We're here for an engagement ring," Terry said it as though it were a rite of passage, and the woman's smile deepened, as though she understood. This was special. It didn't happen all the time in Terry's life, or in Maddie's, and the woman seemed to understand the importance of it, the significance of what this ring meant.

"Do you have a preference in gemstones?" she asked, and Terry looked to Maddie even though he already knew she had none.

"I don't know about Maddie, but I was thinking of diamonds."
The woman smiled. "Diamonds are classic in engagement rings." She showed them to a display case and started in about some of the things John had mentioned earlier-- clarity being one of them. Izzy bent over the glass to look at the rings, but John stepped close to listen to what was being said.

"What draws your eye to diamonds so much, is the sparkle, the scintillation that dazzles when you move. Here, let me show you." She took out some keys, unlocked a display and removed a ring with a small stone. She held it up, and it twinkled like a tiny fallen star. "See the flashes of light?"

"How much?" John asked.

"This piece is not quite a thousand."

Terry frowned. "I can do better than that."

The woman put it back and pulled out another. "The center diamond is half a carat, and the setting is white gold."

"How much?" John asked.

"Two thousand."

"Can we see something else?" Terry asked, and John agreed.

The woman showed them to another display, and offered to take out anything that caught their eye.

"Maddie?" Terry nudged the silent woman at his side, and saw she wasn't even looking up. "I could use some help. Do you see anything you like?"

"Can we go home?"

"Not until you have a ring."

The expression on Maddie's face was somewhere between pain and uncertain fear. She slanted a look at the glass as though it hurt her eyes, then turned away.
"Do you have anything where you can see the diamond more easily?" Terry asked, and they were led to a different display. He pointed to the first ring he saw and asked John's question.

"Four thousand."

It still didn't look very nice, and Terry scanned the display for the perfect ring. He had yet to see one-- THE one he wanted for Maddie. He pulled her along, and Izzy kept looking until she cleared her throat and tapped the glass.

Terry followed Izzy's finger.

"That one-- could we see it?"

The saleswoman unlocked the case, took it out and held it up for them to see. The diamond scintillation she had made a big deal of before, now caught and held Terry's eye. This time, you could see the diamond-- a square, multi-faceted stone that sparkled and flashed as it moved in the light.

"This is a sixteen karat, white gold solitaire, with a one and a half carat, princess cut diamond." The woman let Terry get a very good look at the ring.

"Could we see it on Maddie?"

"Of course." The woman led them to the counter, and Terry had to all but drag Maddie with him.

He lifted Maddie's hand, placed and held her hand on the counter so the woman could slide the ring onto Maddie's finger. The ring was too big, but the woman assured them it could easily be sized down.

Izzy smiled, looked at Terry and seemed to not want to influence him too badly.

"Could we keep looking?" Terry asked, and the ring was set aside for safekeeping.

They went back to the display, and Terry saw another ring-- much like the last, but with a bigger stone, and the saleswoman took it out, and they went back to the counter to see how it looked on Maddie's hand.
Nothing else caught their attention in the display, and by now, Terry had to put an arm around Maddie’s shoulders to make her walk. John had gone silent, and though Izzy wasn’t saying a word, she was smiling, and Terry was busy thinking.

With a sigh, Terry looked to Izzy. "What do you think?"

"You should be asking Madison."

"I will, but I’d like your opinion."

Izzy hesitated. "Of everything we’ve seen, I personally like the ones you chose. They're very classy. Even classic. But that’s just me."

Terry nodded, and rubbed Maddie’s hand. She felt stiff as a mannequin.

"Well?" he asked her.

"I like the first ring."

"Really." Terry smiled.

"Really." Terry smiled.

Maddie nodded. "The thousand-dollar one."

With a groan, Terry asked the saleswoman if she could give them a moment. He waited for the woman to leave, moved Maddie over to one side of the showroom, and used his body to block her from escaping the store but tried to give her enough room to breathe.

She hugged herself. "I want the thousand-dollar one."

"You don't even like it."

"How do you know?"

"I don't. I'm guessing." Terry folded his arms. "This is important, Maddie."

"You keep saying that."

"I'm willing to pay to get this right."

"And I'm willing to save money. Let's get the thousand-dollar one and leave."
"I'd like one of the other ones. One of the nice, pretty ones."

"But I don't."

"But I do."

"You're not the one who has to wear it."

"But I'm the one who has to pay for it."

She opened her mouth for a retort, but none came.

"Maddie, let's go back and at least ask how much."

She stared at the floor for a very long moment and sighed. "I'm not giving in, Terry."

"May I at least ask?"

She nodded, let Terry pull her to the counter while Izzy and John watched.

"The smaller of the two rings--" Terry asked the saleswoman-- "how much?"

"Nine thousand."

Maddie blanched.

"Could we see it on her hand again?"

The ring was slipped onto Maddie's finger and Terry sucked in a breath.

"How much for the other?" Terry asked.

"Thirteen thousand."

Yanking off the ring, Maddie gave it back to the woman, then pushed her way between Izzy and John. For a moment, Maddie struggled with the entrance door, but she managed to get out before Terry could get to her.
"Maddie, wait up." Terry moved past a customer coming into the store, stepped outside and saw her limping to the jeep. "It's locked, Maddie."

She kept going until she made it to the vehicle.

"Maddie, come back."

"No."

"You need a ring."

"I'm going home."

"I'd like to see you try. I have the keys, and you don't know how to drive."

She folded her arms in protest. "That's not fair."

"Maybe." He shrugged, crossed the parking lot and came to stand beside her. "I'll teach you how to drive one of these days, then you can leave me high and dry whenever you want."

"That's not funny."

"I'm glad you don't think so." Terry sighed, leaned against the jeep and studied the windblown hair, the pink cheeks brought on by a blustery disagreement and an equally stubborn arctic breeze. "Look, I can appreciate the fact you don't want to break my piggy bank. I do, Maddie, and I love you for it. I'm not in danger of going bankrupt, all right?"

She looked uncertain.

"I don't go bragging about this, but I keep a zero balance on my credit cards. When a bill comes in, I pay it off."

"Even if you get that ring?" She pushed hair from her eyes and waited for an answer.

"I'll need a little time to pay this off," he admitted, "but you're worth the expense."

She shook her head. "No, I'm not."

He smiled and gazed skyward to collect his thoughts. "I want this to remind you that you're something extra-special. That someone on this earth loved you that much."
"I'm not worth it, Terry."

"I wish you wouldn't say that."

"I'm not."

He pushed out a breath, looked back at the store and saw Izzy coming out with John.

"I love you, Maddie."

"I know, but that's not the point. I don't want you to spend all your money on me. I'm not worth it. I'm not. All your friends are going to see that ring and say I'm using you, and that you're being conned."

"I don't care what others say. And if they're really my friends, they won't think that. They'll know better-- they'll know the truth."

"What is the truth?"

"That I lost my heart to you." Terry sighed, nodded to Izzy as Izzy came near and John hung back. "We're having a slight disagreement over the ring."

"I've been thinking..." Izzy spoke with hopeful excitement mixing into her voice, which amazed Terry, seeing she'd had even less sleep than Maddie. "What if you splurged on the areas of the wedding that are important to you, and scaled back on things that aren't as significant? Such as the wedding cake. You don't have to have a huge fancy cake. I could make a nice one, and save you a lot of money."

Terry smiled. He could see Izzy had taken to heart his promise to let her help plan the wedding.

"This is entirely up to you two, but that's what I would do. I would splurge on things that would last beyond the wedding, and things that you'll remember most, years from now-- like the honeymoon."

Eyes large as saucers, Maddie backed away and began hugging herself furiously.

"Easy, Maddie." Terry stayed where he was, leaning against the jeep, but he kept his eyes on Maddie and told Izzy to continue.
"The ring, the honeymoon, and a wedding dress are the things I'd suggest we concentrate on the most. That, and a good photographer. Keep the flowers at a minimum, have a modest reception, and absolutely no catering. You have me for that, and I'm sure Agatha would be more than thrilled to help out. Those are just some of the ways I can think of to keep the costs down, and if you give me time, I'm sure I can come up with more."

"I'm not wearing a big ring." Maddie shook her head with emphasis. "And Terry, you never said anything about a *honeymoon*."

"Izzy was just talking. Please stop looking at me like that, Maddie. Could we get back to the ring? Please?" Terry puffed his cheeks, turned and propped his arms on the roof of the jeep. Maddie was giving him that cold icy stare again, the one that made him feel like he was wandering around Antarctica without a coat. "I wanted you to have something nice. Is that so hard for you to accept?"

He glanced back to see Maddie still hugging herself.

Terry turned to face her. "Maybe Izzy's right. I haven't been able to get my mind around the wedding yet, but if I promise to keep the other things within reason, maybe you'll let me give you this ring?"

Frowning, Maddie looked to John for help. "You think it's too much money, so tell him. Tell Terry. Make him stop."

"The decision isn't mine. It's yours and Terry's."

"But it's too much money. You think it is-- I know you do."

"What I think," John paused and smiled at Terry, "is that if I were him, I would want to give the woman I loved the nicest ring I possibly could. After Izumi and I married, I bought her a thousand-dollar ring. At the time, it was all I could afford, but it's not the price tag that makes the biggest statement. It's the love that comes with it, and I think that's all Terry is trying to tell you."

A wash of satisfaction came over Terry. John understood. If only Maddie could get that through her pretty head, they wouldn't be standing in Farrington's parking lot in the biting cold.

Nibbling her bottom lip, Maddie turned to stare at the store. For half a minute, she was quiet.
"If I make you promise there won't be a honeymoon," she sighed, "then I'll let you buy me the ring."

"Sorry, no deal." Terry paced a few steps, turned and looked at Maddie. "I will agree to no sex on the honeymoon, though."

"How about no honeymoon, no flowers, no cake, no wedding dress, and you get the ring?"

"No, Maddie, we have to get something besides the ring, and Izzy's right, you should have a dress. No sex on the honeymoon-- but we do have one-- a nice dress, go easy on the flowers, a homemade cake, and I get the ring."

Maddie looked away, smudged her eyes and sniffed back what Terry could only guess were the onset of tears.

"Do you promise about the honeymoon?" Maddie asked in a shaky voice that went straight to Terry's heart.

"I give my word of honor."

With a gasping nod of agreement, Maddie leaned against the jeep as though she couldn't stand a moment longer without help. Her whole posture screamed defeat, but Terry hoped this was for her own good, that it could be even seen as a victory of sorts.

Hey, she was getting a very nice ring, and he hoped-- really, really hoped, they were still on speaking terms.

"Thank you, Maddie." He reached for her hand, but she couldn't take it, and Izzy stepped forward to give her a hug and a shoulder to lean on. He waited as Izzy dried the damp on Maddie's face, then straightened Maddie's hair.

Head bowed, Maddie leaned into Izzy as they made their way back toward the store.

"So," John fell into step beside Terry, "the second ring?"

Terry nodded. He couldn't help but look at Maddie, and saw her shudder. "Izzy, you said it's a good ring?"

"It is, Terry."
"Classy, didn't you call it?"

"Yes, very classy."

Breathing deep, Terry pushed open the door, held it for the women, gave a brave smile to John and went in. Either he was making a big mistake, or he was about to do a very good thing. From this close a perspective, it was hard to tell anything except that his heart was racing and that Maddie looked about ten seconds away from a dead faint.

This wasn't supposed to be so hard. So complicated. They were only getting a ring.

This wasn't even getting married yet. How in the world were they supposed to survive that? How?

Terry cleared his throat, went up to the counter where their saleslady stood with another woman. She nodded to him to wait a second, then came with a smile and a look that said she thought she knew they were ready.

They were.

"We want the second ring," Terry said as she slid the velvet tray to him. "Could we also find a wedding band to go with that, something that would match?"

For thirteen thousand, he guessed he could've asked for the plant in the corner of the showroom, and she would've hauled it out to the jeep for him. She smiled, moved around the counter to a display of wedding bands and showed them some white gold rings that matched the solitaire engagement ring Terry had chosen for Maddie.

Since Maddie was in no frame of mind to say or do anything, Terry picked out a delicate band, and the saleswoman took it back to the counter and placed it side by side to show him how it would look on Maddie's finger. Terry decided Maddie would love it, even if she wouldn't say so right now.

John nudged Terry. "You need a wedding band, too."

They went to another display, and Terry tried on some bands, feeling very much like he was pretending to be someone else.

Surely, he couldn't be Terry Davis. If he were, he wouldn't be here, picking out wedding bands, of all things.
Terry settled on a shiny band in white gold to match Maddie's rings, noticed his hand trembled, took off the ring and gave it to the saleswoman before he said something stupid about how strange this felt.

He had to fill out some papers, then came the sizings, and since he wanted Maddie to wear her engagement ring as soon as possible, they offered to have it sized within the hour. Not exactly the potted plant offer, but Terry smiled and thanked her, and then watched as Maddie's finger was sized.

"Make sure this fits," he asked. "It has to fit perfectly. Make sure it's not too tight, and has to be cut off. Izzy, did you give them your ring? Good. And make sure it's not too loose. It has to be just right, or--" he stopped short from finishing the thought out loud. Or else Maddie might get cold feet and call off the wedding. Did these people know what they were doing?

He glanced at the embossed plaque on the wall, claiming they'd been in business since the early nineteen hundreds. Okay, they probably knew a thing or two, but this was important.

Then came his turn to be sized, then more paperwork, then payment, and Maddie stood with Izzy and John, looking desperate to leave. When everything was set, Terry told the saleswoman they would be back in about an hour, and nodded to Maddie that they could go.

When Terry unlocked the jeep, Maddie crawled inside like a turtle reuniting with its shell.

"That was an experience." John helped Izzy into the back seat and gave Terry a weary grin. "You must be feeling dazed right about now. I didn't even put down all that money, and I admit to feeling lightheaded as we walked out of that store."

Dazed was close enough. Terry climbed into the driver's side, and sat a moment to catch his breath. It wasn't every day he spent several thousand dollars.

"Terry," Izzy spoke up from the back, "we should find a place to eat lunch. It's almost two."

"Is it?" Terry checked his watch, blew out a sigh and realized they'd spent the entire morning in Farrington's. He looked at Maddie and found her struggling to put on the seat belt.

He touched her hand, and she let him snap the belt in place.

"Terry, you can have my thirty dollars."
"What for?"

"To help pay for the rings."

"Thanks, Maddie, but the wedding is on my tab." He started the engine, and headed out of the parking lot with an inward smile. It had been sweet of her to offer. "Lunch is on me, as well, so where to?"

"Could we go to the MegaMart?"

"Sure, there's one here in Watertown, but I thought we wanted lunch?"

"Could we eat in the parking lot like last time?"

"I guess." Terry glanced in the rear view mirror and saw John trying not to smile. "Don't you feel up to a restaurant?"

"Please, Terry? Please?" Her urgency made him feel an inch tall for even thinking of turning her down, and since no objection came from the back seat, Terry headed for Watertown's MegaMart.

For all of Maddie's weakness and the draining fatigue of emotion, life seemed to pump something into her that he couldn't explain. She strained against her seat belt, and when the MegaMart came into view, she all but clapped her hands with excitement.

Terry checked the mirror and saw John looking worried. He could all but read John's expression. Was Madison all right? Izzy's concern was more measured, and when Terry parked the jeep, Maddie all but fought to get out.

"Hey, take it easy." Terry tried hard not to be embarrassed, especially in front of John and Izzy. Maddie was Maddie, and for some reason known only to her and God, she wanted to go to the MegaMart.

As Terry climbed out of the jeep, Maddie's face fell.

"You don't have to come."

"I have to get the food, don't I?"
Yes, women were a mystery to Terry, and this one was no exception. She folded her arms and stared at him as though he had done something wrong. Or had said something wrong. Or maybe both.

"What?"

"Izzy can come get the food, and you can stay here."

"What's the big deal? Why can't I come?" Then it hit Terry, and he kicked himself for being a man. "I'll wait in the jeep, and you and Izzy take all the time you want. John and I will will rest our feet."

"We will?" John sounded like he had something to say about that, but Terry gave him a look, and John gave Terry a look back; Izzy nudged John in the side and John knew he was defeated and waved Maddie and Izzy goodbye.

When the women were out of eye shot, John leaned between the front seats and eyed Terry like he'd lost what was left of his mind after leaving all that money at Farrington's.

"What was all that about?"

"Maddie wanted to spend her thirty dollars." Terry shifted uneasily in his seat. "I hope by her eagerness to keep me from going, she's not going to spend it all on me."

John burst into laughter, and Terry shook his head as his best buddy in all the world fell back in his seat and wiped away the tears.

"I'm glad you find this funny."

"Sorry, Terry, but wow." John sucked in a deep breath. "After all you're giving Madison, I'd say you have this coming."

Though Terry begged to differ, he let the subject drop and pulled off his coat. What he deserved was a swift kick in the pants for not letting Maddie get some sleep. He wished he could read her mind, that she had a ticker tape across her forehead that told him what she was thinking at any given moment and more importantly, why.

"Just enjoy it, Terry." John's laughter calmed, he took off his coat, pulled out his iPhone and got comfortable. "Thirty dollars, huh? Well, it probably won't take her too long. I give them forty minutes, tops."
Terry checked his watch, and ignored the growl of his stomach.

Forty minutes later, Terry looked into the back seat.

"Okay, so I was wrong," John shrugged. "It happens." He put away his phone. "The things we'll do for lunch-- I mean love."

"If they're not back in ten minutes, maybe you could go get--"

"Go get them?" John finished.

"No, I was thinking of something to eat."

"I'm with you there." Then John sat up, grinned, and pointed behind Terry.

"Are they back?" Terry turned, saw Maddie limping beside Izzy, each with two grocery bags. At first glance, it seemed much too much for simply lunch and Maddie's "shopping," and the more Terry looked, the more it didn't make sense. Both of Maddie's bags, and one of Izzy's bags looked substantial. They were carrying a lot.

"What on earth--" Terry squinted, blinked, then prayed he hadn't given Maddie too much money. At least Izzy had been with her. She couldn't have gotten into too much trouble.

The men got out of the jeep, and Maddie swung her bags behind her, and said something to Izzy.

"Don't worry," Terry overheard Izzy tell her, "we'll keep this in the back seat."

Enjoying all the hush-hush, John glanced at Terry, and wiggled his eyebrows.

With a groan, Terry climbed back into the jeep, sensing he wouldn't be privy to what was going on. "I hope one of you brought food," Terry called to them, and Izzy laughed.

"We can eat in Farrington's parking lot, if you like. After all the money you spent there, I don't think they'd mind."

"Sounds fair enough," John said, as he loaded the bags into the back seat.

Terry reached over, unlocked and opened the passenger door for Maddie.
Looking winded, Maddie slid into her seat and kept her eyes down.

"Get everything you need?" Terry asked, and she nodded. "Okay then." He didn't ask a thing more, but started the engine after everyone was inside, and let Izzy take care of unpacking lunch from the back seat.

For all of their shopping, Izzy and Maddie had stopped by the deli and bought sub sandwiches, so the majority of their time in the MegaMart had not been in finding lunch. Terry's only relief came in knowing that Maddie hadn't been alone in the store, and that she'd only had thirty dollars.

Four bags-- one for lunch, still left three.

What had she done, bought fifteen loaves of the cheapest bread? Fifteen boxes of fudge bars? Terry found himself guessing, and each guess was as outlandish as the first.

As he pulled into Farrington's, he slid a look at Maddie, and found her smiling. Her-- smiling. For almost the first time that morning, she was smiling.

That was enough for Terry. No matter what she bought him, he would be happy, for she was happy.

That simple.

He parked the jeep, and after Izzy passed around the small bottle of hand sanitizer she kept in her purse, Izzy gave them their subs. John prayed over their food, and Terry had the satisfaction of seeing Maddie eat.

"Isn't this nice?" Maddie asked with a mouthful of food. There was a sparkle in her eye that spoke of excitement.

Maddie had a secret.

If the secret hadn't been from him, Terry would have been able to enjoy his sandwich. Loaves of bread? Fudge bars? Thirty dollars worth of frozen chicken nuggets? He glanced into the back seat and tried to get a reaction from Izzy.

"Good sandwich?" Izzy asked, and Terry had to nod, "yes."

He should've known better. The Johannes women were very loyal.
His curiosity didn’t touch his hunger, though, for Terry finished every bite of his sub, then polished off the last of Maddie’s.

By the time they left the jeep, it was nearing three thirty, and though Maddie looked tired, the food and her secret had given some bounce to her limp. She didn’t pause when Terry reached for her hand, and when they went into the store, she even smiled.

Then the saleswoman took out the engagement ring and Maddie’s smile faded.

"Don’t let it get to you, Maddie. It’s only a ring.” Terry slid it onto her finger, then gave it a small tug to make sure it fit. "How does it feel? Is it all right?"

"I guess.” She looked at her hand, looked at him, then back at her hand.

The woman told Maddie how to take care of the ring, but the overwhelmed expression never left Maddie’s face. Izzy asked some questions, Terry had to sign something, then it was time to go.

They walked out of Farrington’s with a two carat diamond on Maddie’s fourth finger, left hand. The stone blazed in the sunlight, scintillating the eyes with flashes of fire and brilliance that Terry noticed even from a distance.

With an audible sigh, Maddie stuffed her hand into the pocket of her coat. "How many times does thirty go into thirteen thousand, plus tax?” she asked.

"Too many times for you to worry about, so don’t even try.” Terry took her free hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Whenever you see that ring, do you know what I want you to think?"

She shook her head.

"I want you to think, ‘I am loved.’ That’s what I want you to think. Remember that, and I’ll consider it a reminder well spent.”

As they climbed into the jeep, Terry heard Maddie hum a familiar tune.

The ring, the music box doll, even the teddy bear and roses were all important. The fact she could hum that tune right now, proved it. Terry prayed with all his heart Maddie would keep on holding on, and remember. Cruelty had a way of making you distrust even the most well-intentioned acts of love, and after they married... Terry sighed.
After they married, she would need all the reminding she could get.

"Great are thy tender mercies, O LORD..."
~ Psalm 119:156 ~

"Remember the word unto Thy servant [Terry], upon which Thou hast caused me to hope... Thy statutes have been my songs in the house of my pilgrimage [the Johanneses' house]."
~ Psalm 119:49, 54 ~
Chapter Twenty-nine
Taking Care of Maddie

"How excellent is Thy lovingkindness, O God! therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Thy wings."
~ Psalm 36:7 ~

The diamond sparkled, caught Madison's eye even though she was trying to ignore its brilliance. It was expensive, it had made Terry spend a lot of money, and yet with each flash, it seemed to say, "I am loved, I am loved." It was so pretty, a piece of sunlight trapped in a polished stone and set so prettily on her finger.

No, she wouldn't look.

It flashed, and her eye traveled back.

I am loved. I really am.

The jeep swayed as Terry moved onto the road for the drive back home, and she shoved her hand into her pocket rather than be caught admiring the very thing that she'd tried so hard to talk Terry out of buying. Something caught, and she had to pull her hand out.

"Anything wrong?" Terry asked, as she looked the ring over from different angles to make sure it hadn't been hurt.

"It got caught on my pocket, but I think it's all right." She sighed at the brilliance. She shouldn't have let him do it, no matter how pretty it was.

"It caught?" Terry frowned, and Izzy spoke up from the back seat.

"It didn't catch on the material, did it? That's good. I didn't think that particular setting would."

The frown on Terry's face deepened, he adjusted speed and glanced in the rear view mirror. "Izzy, do some rings catch on material more than others?"

"Of course."

"Could they scratch someone? Maybe even hurt skin?" Terry's voice had an alarmed rise to it, as though a car in a parking lot had been touched and a security alarm had gone off.
"I don't know how badly it would hurt if you were to do it on purpose, because I've never tried--but yes, they could scratch. That's why I was so very careful about which ring I brought to your attention."

"'Brought to your attention?"' John laughed. "Izumi, you all but picked the ring, yourself."

"I did not. It was Terry's choice."

"Izzy-- back to the scratching." Terry blew out a breath, but his eyes stayed on the road. "I never thought to make sure it wouldn't scratch Maddie. It never even crossed my mind."

"It crossed mine," Izzy spoke with a smile in her voice, "so you can calm down. It's why I had such a hard time finding anything. Most everything they had was with the traditional prong setting, which is my favorite, but it isn't what Madison needs."

Madison looked at the ring in question and her heart bumped with secret joy.

"Its raised just like a prong setting, so it catches the light, but instead of prongs, this one is bezel at the corners, so it looks traditional enough to be very classy and yet won't scratch like the other ones would. And I admit, I liked the diamond."

"Is that why you took so long before you suggested something?" Terry asked.

"That's why," Izzy said with a yawn.

"What if I had gone with something else?"

"Don't worry, I would have told you if you were about to make a poor choice." Izzy yawned again, and Madison looked into the back seat to see John hug an arm around his wife. Izzy cuddled into John's hug, smiled at Madison, then closed her eyes for a nap.

"Thanks, Izzy." Terry glanced at Madison. "It looks like we're in pretty good hands."

Nodding, Madison settled into her seat and started thinking about something else entirely. She had so much to plan, things to do, logistics-- that's a word she'd heard on TV and had remembered-- and then there were the scissors. She needed some. Terry had taken away all the sharp things, and that was a problem.
She watched Terry as he sat behind the wheel, looking nice and handsome, and wondered how was the best way to get what she wanted.

* * * *

The fact Izzy had been looking after him and Maddie, came as a great relief to Terry. The saleswoman had said something about prongs, but--

Why was Maddie looking at him that way?

He adjusted his seat belt and concentrated on the road. After about two miles, he checked again, and groaned when he found her still watching.

"Maddie, would you knock it off?"

"Knock what off?"

"Whatever it is you're doing."

"I'm not doing anything."

Yes, she was, and he found it pleasantly distracting. That was the problem.

"Terry?"

He shook his head, half laughed, and half smiled at the way she said his name. "Yes, Maddie?"

"If I asked for something, would you say 'yes,' even if I don't tell you why?"

"That would depend."

"On what?"

"On whatever it is you want."

She sighed, looked down at her feet and Terry thought she'd given up.

"Terry?"

"Yes, Maddie?"
"If you loved me, would you give me anything I asked?"

"If you want something, Maddie, just come out and ask and I'll see what I can do. You don't have to beg."

"I want scissors."

"Scissors?"

"Please don't ask why, Terry."

"This wouldn't be to hurt yourself, would it?"

"Oh, no."

"Then why?"

"Please, Terry, I just asked you not to ask."

"I don't know." Terry shook his head. "I just spent thirteen thousand dollars, plus tax, then I had to pay for lunch, and now she wants scissors. What next? Glue? I don't know what the world is coming to, I really don't."

"You're making fun of me."

"I'm only teasing, Maddie, I'm only teasing."

"So can I have the scissors?"

"Do you mind if it's the kiddie-safe ones the triplets use?"

"I don't mind."

"Then you can have the scissors."

He slid her a look, saw her smile, a sweet parting of her lips that made his heart thump to a crazy-happy beat.

"Thank you, Terry."
His breath caught a little, he smiled, and it took effort to keep breathing. He turned on the radio, kept the volume low for Izzy’s sake, and tried to work up an interest for the agriculture report. In the seat next to him, Maddie turned to look behind her, made some noise with a grocery bag and Terry switched the radio to something else.

He sped up a little, still keeping the limit but pushing to get home. Maddie, it seemed, was eager to get into her bags, and Izzy needed to go to bed. So did Maddie, for that matter.

"Maddie, are you hurting your stitches?"

She straightened in her seat and looked at him. "If I ask you to promise something, would you do it?"

"I don't like making promises until I know what's being asked."

"Promise you won't go into the office bathroom, even when it's empty?"

"What for?"

"If I told you what for, you wouldn't have to not go in."

"Maddie, if I hear breaking glass in there--"

"I won't cut, Terry. It's not why I don't want you to go in."

"Okay then." Terry breathed deep. "How long am I supposed to stay out?"

There was a long guilty stretch of silence, as though she didn't know, and he switched off the radio. He was glad they were nearing home, and guessed this had something to do with the scissors request, and those three bulging grocery bags. He could cross the chicken nuggets off the list-- whatever she'd bought, it wasn't frozen, or she wouldn't be able to take it into the office bathroom.

If she needed privacy, he wouldn't get in the way, and he told her so. Whatever her secret was, it was making her happy. He contented himself with that thought.

Even before Terry could see the house, Maddie was already struggling to undo her seat belt. She pulled and tugged, and he put out a hand to calm her. Her lack of sleep and over-excitement were getting the best of her, and he held her hand until turning off the main road.
He rolled to a stop in front of the house, switched off the engine, then released her from the seat belt.

She pushed against the passenger door to get it open.

"Maddie, settle down. You've gotten out before, just calm down and remember how."

She nodded, took a few breaths, then tried the handle and it popped open without problem. When Maddie fixated on something, she knew how to give it her everything, almost to the point of forgetting all else. Sometimes, it scared Terry-- especially, when she fixated on him.

He opened his door but sat where he was while Izzy stirred and John got out. Terry knew he wouldn't be allowed to touch "the bags" and stayed put while Maddie went around, and collected all three. Though John offered to help, she managed it herself, and struggled with all the plastic loops until Izzy saved her, took the bags and passed them to John without ceremony. John was willing to help, and Terry silently thanked his friends.

As John took the bags into the house, Abby came out with a big smile and waved to Terry as he got out of the jeep.

"Did you get the ring?"

"We sure did." Izzy coaxed Abby over, and showed her the engagement ring on Maddie's left hand.

"Is that a real diamond?"

"For what Terry paid, it had better be," John laughed as he stepped from the house with Jake. "Your mom picked it out."

"I did not pick it out. John, I wish you wouldn't say that."

"She suggested it, and I agreed she had very good taste," Terry smiled to Jake. "The munchkins give you much trouble?"

"Not much." Jake grinned when he saw Maddie's rock. "Somehow, I'm not surprised."

"She is." Terry nudged Maddie, but held back from teasing her further when her cheeks blushed pink. He braced himself for a "How much did it cost?" question, but to his surprise, one didn't
come. John had already hinted that Terry had paid a lot, but even now, AJ didn't ask how much. Terry guessed Abby, in particular, would ask her parents in private, but the fact she didn't ask now, and in front of Maddie, proved to Terry that Abby had noticed Maddie's shyness over the ring.

For her thoughtfulness, Terry felt like giving his niece a big hug.

At Jake's side, Ricky leaned against his daddy, and watched as Debbie and Lizzie came out to meet them. Ruthie followed, and ran up to Terry.

"Uncle Terry," Ruthie asked, ending her run with an excited hop, "Jake said the box in the living room is for you and Madison?"

"True enough. That's what the shipping label said." Terry noticed as Maddie stole into the house. "Why, is the suspense killing you?"

"Yes! it is!" Ruthie twirled about. "Lizzie thinks there's a dog inside and we have to let it out, but Debbie said no one would send a dog, because Mommy's allergic and she'd have to take allergy pills like she does when Macho visits. But I listened hard, and I don't hear it making any noise, so I don't think they sent one."

"It could be a dog." Lizzie folded her arms as Debbie showed John something she'd drawn. "It could just be sleeping, that's all."

"Sleeping for all this time? And there aren't any holes, so how can it breathe?" Ruthie gave a patient look as Terry and the others headed inside. "I scooted the box on the floor, and I think it's stickers."

"If it is, there's a lot of them." Terry stepped into the living room with Ruthie hanging onto his hand, and saw the large box in question. To his amusement, it sported a medley of construction paper faces made by the munchkins. Ricky went over and pinned another eye on top of the box, so it ogled the ceiling. Apparently, it had been the center of attraction while they were away.

"Can we open it?" Lizzie asked, and the other two triplets chimed in with "Pleeeeeease?

"Madison's name is on it, too," John told the girls as he shut the front door. "Izumi, how close are we to eating dinner? Terry and Madison have an appointment this evening."

"What do you mean, 'how close'?" Izzy laughed. "I just got home. Give me a chance to get into the kitchen."
Abby looked alarmed. "But I thought I was fixing dinner?"

"Why should you, when I'm here?" Izzy asked.

"But I have the meal all planned out. All I have to do is prepare the food."

"Enough for six adults and four children?"

"It's no big deal. We have enough ingredients. All I have to do is multiply the servings. Besides, you should probably be asleep. If you don't mind me saying, Mom, you look terrible. You should take it easy for a change and let someone else do the work."

"Thanks, I suppose." Izzy sighed, but smiled when John snagged her by the hand.

"Let's go take a nap," he said, and tugged Izzy toward the hall. "Would you guys look after the triplets for a while longer? Mommy and I are going into hiding, and we're locking the bedroom door."

"John."

"We are, and I don't want anyone to come running unless there's blood or broken bones involved. Got it?"

Ruthie nodded. "Got it, Daddy."

"What about dinner?" Abby asked. "Don't you want to eat?"

"Keep it warm, and we'll get to it later."

"John."

"Izumi, you need to lay down and get some rest, and contrary to what our eldest daughter just said, you look wonderful; we've been sleeping on different ends of the house the past so many nights, and I'd like the chance to hold you a while. We're locking the door."

How Terry wished Maddie could hear this.

He looked about, and pushed off to go find her, only to find Ruthie still latched onto his hand and leaning so hard toward the box she was nearly horizontal. Right. The box. He'd forgotten all
about that. The munchkins were all over it-- Ricky picked at the edges of the packing tape and Debbie and Lizzie tipped it on one end to see if it would rattle and make a noise.

"Let me get Maddie," Terry smiled, and lifted Ruthie onto the couch as Abby headed into the kitchen with Jake.

"I'd like to see what's in the box, too." Izzy pulled away from John. "Just a few minutes, John, then I'm all yours. Terry, she's probably in the office bathroom. I told John to give her the scissors, but she's probably nervous you won't remember your promise to stay out."

"She has nothing to worry about," Terry chuckled. "I don't go in there when someone else is using the bathroom, and especially when she's in there. Don't worry, I won't forget that even when it's empty, I'm to stay out."

"Mom--" Abby stuck her head in the living room-- "do we have more black olives?"

While Izzy and Abby discussed olives, Terry went to get Maddie. He hoped Abby didn't knock herself out making dinner. It was just them, not a bunch of guests she had to impress. He moved into the office, rounded the desks, went to the closed bathroom door and gave it a sound knock.

It prompted a hasty, "Don't come in!"

He smiled. "Would you please come into the living room? Everyone wants us to open the box."

"You can go ahead without me."

"Don't you want to be there? It's for you, too."

"It's okay, I don't mind."

"Are you sure?" Terry could hear crinkling of some sort going on behind the door, and tried to ignore it for Maddie's sake. "I'll need to call Brian and Emily afterward, and thank them for the gift. Do I have your permission to include you in that thanks?"

"Uh-huh."

"Okay." He hated to leave her out of things, especially when she was a big part of the reason why they were happening. But if she didn't want to come out, so be it. At least she was happy where she was, even though it was a bathroom.
Going back to the others, Terry found the munchkins seated on the floor next to the couch, looking very much ready to see what was in the box.

"Let me guess-- she's not coming?" Izzy smiled as Terry accepted a pocketknife from John. "Don't worry about her, Terry. I'm taking care of her."

"Thanks," Terry smiled, not needing the assurance but grateful for it anyway. He trusted Izzy.

Terry slit the tape and Abby and Jake appeared from the kitchen. He hoped whatever was in there was worth all this excitement. The kids grinned as Terry pushed back the cardboard flaps, then lifted out another box-- this one wrapped with packing bubbles. He unwound the packing and found a box with color pictures on all four sides.

"A bread-maker?" Abby came closer and smiled as Terry set down the large box.

It was supposed to be a bread machine that made two pound loaves, or something like that, and Terry opened the second box to find foam padding and a compact machine much smaller than its boxes. The machine seemed familiar somehow. The munchkins looked at each other in glum despair, and Terry handed them the packing bubbles as a consolation prize for all their patience.

As they ran off to play with it, Terry could already hear Ricky claiming one of the lengths of the packing bubbles for himself. At least they were having a good time, and Terry went to the triplets' room and also gave them the outer packing box, for good measure.

When Terry came back, Abby looked puzzled for some reason.

"A bread-maker." Abby said it again, as if saying it a second time would change the fact it was still there. "You already have a bread machine, Mom. In fact, you have that one."

Terry smiled. "I thought it looked familiar."

"No, that's a newer model than mine, but Emily knows how much I love my bread-maker and I guess she thought Terry and Madison would like one of their own."

"But they're not going to need one of their own." Abby folded her arms. "They're going to live here with us. Aren't they?" Abby turned to Terry. "Uncle Terry, you're going to live here, with Mom and Dad, and next to us, aren't you?"

"To be honest, Abby, I don't know."
"But I thought you said dynamite couldn't get rid of you. I asked you never to move, remember?"

"I thought that was a plea to not move from the general area, and I'm not planning to. I'm staying put."

"But you are planning to move from this house?"

"I haven't given it much thought, Abby. I don't know." Terry handed the pocketknife back to John and saw the sober look on John's face. "I really don't know. I guess I've always thought if I got married, I'd move out and start a family with my wife."

"You can't move out. You just can't. You've always been here."

"Abby, let him decide what's best."

"But, Dad--"

"Abby, let him decide." John gave his daughter a look, and Abby swiped something away that looked a lot like a tear. For a moment, John opened his mouth as if to say something more, but he couldn't speak.

Moving out had never really given Terry deep cause for thought, because he'd never had a girlfriend, let alone a fiancée. The bread machine had suddenly shoved that into focus. Emily and Brian had assumed the same thing he had-- that he would move out and set up house with Madison somewhere else. It made sense. Couples went out on their own and made homes of their own.

This made sense.

Shaking her head, Abby went into the kitchen and a moment later they heard what sounded like someone crying. Terry started for the kitchen, but Jake held him back.

"I'll take care of her."

Terry nodded, watched as Jake went to comfort Abby. For some reason Terry had trouble naming, he felt guilty, as though he were ripping apart his family. This was only moving out, and it made him feel like a dirty dog for even contemplating such a thing. It wasn't as though having a place somewhere else other than here, was so strange a thought. He had an apartment after all, a fully furnished apartment not far from Three Mile Bay.
Of course, it was an apartment he hardly ever used, so it had never been an issue with his family. He had a family. Terry was feeling the full effect of that now, and a deep sigh drew Terry back to John.

"Whatever you decide, Terry, we'll support it all the way." John sounded strong, a tone Terry was used to when John was making a tough decision, and Terry nodded.

"Thanks. I know."

John gave a lips-pressed-together-smile that said he had a lot on his heart, and when John took Izzy's hand, Terry knew John was fighting back sadness. They all stood where they were for a long moment, and though Terry knew John could easily tell him how much he would be missed, John held back, and Terry knew why. John wasn't trying to make him feel any guiltier for leaving them than he already did.

"This is crazy." Terry gave a half laugh and collapsed onto the couch beside his bread machine. "I always thought if I got married, you and Izzy would want me out of the house."

"You what?" John let go of Izzy.

"This house--" Terry gestured to the four walls-- "I always figured you'd think it would be too small if I brought a wife to live here. As it is, I live in the guest room."

"That room is yours for as long as you want it. I don't know about Izumi, but I haven't considered that room as anything but yours, in decades. It's always been your room, and as far as I'm concerned, always will be. And that extends to Madison." John breathed each word so hard, Terry could feel the impact of them all the way from the couch. John looked to Izzy, and Izzy smiled and hugged John's arm.

It took Terry a long moment before he could speak. He got up, went over to them and gave them a hug. "Thank you for that."

"Think about it, Terry." John squeezed Terry's shoulder, and Terry stepped back to look at his friend. "You don't have to go, not unless that's what you want."

"It's not." Terry looked toward the hall and saw Maddie come into the room. "I'm not sure I have a choice, though. I don't know what's best for her."
"At least you won't make a knuckle-headed decision, thinking we want you out." John lightly knocked Terry in the arm. "That has to be the dumbest thing I've ever heard you say. As if I'd ever want you out."

"If I take you up on that offer, this house is going to get crowded."

"No more than it is right now. Less so, when we don't need AJ to help chaperone this situation."

"But when Maddie and I start having kids--" Terry stopped when Maddie began hugging herself. "I'm sorry, Maddie, I didn't mean to scare you. Thanks, Izzy." Izzy went to comfort Maddie, and Terry tried to press on. "Even if it doesn't get crowded in here, people are going to think I'm not willing to stand on my own two feet if we stay. They'll think it's because I need someone to prop me up. I know they already think you're the strong one."

"The strong one here, is you-- not me." John folded his arms. "Your two feet have been holding up pretty well considering what you've been through, and if people want to compare us, then go ahead and let them. I'm not afraid. They'll know what I've known for a long time-- that your feet are stronger than mine because they've been through more, and they've kept going when lesser men would've quit and retreated. Listen, Terry, if you want to move out some day in the far-distant future, then fine. I'll help you pack. But move when you're good and ready, and not because you think you have to. And certainly not because you think Izumi and I want you out. That's not good enough."

All that emotion poured onto Terry and he didn't know what to say. He felt helpless to give an answer, for he still felt the pull to move. John put out a hand, as if to stop him from making a decision at that very moment.

"Take all the time you need. Talk it over with Madison, as I'm sure you will. Take a few years to think it over-- I'm in no hurry." John smiled, then lowered his voice to a hush. "Unless you want panic in the troops, I'd suggest you kept this decision from the little ones. They won't take this as calmly as Abby."

"Are you sure you wouldn't mind us staying? What about Izzy? Wouldn't Izzy mind another woman in the kitchen? I thought women were territorial about things like that."

"Please leave the kitchen out of this." Izzy spoke as she took Maddie to the couch. "If you decide to stay, then Madison and I will get along just fine without you two trying to figure out how we'll possibly manage." Izzy lifted the box and started to show Maddie what it said about the bread machine. "I haven't been using mine lately, but tonight, I'll set up the one on our kitchen
counter so we'll have warm, homemade bread by morning. I love the way it fills the house with aroma. To me, the sweetest perfume in the world is a loaf of freshly baked bread."

Knowing what he did of Maddie’s past, Terry guessed she’d never eaten a slice of homemade bread in her entire life.

"Abby," Izzy called into the kitchen, "how are you coming with dinner?"

"How can you think of food at a time like this?" Abby asked, as she came into the living room and stared at them with puzzled horror. "The family's breaking apart, and you expect me to fix dinner? It's all right, Madison, I don't mean you. It's them I don't understand." Abby shook her head as John tugged Izzy toward the hall for their nap. "Dad, I don't think you're treating this very seriously."

"Give your poor old dad more credit than that," John smiled. "If you would, keep our dinner warm until Mom has had a chance to rest? And thanks for fixing dinner."

"Terry and Madison need to leave before five thirty," Izzy said as John continued to tug, "so make sure they've eaten and are ready by then." Izzy blew a kiss to Abby. "Your uncle will be all right, Sweetheart."

"But Mom--"

"Thanks for looking after the girls." Izzy smiled to Abby, then waved to Maddie as John led Izzy away to their bedroom.

It made Terry smile with happy satisfaction. He felt like pointing to John and Izzy, and making a big deal of their affectionate display.

Did you see that, Maddie? Is that anything like what you experienced with the Dragon? Did Izzy look desperate to get away from John? Were there any threats, any violence, anything that didn't shout love? That's what we want.

Had she seen that?

He glanced at the couch and found Maddie staring at the bread machine.

"I don't understand." Abby turned to Jake as he came into the living room in a spattered apron. "Uncle Terry and Madison are moving out, and Dad and Mom are going into hiding like nothing's wrong. I just don't understand. I know they care, but they sure aren't acting like it."
"They care, Abby." Jake gave Abby a hugging squeeze from behind and looked to Terry. "We haven't been listening from the kitchen-- someone was crying and I couldn't hear the conversation."

"I wasn't crying all the time." Abby let out a squeal as Jake tickled her. "I wasn't! Jake!"

Jake grinned, and held Abby fast. "Are you really moving out after you get married?" he asked.

"We're thinking it over."

"If you need help thinking it over, let us know." Jake gave Abby an extra-hard squeeze that made Abby laugh. "I'm sure Abby here would love to talk you and Madison into staying. I wouldn't mind a shot at it, myself. If you stay here, Abby and I could babysit whenever you want." Jake kissed Abby's ear, and Abby had to smile and relax a little with Jake's arms around her.

The effect was like sunshine on flowers.

"Thanks-- both of you."

"I think we'll have dinner ready in about ten minutes."

Terry nodded, smiled as Jake took Abby back to the kitchen to finish getting dinner ready. He easily guessed Jake was the one making sure things stayed in control in there, and thought again how good a match they were. One balanced out the other. He wondered how well he and Maddie balanced out each other.

Did they balance out well enough to make a marriage work?

From the couch, Maddie watched Terry with large gray eyes that made him feel off kilter, out of balance, and needing to reach out and grab onto something. Not exactly the effect he wanted, but this was love, and this was Maddie, and Terry's heart did a somersault when she gave him a half smile. A tiny ray of Maddie-made sunshine.

She looked back at the box and the smile slipped away.

He took out his phone, punched Emily's name in his address book and tried to make Maddie's smile come back. "Nice wedding gift, isn't it?"

Maddie reached around the box and snagged her teddy.
"You'll like homemade bread, you'll see." He smiled and his heart fell a little when she didn't. He had to push it all aside a moment later when Emily answered. "Hey, it's Terry. Maddie and I wanted to thank you and Brian for the wedding gift."

"Oh, you're very welcome!" Emily's voice was as upbeat and cheerful as ever. "I tried to think of something you could use, then I remembered how much you enjoyed Izumi's whole wheat bread and thought maybe Madison might like the help. It's the same model Izumi has, isn't it? I was thinking Izumi could show Madison how to use hers, so Madison would be able to make bread the way you like it."

"That was thoughtful of you, thanks." Terry grinned into the cell phone. "It's actually a nicer model than Izzy's, but I'm sure she can show Maddie how it works. Izzy's been teaching her to cook, and homemade bread is still very much out of Maddie's reach. A machine will be a big help." Terry glanced at Maddie and saw her hugging the bear. "Things have been kind of hectic around here. We've been out of the house for most of the day-- John and Izzy have been helping me pick out Maddie's engagement ring, and--"

"You have her engagement ring?" Emily gasped. "I wish you didn't have the flu, then we could see it."

"I don't think we're contagious. No one has a fever."

"Then come over. Both of our houses are probably about to have dinner, but maybe afterward, everyone could come over and have dessert and Madison could show off her ring."

"That's very kind of you." Terry paused. "I'd better check with Maddie. She's a wilting flower right now, and to be honest, I don't think she'll last the evening. Let me check." Terry put a hand over the receiver, looked at Maddie and found her watching him. "You wouldn't feel up to visiting Emily, later today, would you? She said she'd like you to show off your ring."

Maddie shook her head wildly.

"I didn't think so." Terry got back on the phone. "I'm afraid Maddie will have to take a raincheck on that. She's a bit worn out right now, and I'm thinking we might have to cancel the rest of today. We had an appointment with our therapist--"

"No, Terry, please--" Maddie looked alarmed, but she stopped from saying more while he was still on the phone.
"Well, we'll have to see how that works out," Terry sighed.

"I understand if Madison can't make it, but everyone is more than welcome to come. Brian and Dave are here for dinner, and I know Brian would love to visit with you all. How about six o'clock? I have a Double Dutch Chocolate Cake that I'm sure the kids would enjoy, and we can catch up on some visiting before the craziness of tomorrow. What do you say?"

"Double Dutch?" Terry winced, knowing this would hurt. "That sounds great, but that appointment I told you about is for six."

To Emily's credit, she didn't miss a beat or ask him why Maddie might make it for a therapist, when she couldn't come for cake. To Terry, the answer was more obvious-- because Maddie had issues that often turned to emergencies, but he didn't want to embarrass Maddie and kept that to himself.

"How about eight o'clock? I know Brian would hate miss seeing you all before we leave on our honeymoon, and so would I. Dad's resting in his room, watching TV, so he can doze whenever he needs. Company won't bother him in the slightest. How about eight? Can you make eight?"

"Thanks, Emily, I'm pretty sure we can make it. Do you want us to bring ice cream?"

Emily laughed. "I have a gallon of vanilla in the freezer, so I'm well stocked. We'll see you tonight."

"See you then." Terry hung up with a smile. As always, Emily was a good friend, and he suspicioned her remark about Stan had been made to assure him that Stan wouldn't be present to make him uncomfortable. It gave Terry an impression that whatever Emily had or hadn't known about her father's behavior in the past, she was more aware of it now. That she had someone like Brian, made Terry happier than words could express. He pocketed the phone, turned to Maddie and found her drilling a hole through his skull.

"What?"

"You're going to her house, aren't you?"

"Yes, but you don't have anything to worry about. You're off the hook."

With a sigh, she looked back at the machine.

A crazy thought occurred to Terry that Maddie might be jealous.
She collected the doll she'd been calling Terri-- a fact Terry found slightly annoying in an endearing sort of way-- added it with the teddy, and curled onto her side.

He crouched to her level. "You know I love you, don't you?"

She nodded, a shy smile starting around her mouth. She cycled through moods like a bicyclist moving through neighborhoods, but she had a constant and tender heart, even when she was hurting and all he could see was that jaded side. When those gray eyes fluttered and looked away, he realized he'd been looking at her too directly and for too long.

He stood, moved back and went to the kitchen to relay the invitation to AJ.

"That was nice of Emily," Abby said, as she slid her parents' dinner into the oven to keep warm. "If Mom and Dad don't wake before eight o'clock, one of us really should knock on their door. I know what Dad said about blood and broken bones and not interrupting Mom's sleep, but I think Mom would want to be there for that. On the bright side, this invitation gets me off the hook for dessert."

"Not that we had any planned," Jake grinned, taking off his apron. "The casserole is ready."

"Is that what you guys have been cooking? Not bad, Abby. Not bad at all."

"I wouldn't thank me just yet," she winced. "Jake helped a lot, and you haven't tasted anything. I'm afraid I messed up the recipe. It's a lot harder than it looks."

"She saved it-- it'll be fine." Jake looked unworried and Terry took that as a good sign.

Terry thanked them for all their work, rounded into the living room and paused to talk to Maddie.

"Dinner's ready, but if you finish early, you could get in a little sleep before we head off for Carol's. That is, if your heart's still set on going. I could cancel. Izzy had to take a nap, so there's no shame if you have to cancel. Do you still want to go? Are you sure? If you change your mind, let me know."

Maddie bit her lip, nodded, and watched as Terry started for the hall.

He paused. "Are you sure you're feeling all right?"
She nodded.

"Why don't you start dinner without me so you can get in that sleep I was talking about?"

She nodded. And watched him closely.

A little odd, but then, she needed a lot of sleep.

He pushed into the hall, came to the triplets' room and found torn packing bubbles and cardboard box all over the floor. This was nice. Anyone would think there had been a dog in that box, after all, and someone had let it out to make all this mess. He should have known better, but at least it had kept them busy.

"Uncle Terry?" Ruthie looked up from her destruction. "Where's the arts and crafts bag? We can't find it anywhere."

"You know, I think your Dad might have given it to Maddie. He was supposed to give her the kiddie-safe scissors, and he probably just gave her the whole bag. Why? Do you need me to get it from her?"

"No, I guess not." Ruthie kept working while Ricky had Stanley leaping from the corner of a mattress and onto a pile of cardboard.

"Dinner's ready, gang. Start washing up. We'll have to tidy this floor before your parents wake, and kick me out of the house for being a bad uncle." He stepped around the mess to upright an overturned wastebasket. "Come on, let's scoot. Abby went to a lot of trouble over dinner, so don't keep her waiting."

"Mommy cooked?" Ricky's eyes went wide with shock. "Uh-oh."

"It's okay, your daddy helped." Terry moved into the hall and almost bumped into Maddie. "What are you doing here? I thought you were supposed to be eating?"

Maddie hugged her teddy and doll, and stepped back. She kept looking at him and he didn't know what to think. It wasn't romantic, like she was trying to catch his attention, so much as she was trying to watch him-- to see what he would do.

"Are you feeling warm?" Terry tried to touch her forehead, but she backed off. "I told Emily no one had a fever, so I hope you're not trying to prove me wrong." He stepped into the office, took
out his receipts, then sat down to quickly enter the day’s expenses into his laptop. He wanted to get it done before dinner, before he was missed too badly at the table.

Kids ran past the office door on their way to the kitchen, and Terry hoped they hadn't disturbed John or Izzy with all their play.

As Terry entered the last receipt, he noticed something under his coat on the desk. Something bright blue with... red hearts? He lifted the coat and found a small long package in shiny wrapping paper.

He glanced at the door and saw Maddie quickly draw back.

Grinning, Terry looked at the gift tag. In very careful, very neat print, it read:

You are loved.

His grin felt shaky, and a lump formed in his throat. He looked back to the door and saw Maddie watching. The fact she was hugging her friends almost made him cry. She hid her eyes behind the bear a moment, then looked at him, as if begging him to open the gift. She really, really wanted him to open the gift.

He slit the tape, and pulled away the shiny wrapping paper. Inside, he found an ordinary ballpoint pen. It wasn't fancy, just something that cost a few dollars, but it had been wrapped so carefully, and with that precious gift tag, Terry found himself brushing away tears.

"Do you like it?" she asked. "It clicks, just like mine does, like the one you gave me."

There was such hope and joy in her voice, Terry’s heart ached.

"It's perfect, Maddie. Thank you."

"When you use it, you'll think of me?"

"Absolutely." He smiled from his aching, deliriously happy heart. "I promise, I will."

"Really?" She hugged her bear and stood on tiptoes to see the pen. "I was afraid you might not like it, that you'd think it was silly."

"This pen is not silly. I'll give it a place of honor in my pen holder and every time I use it, I'll remember the sweet one who gave it to me." Terry slipped it into the holder and quietly
wondered if she had thirty dollars more of those pens in the office bathroom. He rubbed his face. It didn't matter. If he had pens coming out of his ears later on, he'd treasure every one, for they had come from Maddie.

Tucking the gift tag into his drawer for safekeeping, Terry shut the laptop and went to go eat dinner with Maddie and his family.

* * * *

He'd liked the clicky pen! Madison could hardly contain herself. She wanted to go tell Izzy, but Izzy was asleep and she couldn't wake her—not when Izzy needed sleep so bad and had done so much that day.

As Madison ate the tasty dinner AJ had fixed, she tried to keep her eyes open so she could eat. Hard to do, when all she wanted was to crawl off and sleep. But he had liked the pen. She kept looking at him, to check if he had really liked it, and he kept smiling back at her and she felt easier.

Thank You, God. He had liked it.

Tired lines played around Terry's eyes, his mouth smiled slower than usual, but there was a sense of happiness to him that Madison tried hard to soak in. Things slid by her sometimes, the things that made Terry happy, and she desperately wanted to be like him, to see what he did, to have that kind of confidence in the next breath, that it wouldn't hold pain but something else. So many times, she felt like tightening into a ball; she kept expecting something bad to happen, to later open one eye and then another, only to find Terry enjoying something she had missed.

If she concentrated on him hard, maybe she wouldn't miss out on those moments as much.

The world faded. Terry bumped her arm, she widened her eyes and tried to give him a smile.

"Go lay down and get some sleep. Right now, sleep is more important than food." To make his point, Terry stood up from the table, pulled out her chair and helped her to the living room even though she could make it there on her own. "Are you sure you don't want me to cancel our appointment with Carol?"

"Please, don't cancel." Madison gripped his arm as he tried to get her to sit on the couch. "Please, Terry, don't cancel."

He pulled out a comforter and tugged it over her as she curled onto her side on the cushions.
"Please don't cancel, Terry."

"Calm down, I won't-- not if you don't want me to." He crouched beside the sofa and looked at her. "Are you close to cutting right now? Are you in trouble?"

She shook her head.

"Try to rest, Maddie. I love you." He tucked her Terri doll under her arm, and she relaxed.

Terry's comforting words, the soft blanket, the safe, warm feeling that it was all right to close your eyes, lulled her to a cozy, half awake sleep. Terry stood, moved away from the couch and the living room faded. Sleep came, and she fell into it completely.

It seemed but a heartbeat later, and someone's hand felt heavy on her shoulder. Panic washed over her, then tided from her body with the familiar sound of,

"Maddie. Maddie, wake up."

She wasn't so sound asleep she didn't know who that voice belonged to, and she tried to obey. She tried to, even though sleep demanded that it hadn't been a very long nap, that she needed more rest. Her body protested as she forced her eyes open, and there was Terry, wonderful wonderful Terry.

"I'm sorry, but it's time to go. You can get more rest in the jeep, but are you sure you don't want me to cancel?"

"I'm sure." Madison struggled off the couch, climbed into the coat Terry held for her and eyed the doll still sleeping in the blankets.

The house felt quiet, the kitchen was dark, and when Madison moved she noticed lights coming from the open bedroom doors in the hall-- all bedrooms but the master, that is, and she guessed it meant Izzy and John were still asleep.

"Let's go." Terry held open the front door and Madison looked back at the couch.

She bit her lip, edged around Terry and went to the couch to collect her doll. He said nothing as she hurried past him, and he didn't make fun of her when she climbed into the waiting jeep with the doll tucked under her arm.
The sun had yet to go down and it felt strange to Madison to see it still daylight when she'd just woke from a nap. She gave her Terri doll a hug and saw the real-life Terry slant her a look from behind the wheel. He smiled, said nothing, and Madison watched the trees speed by her window. The world dimmed once more, and before long, it disappeared altogether.

"I hate to break it to you--" she stirred and found Terry looking at her with an apologetic wince that for some reason, made her want to hug him. He just looked so nice.

It was then she noticed the jeep had stopped.

Through the windshield, she could see Carol's brick building, and Carol's sign, and Carol's shrubs.

They were here.

With a sigh, Madison worked to get off the seat belt. For once, she wished she could enjoy her sleep. All these interruptions left her feeling cranky, not in the mood for anything but a couch and a warm blanket. At least in the office, there would be a couch.

Hugging her doll, she climbed out of the jeep and shivered in her coat.

"I'm thinking we should have canceled." Terry locked the passenger door, shut it with a soft click that made Madison jump. "Look at you-- you're all nerves. I've already put you through a lot today, and you should be resting."

"I can rest later." She fell in behind him, but Terry waited until she caught up and could move with him at his side.

He pulled the entrance door open and held it for Madison. They went inside and found an empty receptionist's desk where Tom usually sat. He'd gone home for the day, and it gave an after hours feel to the place that emphasized Carol didn't usually do this for her patients. Carol's office door stood open and ready for them, and when they went in, Terry shut the door behind him, even though there were no other people about to overhear their session.

"Good evening," Carol smiled from behind her desk. She stood and shook Madison's hand.

Madison decided to just blurt out her news. "We're getting married."

"So he finally proposed." Carol smiled and shook Terry's hand. "When did this happen?"
"Tuesday, after we left here and we agreed he could ask me. Then he asked me again on Wednesday, but this time with roses. That’s when I said ‘yes,’ but not because of the roses.” Madison took off her coat, then showed Carol the ring on her finger. "He bought me this, today, even though I tried to stop him. I’m feeling kind of guilty about that, and I’m not sure what I should do."

"If you remember correctly, we did talk it over." Terry took his usual chair. "We stood out in the parking lot, and you agreed."

"I know, but it’s so expensive." Madison looked at the ring she’d secretly fallen in love with, then turned to Carol. "How much is too much for something like this?"

"What are you asking her for?"

"Because I want a second opinion. I want to know if I’m being dumb for keeping the ring and not taking it back."

"Go ahead and ask, but you’re not dumb." Terry sighed and looked to Carol. "We had this settled earlier, and now we’re going over it again. I knew it was a mistake to bring her down here without enough rest. She hasn’t been getting much sleep, lately. Izzy said Maddie has been having nightmares, and last night, Maddie didn’t get any sleep at all."

"Nightmares?" Carol opened her laptop. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Madison shook her head. "I’d like to talk about the ring. How much is too much for an engagement ring?" Madison stared intently at Carol, and Carol gave her thoughtful face.

"That depends. How much is too much for whoever is buying it?"

"It’s not too much, Maddie."

"Please stay out of this, Terry."

"Why? Carol just asked me a question, I was only answering. If you wanted another opinion, you know, you could’ve asked Izzy. She would’ve been more than happy to discuss this with you."

"No, Izzy picked the ring so it means she didn’t think it was too much." Seeing she was getting nowhere fast, Madison let it drop. She was stuck with the ring. She’d done her very best to make sure it hadn’t hurt Terry, and the thought gave her a quiet joy to know she could keep it, after all.
Her conscience was clean. "My next question-- and please, Terry, let me get it out before you try to answer-- I want to know what Carol thinks."

Terry held up his hands in a playful gesture. He was smiling. He knew, that she knew, that he had won on the issue of the ring, and a small part of her sensed that now he also knew she was pleased about being able to keep it. It stunned her. He could sometimes be a really good guesser.

"Your question?" Carol asked.

"I don't want to move after we get married, but Terry does. What do normal people do when one doesn't want to move, and the other one does?"

The deep intake of Terry's breath got Madison's attention.

"I never said I wanted to move."

"Yes, you did." Madison held onto her doll. "You said-- I can't remember your exact words, but you told John that you'd think about moving."

"And I am. I'm glad you brought this up, because I'd like you to think about it, as well."

"But I don't want to."

"Maddie, we have to at least consider the possibility."

"I don't want to consider it. You consider it. I want to stay with Izzy."

Bowing his head, Terry smiled. "So it's Izzy, is it?"

"I don't want to leave her."

"Well, I don't want to leave John, but after we marry things are going to be different."

"No, they won't."

"Maddie, they will." Terry's breath sucked in, he looked up at Madison and gave her a half direct, half blunted stare that had her squirming. "Trust me when I say they will. Even if we stay five feet from each other at all times, it's going to be different. We'll be married, and there's going to be times when I'd rather not have John and Izzy around."
"Not me." Madison hugged Terri and the real Terry sighed.

"I appreciate the fact you love Izzy. I do, and I love you for it, but you and I have enough to work through without an audience. If things were normal between us, I'd love nothing more than to stay, but they're not. Help me out, Maddie, but I think we have to go."

"Have either of you considered an alternative that might make you both happy?" Carol asked. "That would make you both comfortable after you're married? What would it take to make you feel comfortable with yourself and with each other?"

It seemed to Madison to be a hard set of questions.

"For me," Terry began in a quiet, careful tone, as if he were picking his way through difficult terrain, "the thing that would make me the most comfortable, would be if Maddie were happy. If she's not happy, then I'm not going to be comfortable and neither will she. The thing is, I'm having a hard time balancing that, against what could be coming our way after we marry. Maddie has agreed that we'll try to have sex-- not right away, and not even on our honeymoon, but later-- we are going to try. When we do, I'd rather not be home."

Now Madison was wishing she'd never brought up the subject. She wanted to bolt from the office-- the building-- the city, and go find a place to lose herself and forget she ever made such an agreement.

"Madison, what about you? What would make you feel comfortable?" Carol waited, and Madison tasted blood and tried not to chew her lip so hard. Carol didn't look impatient, but waited with such calm it gave Madison a chance to find her thoughts.

"I don't want to be far away from Izzy."

"You like her?"

Madison nodded.

"What do you like about her?"

"I don't know. She's like... I don't know." Madison prayed no one would laugh at her. "She's like my sister."

"You've never had one."
Madison shook her head.

"So you'd like to stay close to Izzy." Again, Carol hadn't asked a question, but Madison nodded anyway. Carol turned to Terry, and so did Madison.

Now it was Terry's turn to look thoughtful. He looked so deep in thought, Carol didn't ask him anything, though Madison nearly did. She wanted to beg him to stay with John and Izzy, but held back. If Carol thought it best to give him time to think, then so would she.

"For all my resisting, I don't want to leave home." Terry shook his head. "It is home to me-- when I think of home, I think of John and Izzy, and the girls, and Jake. But even that's changing for me. Already, in my heart, home is taking the form of Maddie. I don't want to jeopardize what we might share together, but I want both."

"You think staying with John and Izzy might get in the way?" Carol asked.

"I think it could. Simply because I'll know that John knows when Maddie and I start getting really serious. But there we are. Back to square one. We move out, and Maddie isn't happy and neither of us is comfortable."

"Maybe we could just not try, Terry."

Terry gave her a pained look.

"Or," Carol pressed on, "you could find a compromise."

"I'd rather just not try."

"Compromise?" Terry looked ready to consider the word. "I do have an apartment-- Maddie has one as well. When we need a lot of privacy, I suppose we could leave for a few days." Terry brightened as Maddie's stomach began to churn at the thought. "Then we wouldn't have to move out. If we ever did later, at least we could stay with our family for as long as possible." Terry began to look hopeful. "That makes a lot of sense, but I'd like to know what Maddie thinks?"

"If I need to--" she felt so tired-- "will you take me home?"

Terry looked surprised. "Do you mean right now, or then?"

"Then."
"I'll take you home, Maddie. If you that's what you need."

"And I can call Izzy?"

"Whenever you want. This isn't meant to be a punishment."

"But what about moving later, like you said?"

"We won't move without agreement. I'm sorry if I gave you that impression earlier, but I give my word, we won't move unless we agree. After what we've said here, though, I don't think we'll have to worry about that for a very long time-- not if we can make this arrangement work. We'll set up our hideaway at either my place or yours, and that's where we'll put the bread machine."

"And if the arrangement doesn't work, we won't have moved out for nothing." She felt a little better now. "I don't want to take you away from our family for nothing, Terry. If this doesn't work, then we can just leave things the way they are and I can keep sleeping on the couch."

"We'll see what happens, Maddie, but if you do wind up long-term on a couch, I'm going to make sure it's a comfortable one. Now maybe we can talk about the fact you haven't been getting much sleep lately. And those nightmares." Terry looked to Carol. "The night before last, Izzy said Maddie had one bad dream after another."

"But I want to ask about our honeymoon." Madison looked to Carol. "Is a honeymoon a honeymoon if there isn't any sex? If it isn't, couldn't we call it something else?"

"You're quibbling over semantics, Maddie."

"No, I'm not." She paused. "What's semantics?"

"You're splitting a hair, calling a rose by another name."

"What?"

"I'd like to address your sleeplessness."

"We can relabel the honeymoon if it makes you more comfortable," Carol said, stepping in and giving the two a moment to settle down. "Have you been getting enough sleep, Madison?" Carol took notes on her laptop and Madison wished she had a different answer than the truth. "Have you been having bad dreams?"
Madison nodded.

"Has Izzy been able to wake you before they escalate into night terrors?"

"Uh-huh."

"That's good, it's helpful to have someone there who can help. Have you been getting much exercise?"

"I can't-- not with my hip."

Carol nodded. "I saw your records. You were diagnosed with hip osteoarthritis."

"Yes, Dr. Nelson said my hip will one day have to be replaced."

"Did she say that as fact, or did she say something that maybe you thought sounded like fact?"

The question caught Madison off guard. "I don't remember. The doctor said a lot of things, and most of it I can't remember. She gave me an exam with my feet up in some stirrups. That's the main thing I remember-- that, and Terry gave me his cell phone so I wouldn't be afraid."

"Try to make an appointment to see your doctor," Carol nodded. "If exercise is appropriate, she'll let you know what kind and how much."

"So it's not definite Maddie will need her hip replaced?"

"I'm a psychiatrist, meaning I'm a physician as well as a therapist, and I'm guessing Dr. Nelson only meant it may one day need to be replaced, but that it wasn't certain. Sometimes things get lost in communication, especially when there's a lot going on." Carol smiled at them and Madison felt a little better for the misunderstanding. Carol asked Madison a few questions about the sleep she hadn't been getting, then leaned back in her chair. "What are some ways we might help you get a better night's sleep?"

"Besides getting more exercise?" Terry sighed. "I suppose Maddie could try an herbal tea, anything to help her relax. Absolutely no caffeine. We made the mistake of giving her coffee one time, and she nearly crawled out of her skin. Perhaps music? Reading from the Book of Psalms? How about sleeping pills? Those things are addictive, though. I'd rather stay away from them, wouldn't you?" Terry turned to Madison, and Madison held onto her Terri doll.
She was dreading another visit to the doctor's office, and the moment when Dr. Nelson would find out about the new scars. She'd cut more than once since the last time she'd seen her doctor, so there were many new ones to look at. There were so many to begin with, it might be hard for Dr. Nelson to know which were ones she'd seen before, and which she hadn't. Maybe that could be a good thing. But maybe a doctor could tell the age of a scar. Would it matter though, so long as Madison could say she was seeing a mental health professional like Dr. Nelson had wanted? Carol was a professional, wasn't she? Didn't Carol count?

"Maddie, calm down." Terry's voice brought Madison back to the office and she found herself scraping deep into her arm.

*What time I am afraid*-- there was a verse that started like that-- it had been on Terry's phone but she couldn't remember the rest of it and forced herself to stop scratching without the help of a comforting Scripture to lean on.

Sleep. Exercise. Change. This attempt for a normal life was hurting more than she had thought it would.

* * * *

As Terry watched Maddie struggle and fight not to scratch, he wondered if he wasn't making a mistake. He'd wanted to give her plenty of time to get used to their engagement, but in a way, time was against her. The more time she had, the longer she had to writhe and twist in the wind.

It made him think.

The session had grown late, and since Maddie had become listless and seemed to no longer be paying attention, Carol suggested that maybe they should call it a day.

He agreed.

"Before we go-- Madison?" Carol stood, reached over the desk and lightly touched Maddie's hand until their eyes met. "How do you feel about being engaged? Can you tell me in as few words as possible what you're feeling?"

"I'm--" Maddie seemed to search for the right words and Terry held his breath-- "everything's all jumbled up, but I'm happy. I love Terry."

"I've been admiring your doll. Does she have a name?"
While Maddie showed Carol her doll, Terry thought things over. To help Maddie, he must give her time but not so much time she languished from waiting. The timing would be a judgment call, he could see that now. After getting a marriage license, how long would they need to wait to have the wedding ceremony? He wondered. Pulling out his trusty iPhone, Terry did a quick search of the New York State Department of Health's website, did some reading, and almost didn't hear Carol.

"And you, Terry?"

"Huh?" He read one area in particular, and his heart sank.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm... feeling good. Happy. I'm happy."

Carol closed her laptop and gave him a cautious smile.

"Sorry, I was thinking about something else and wasn't paying attention. I am now." Terry put away his smartphone and focused on the discussion, or what was left of it as everyone got up from their chairs. "I'm heart over heels in love with a very sweet woman, and I'm happier than I deserve to be. As I'm sure my family can attest."

"Then I'm happy for both of you." Carol collected her things while Terry helped Maddie into her coat. "When I became engaged to my Brent, I remember feeling lost in a flood of decisions, and it seemed like they all had to be made at once. I've always been a little sorry I didn't take more time to just breathe and enjoy the moment."

Terry smiled as they filed out of the office. "Is it ethical to invite your psychiatrist to your wedding?"

"Bless you," Carol laughed as they moved to the entrance, "but my schedule is busy and any free time I've promised to my family. But thank you for the thought."

The three moved into the cold, made all the crisper by the night sky and a fierce gusting wind. Terry zipped up Maddie's coat so she wouldn't catch cold or blow away, then closed his own.

Since Carol had only stayed this late on their account, and Tom had already gotten off work, Terry waited as Carol locked the entrance. Standing there in the semi-darkness of the streetlamp, he couldn't stop thinking about what he'd read. To get married in the state of New York, Maddie would not only need a birth certificate-- which she had-- but also photo ID--
which she didn't have. They wanted a driver's license, passport, or an employment picture ID. None of them seemed likely without a lot of time and trouble on Maddie's part, and Terry was feeling discouraged. He kept forgetting, or underestimating what it was like to have so little to your name.

"Good night, Carol." Terry stepped aside as Carol opened her car door. "Thanks for the session."

Carol smiled back. "Thank you for walking me to my car. You're a true gentleman."

With a nod, Terry headed toward his jeep. Maddie kept up at his side and he wondered if she could wait the several months it might take to get her one of the documents the state of New York wanted. Could she wait that long? Less importantly, could he? It was a much longer wait than he'd originally anticipated for their wedding to take place.

Fighting back some frustration, Terry unlocked the passenger door, opened it and held it for Maddie. So close. All for the sake of a photo ID. He shouldn't have assumed that just because she had her birth certificate, all would be easy.

"Terry?"

He shook himself and realized Maddie was chewing her lip again.

"Are you mad at me?"

"Of course not. Why would I be mad?"

She shrugged as though it were obvious. "Because I'm so much trouble?"

"It's all right." He touched her shoulder. "Some things are worth a little trouble. Climb in, you're getting cold."

"But I'm a lot of trouble, aren't I?" Maddie got inside, stared at him as he shut the door. She looked worn out, like she didn't have the strength needed to keep talking.

He went around the back of the jeep, found she'd unlocked the driver's side and opened it with a thankful sigh. He slid in behind the wheel, closed the door and warmed his cold hands under his armpits.

"I'm a lot of trouble for you." She didn't fight as he fastened her seat belt. "Do you ever wish you didn't find me?"
“Nope.”

“Not even a little?”

“Not even that, so don’t give it a second thought.” Terry started the engine, put on his seat belt and saw Maddie secure the Terri doll under the belt across her lap. He smiled at her sweetness. “The way I look at it, Maddie, life isn’t easy for anyone. I’m not expecting a smooth ride, and I’m not about to throw a tantrum when things don’t go exactly my way. When did God promise us no pain, no heartache, and no problems?” Terry pulled out of the parking lot. “God is faithful. If He wants something done, it will get done.”

“I’m pain, heartache, and problems.”

“No, not you.” Terry reached over and took her hand. “I could never mean you.”

“Something’s wrong, though?” she asked, her words coming with a tired, sleepy sound that had him wondering how she managed to stay awake.

Not wanting to saddle her with a new problem when she already had so many, Terry gave her hand a quick squeeze. “Let me pray over it—God will give us a way through.”

“Through what?”

“Just let me think, Maddie.” He slowed to a red light and silently asked God for wisdom. Okay. He could put off the wedding long enough to get Maddie one of the photo ID the state of New York wanted. Teaching her how to drive was out of the question— it’d take too long— a non-driver photo ID would probably work, but he’d already looked into getting her one and knew she still didn’t have enough proofs of identity to apply yet. A passport would be a hurdle in and of itself, and an employee ID meant she had to get a real job. Ironically, getting married would’ve gone a long way in helping her obtain that non-driver photo ID, and it made him more determined than ever to find the way through that God intended.

In his soul, Terry knew God wanted this.

The light turned green and Terry moved through the intersection. He had two birth certificates and a Social Security card. That was it.

“Terry?”
If they wanted to get married and didn't want to put off the wedding for very long, one thing seemed clear.

It couldn't happen in the state of New York.

"Terry?"

Terry pulled into the nearest business to use their parking lot and a few moments to think. Leaving the engine running, he took out his iPhone and noticed the darkness gathering around the jeep. He made sure the doors were locked, reached up, turned on the overhead light and saw Maddie hugging her doll.

"It's okay, we're safe. We'll be going home in a minute."

"Are you okay, Terry?"

"I'll be fine, just fine." He searched the results, hit a link and it took him to a page about the requirements for wedding licenses in the state of Pennsylvania. Photo ID. How about Vermont? Same requirement. One by one, he checked nearby states until it became obvious that if any of them didn't require photo ID to get a marriage license, he had yet to find them. Anger simmered in his veins-- the Dragon had done this to her, he had kept her chained to that bed so long, Maddie now had a hard time proving who she was so she could do something as simple and basic as get married.

Terry hit the overhead light, shoved the phone into his pocket and started the jeep back onto the street.

There was no way around the several months needed for Maddie's ID. So be it. If he had to hold her together with duct tape and glue, he would-- but more importantly, God would, no matter how long this took.

Terry checked the time, winced, and sped up a little, not wanting to be late for Emily's get-together.

"Terry, I'm praying."

"Thanks for that, Maddie." He breathed deep, then realized he'd been so steeped in his own thoughts he hadn't been telling her anything. This was her wedding, and it was only fair that she should know. Even so, he wanted to break it to her gently. "Nothing very bad has happened, so
you don't have to fast along with those prayers. We'll be all right. I just found out the wait until we can marry will be longer than I'd been expecting."

"Is that all?"

"What do you mean, 'is that all? Don't you want to marry me?"

"Yes, I do, but I can wait."

"You realize we can't kiss until then, don't you?"

Silence.

He'd said it out of reflex, not out of thought, and a voice in the back of his brain whispered that he'd just made a mistake. He adjusted his speed, glanced at Maddie and mentally kicked himself for being so stupid.

"I take it back, Maddie. You're right-- this is no big deal. We can wait."

"Are you sure we couldn't kiss, Terry?"

"I can't, Maddie. It'd just turn me on. I need to wait until we're married, okay?"

No answer, just complete and total silence.

"I scared you again, didn't I?" He glanced at her, and she nodded. "I'm really sorry, Maddie. It's my fault, I should have been thinking more clearly. If it's any comfort, I don't think we'll be married anytime soon. Please, try to relax."

Not trusting himself to not make things worse, Terry let the radio fill the silence between them for the rest of the drive home. Poor Maddie. She'd been running on fumes to begin with, she had little energy left after the long day she'd had, and now he'd turned her moonlight pale with one comment.

A comment he prayed she'd be able to forget.

* * * *

Tired. She was so tired-- it coated her thoughts, even the frightened ones. 
She didn't know which scared her more, the fact Terry had kissed enough in the past to know himself so well, or the fact that the one thing she'd been looking forward to, had that effect on him. The dread of going back to Dr. Nelson smudged before her, and all she could think about was not being able to kiss Terry. Getting married had a curious sort of dread to it, mixed with wanting to belong to Terry, just not necessarily with Terry. She wanted those kisses-- she wanted them badly-- and now that she knew that about him, she wanted to burst into tears. Fatigue blurred the edges of her mind and she fought to stay awake.

What had Terry said about the Dragon again? What were those words that had eased her from the edge?

She wished she could remember.

Thoughts felt sluggish and yet they raced at the same time. If only she could take a nap, if only she could sleep, maybe the bad stuff would disappear and she'd find it had only been a dream.

Weak and feeling so tired it made her stomach turn, she leaned her head back and watched Terry. Darkness and light chased across his face, highlighting this feature, shadowing that one, caressing him with moonlight and the headlights of the occasional oncoming car. This wasn't a dream. If it were, he wouldn't be here. Dreams were never this sweet, this tender.

Why did things have to change? Why couldn't they go on like this forever?

She shifted in her seat and winced when her hip answered with pain. The acetaminophen had worn off, she'd been doing a lot of sitting and was stiff, and her eyes were so heavy she wanted to scream.

Needing comfort, she reached for Terry's hand and he gave it without pause or question.

She inhaled slowly, felt his thumb move in soft circles on the back of her hand and she began to pull away.

He stopped and she relaxed.

She had no strength to fight off the weariness that had been building since the day before, and in the semi-quiet with the radio and Terry, she tumbled into the clutches of an exhausted sleep.

* * * *
Terry shut off the engine, sat a moment and watched Maddie. He really hated to wake her. It seemed to him that he'd been doing a lot of that lately, and wondered if he shouldn't just let her sleep where she was. He pictured her waking in the jeep, alone, in the dark, freezing cold, thinking she'd been abandoned... NO. There was no way in a million years that he'd ever do such a thing to her, and it took him a moment to shake the grief the mental picture had caused him.

"Maddie." He gently nudged her shoulder and when that wasn't enough, he rubbed her arm. "Hey, wake up. Maddie? Come on, Sleeping Beauty, wake up."

She stirred, moved a little and kept on sleeping.

"I'm sorry, Maddie, but we're home. You really need to wake up now."

She didn't respond, but kept on sleeping like someone who'd reached the end of her endurance.

Terry sighed. She'd probably wake up if he made enough noise. He popped open the driver's side door and a cold blast of night air rushed in. He checked Maddie.

Still nothing.

He got out, locked the door, then let it fall shut with a sturdy slam. Someone came to the living room window at the house, but Maddie kept right on sleeping. Terry waved to Abby, rounded the hood of the jeep, unlocked the passenger door and opened it with gusto.

If he didn't know Maddie any better, he'd have said she was teasing, but she remained as lifeless as the doll seat belted on her lap. Becoming concerned, Terry leaned in and put two fingers to Maddie's neck. He felt a steady, resting pulse. She was alive, she was asleep, and she wasn't faking anything. She really was exhausted.

"Hi, Uncle Terry," Abby stepped from the front door in a heavy sweater, vapor spilling from her mouth. "You're running a little late."

"Shhhhh." Terry put a finger to his lips, and Abby came to the jeep looking puzzled. "Maddie's asleep," he whispered. "I can't wake her."

"Then why are you whispering?"

"I have no idea." Terry sighed, looked Maddie over and unbuckled her seat belt. He handed the doll to Abby.
"She belted the doll?"

Terry gave Abby a look but made no comment.

"Maddie, come on, Honey. You really do need to wake up." He shook her by the shoulder and she moaned. "Maddie, we're home. It's time to go to bed."

"No," she mumbled, and began to fight the hand on her shoulder.

"Poor choice of words," he breathed, and tried again. "Time to go to your couch, Maddie. I can carry you to the house, but I need you to help me get you out of this jeep. Can you do that much?"

"Is she coming to Emily's with us?"

Terry shook his head. "She knows not to expect Maddie. It's a good thing, too, because it looks like Maddie isn't going anywhere. Tell someone to make up her couch, would you?" Terry gently tugged Maddie toward the passenger door so he could first get his arms around her, then scoop her up.

"Do you need help?" Abby moved out of his way. "Should I get Jake?"

"No, just tell him to get her couch ready." Terry hoisted a half asleep Maddie into his arms, and Maddie mumbled something about being able to walk on her own. He ignored her, and turned to Abby. "Open the front door, would you?"

Abby scrambled to the house, swung open the door and called to Jake.

This wasn't exactly the way Terry had pictured coming home, with Maddie in his arms, and he hoped the neighbors weren't paying attention. She wasn't heavy, but he'd had a long day, too, and he felt it in his biceps as he made his way to the house. He stepped through the open door and found Jake hurriedly making a bed for Maddie.

"I forgot--" Terry turned to his niece-- "would you lock the jeep?" He thanked Abby, waited a moment longer for the blankets to get in place, then lowered Maddie onto the sheet-covered cushions.

"Well," Jake sighed, "at least she won't have trouble sleeping, tonight."
"That's a true blessing." Terry worked to pull off Maddie's coat, tossed it aside, then gently tugged off Maddie's shoes as Maddie made a feeble attempt to do it herself. "Are John and Izzy up?"

"Not yet. I was just about to knock on their door when Abby heard your jeep."

"You'd better go wake them. I'm running behind schedule, and we're about to be officially late for Emily." Terry covered Maddie with a comforter, and smiled as Maddie rapidly cozied beneath the soft blanket in a fit of pure and utter exhaustion. "What a day," he sighed. "I don't suppose the kids are asleep?"

"Not a chance," Jake said over his shoulder. "They're too busy making their own coloring books to notice it's getting late."

A moment later, Abby came in with a shiver, shut the door, and handed the doll to Terry. "I locked your jeep."

"Thanks, Abby. I'd better call Emily before she thinks we've forgotten about her invitation." He put the doll next to Maddie, and while Emily's number rang, he saw Abby go to the couch and tuck in Maddie.

When Emily answered, Terry apologized for being late, and told her to expect them in a few minutes. After he hung up, the fatigue of the day seemed to catch up with him all at once and he almost wished he could fall into bed instead of visit with Emily and Brian. Still, he had promised, and unlike Maddie, he could go. As he put away his phone, he noticed the state of his shirt and decided to do everyone a favor and put on a clean one. He'd been sweating a lot that day-- first over the engagement ring, then over the marriage license. Really, he needed a shower, but there was just no time.

Even before Terry reached the hall, the play of the munchkins could easily be heard coming from the triplets' room. He could hear Jake telling them to put on their coats, the sound of toys being put away and the cleanup that came after play.

As Terry rounded into his old room, the door to the master bedroom opened and Izzy came out looking rested.

"I'll be ready in a moment--" Terry said, and ducked into his bedroom for that clean shirt.

Putting on her coat, Izzy came to his door and smiled. "Jake told us about Maddie. I'm glad she's finally getting her sleep."
"I offered to cancel our appointment with Carol," Terry located a comb on his dresser, ran it over his hair without bothering to check in a mirror, "but Maddie wanted to go and I didn't have the heart to say 'no.' I'm thinking maybe I should have."

Quiet now, Izzy watched intently as Terry went to his closet, then opened the door.

He was being watched again.

Odd.

Then he saw it. He almost missed it, but there, hanging heavy by a ribbon from the metal closet pole was a medium-sized, bright blue package.

With red hearts.

"What in the world?" He looked at Izzy and saw her smiling. "What's this?"

"What does it look like?"

"It looks like a present. I had another under my coat, earlier."

"Really?" Izzy looked pleased. "I wish you'd found this when she was awake, but I suppose it couldn't be helped. Could I talk you into re-discovering it when she's around? No, that wouldn't work. She'd never look in this bedroom to see you opening it. Oh well. You might as well open it now."

"You put it in here?"

Izzy gave him a look. "We're running late, Terry."

"You put it in here?"

All the commotion attracted John. "What's up?" he asked.

"Terry found a you-know-what."

"There's more?" Terry asked.

"I never said that. Would you open it, please? Emily's waiting."
Terry pulled out the present, and smiled hugely when he saw the tag:

*You are loved.*

Tenderly taking off the tag so he could keep it forever, he tore off the paper and felt the weight of the medium-sized package. Whatever it was, it sure wasn't a pen. This had heft to it. Substantial heft. He let the wrapping paper fall to the floor, and gasped. Instead of the cheap item he expected, he found an electric pencil sharpener. A nice one.

Izzy smiled.

"I don't understand." He looked to Izzy. "She came from the MegaMart with three bulging bags. Three. I counted."

"Your point?"

"She gave me a ballpoint pen this morning, and it wasn't expensive."

"And?"

"And this thing cost what-- twenty? Twenty-five dollars?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"My point is, she went in with thirty dollars. This and the pen, at best, leaves only a few dollars to fill three bags. Three bags? This pencil sharpener isn't that big-- it couldn't fill a bag if it tried."

"Terry, you're thinking about this too much."

"I am?"

The noise in the hall was getting louder. John and Jake had the children gathered, and Terry could hear their voices. He knew it was time to leave, but the gift in the closet had him off kilter. Forget the shirt. He wanted to know what was going on with the bags. And the gifts. And that smile on Izzy's face.

Izzy left the doorway and Terry hurried after her.

He wanted to tell Izzy that he could easily look up this pencil sharpener on MegaMart's website. They would tell him how much it cost. Things weren't adding up and coming out to thirty
dollars, and Terry had a sneaking hunch Izzy was the reason why. He had absolutely no idea what Izzy and Maddie had worked out, but whatever it was, he trusted Izzy. He knew and respected her. Knowing Izzy the way he did, he guessed the extra money had even been Izzy's idea. It sounded like something she'd do, especially for family.

John, the children, Jake, Abby, Ricky, spilled into the living room ahead of them, and Izzy looked behind her and smiled at Terry when he continued to say nothing.

He trusted Izzy, and Izzy looked grateful for that trust. Especially concerning someone as fragile as Maddie.

The munchkins made a low ruckus as John checked windows, locked doors, and made sure the house was secure before they left. As Terry was about to ask the kids to keep it down, something stirred on the couch, and Izzy sighed as Maddie struggled to push herself up. The munchkins had done the impossible. Maddie was awake, or partially so, and she was pushing herself up and trying hard to force her eyes open.

"I want to go with you," she mumbled, and began to struggle to get off the couch.

"Never mind about that," Izzy hurried to tuck Maddie in, "go back to sleep, and we'll save you some cake."

Not that Maddie had wanted to get up for cake. Terry started to go comfort Maddie, but Izzy kept going and he stayed where he was.

"He found the pencil sharpener," Izzy whispered, and Maddie's face momentarily came alive in a bright, beautiful smile. "He loved it, so go to sleep and dream of Terry." Izzy took Maddie's hands, said a quiet prayer, then turned on the night-light in what Terry sensed had become a small routine with them. They truly had become close. "Do you have your phone?" Izzy asked, and she made sure Maddie's phone was close by. "Call us whenever you want. We'll just be down the street. We'll lock up the house before we leave, so you'll be safe." Izzy turned off the lamp, and Terry began to doubt if he should leave Maddie by herself.

The sharp things had been hidden, but she could always hurt herself if she wanted.

If she was awake.

It looked as though Izzy's instincts were on target, those secrets between sisters, that small exchange that said everything was all right, that Maddie was safe and wanted right where she was. They would come back. She wasn't being abandoned. Terry didn't have to be Maddie to
understand that. He had no idea if Izzy understood the impact of what she'd done, other than Izzy had her instincts and she kept to them, and they were often right.

Seconds after Izzy's comfort, Maddie was sound asleep and the munchkins were hushed out of the house. No one wanted to take the chance she'd wake again, though Terry had a feeling that Maddie was now feeling so good, and was now so tired, a natural disaster could wipe out their home and she'd still be asleep.

Outside, the night had become bitterly cold, and Terry fell into stride with Izzy and John for the very short walk to Emily's. The munchkins ran about them, now free to make as much noise as they wanted, and Abby and Jake walked arm in arm.

"Thanks, Izzy. She loves you, and so do I."

Izzy smiled, and leaned on John's shoulder as the moon followed them down the street.

"I second that, Little Dove," John said in his quiet, steady voice. "You've been quite a blessing to this family, and to me."

The praise seemed to embarrass Izzy. She kissed John's shoulder, gave Terry a warm, thankful smile, and was able to interrupt everything by ringing Emily's doorbell and changing the subject altogether.

Which seemed to suit Izzy just fine.

Hellos and congratulations and thank you's for the wedding gift they'd sent each other were passed around Emily's living room, and Brian and Terry hugged and congratulated each other on their upcoming marriages while Brian's teenage son, Dave, stood by and grinned. Macho barked his terrier head off, and the triplets introduced Ricky to their furry friend.

"I'm sorry Maddie couldn't be here--" Terry started, but Emily stopped him with a smile, and invited them to take seats on the couch and the chairs she'd placed about the room.

"I'm sure Madison has had a very busy day."

"You're about to have one, yourself," Terry grinned, and Brian grinned back. "Is everything ready for tomorrow?" Terry asked.

"You'll have to ask Emily that, I can't keep it all straight." Brian shook his head and looked about the room. It was then Terry noticed the boxes, the belongings stacked against the wall. "Dave
and I have been moving our things in-- after Emily and I get back from our honeymoon, I have to go back to work on Monday. So it’s kept us busy."

"I'm sorry we couldn't have helped."

"It's nothing Dave and I couldn't handle. And this way, Dave can already be moved in over the weekend, to keep Mitch company while we're in Niagara Falls."

"Niagara!" Izzy smiled. "Is that where you're going for your honeymoon?"

Terry was still reminding himself who Mitch (the aid) was, when the thought of Niagara Falls reminded him of his own predicament.

Beside him on the couch, John nudged Terry.

"You okay?" John asked in a hushed voice.

"Yeah. Just a lot on my mind, that's all."

"I can sympathize," Brian laughed, and Terry realized Brian had overheard. "I've been preoccupied and unable to string together two coherent thoughts, ever since she said 'yes.'"

"He has not," Emily said with a smile, "Brian has not only been coherent, but he made all the travel arrangements, himself. The tickets, where we'll be staying, the restaurants-- everything. I didn't have to lift a finger. And before anyone thinks I've forgotten, I'd better get the dessert." Emily stood and Izzy went with her to the kitchen.

On the carpet, the little ones played with a nearly manic Macho, who was unused to so much attention. He was loving it.

Dave grinned. "Dad's been on the computer, making reservations, researching wedding stuff. He's been driving me crazy. I'm glad the wedding's tomorrow, then he can drive someone else nuts."

"He's right, I have been driving him crazy," Brian said with a laugh. "If you need help planning your wedding, Terry, I could probably help out. Like Dave said, I've been doing a lot of reading up on the subject."

A frantic bark had everyone laughing as Ricky danced Firefighter Stan over the pup's head.
"I don't suppose," Terry hesitated, wondering if he should take Brian up on that offer. Just to see what he knew.

"Go on," Brian grinned. "Try me."

"I found out Maddie doesn't have enough ID for us to get a marriage license. If there's no way around it, we'll have to wait several months until she has enough proofs of identity to apply for a non-driver photo ID. Then we can apply for the marriage license, and get married. I'd been hoping to move up the wedding, but after this, that seems impossible."

"When did you find this out?" Izzy asked, coming into the room with Emily and a large serving tray of cake and ice cream.

"Today, as we were finishing up our session with Carol-- she's our therapist," Terry explained to the others. "I did a search on my phone and learned Maddie needs more than a birth certificate and Social Security card to get a marriage license in the state of New York. I tried other states, but I can't get around the photo ID requirement."

"There is a way." Brian winced. "You won't like it, but it would work."

"Tell me, please."

"Las Vegas. It's the only place I know of where you don't need anything but a birth certificate and a Social Security card to get married. I'm not kidding. Hey, they make it easy to get married down there. When my cousin eloped in Vegas a few years back, he told me all about it. Madison shouldn't have a problem-- not there. Stay away from the flesh shows and casinos though, that's what I'd recommend. Just get married. My cousin's marriage didn't last, but it was legal."

Stunned, Terry sat back on the couch and wondered if this was the answer to his prayers.

"Still, it's disappointing." Izzy helped Emily serve dessert from the large tray while Macho watched at their feet. "I'd been looking forward to a wedding here, in Three Mile Bay, but I suppose it can't be helped. You do what you need to, Terry."

"If we do go to Vegas--" Terry thought it over-- "I don't want to call off our wedding here. I want our memories to be here, not there. What if we had the first ceremony as a legality, something that has to be done to make this legal, but then we have a second ceremony here, and that's the one we buy the dress for, hire the photographer? That's the one we celebrate."

Except for the barking dog and the eating children, everyone was quiet.
Dave started in on his dessert and John broke the stillness with a deep sigh.

"It sounds like a plan, Terry. When do you want to do this?"

"That depends on how soon I can get everything set up." Terry grinned, suddenly finding an appetite for his cake and ice cream. "If what our very good friend and neighbor here says is true--" at this, Brian grinned-- "then I'd like to go just as soon as I can be sure it'll be good for Maddie. If all goes well, tomorrow, or the day after. That'd be Saturday, wouldn't it?"

"So soon?" Izzy sank onto the couch beside John.

For a moment, Terry wondered if Izzy didn't think the timing was good, but then he saw her smile, and knew God was opening a door for this marriage to take place. He still needed to work out the timing with Maddie, but if it all worked out, he didn't see why that stage of their wedding preparations needed to be drawn out. Then they could start on other, more happier things, like a church wedding with their pastor presiding, a nice dress, and honeymoon plans.

Terry felt his spirit lighten.

"John and Izzy invited us to stay with them," he announced. "Maddie and I want that, so we'll be staying with John and Izzy for the indefinite future."

A strong arm slung around Terry, nearly knocking the plate from Terry's hand as John hugged him fiercely. "Thank You, Lord! You talked it over with Madison?"

"I did, and it turns out she and Izzy are long lost sisters." Terry saw Izzy's smile deepen. "It looks like this family will be staying together. And thanks to Brian and Emily, I hope we'll be able to invite them to our own wedding here in Three Mile Bay, sometime soon."

"Amen to that." Brian was smiling so hard Terry wondered if it would become permanent, then he realized he was smiling just as much.

It meant getting hugs from everyone in the room, especially from a tearful Abby. The family would be staying together. If Emily or Brian wondered how they'd manage to get along in one house, they didn't say, and really, they didn't look too surprised by Terry's announcement. Terry wondered if that was a compliment to the closeness of their family, or a commentary on his perceived mental health and wellbeing. He decided to put it out of his mind. The future Mr. and Mrs. Donovan were genuinely happy for him and Maddie, and that was all that really mattered.
After dessert had been finished, Brian and Dave got ready to leave with everyone else. It would be the last night Brian would spend alone as a bachelor, and though there were no parties to encourage him as a new husband in the Lord, the small group gathered in the living room and asked God to bless the two couples about to be married.

How Terry wished Maddie could have been here, but as they left the house and Emily went to check on her father, Terry knew it had probably worked out for the best. The old friends had been able to visit as they were, as old friends, and not old rivals. Maddie didn’t really know Brian and Emily as anything but the woman who’d chased Terry, and the man who’d scared Maddie silly, but after this, Maddie would owe them both in a very big way.

Terry could hardly wait until tomorrow morning, when he could tell Maddie the good news.

They would be able to marry, very, very soon.

"With God all things are possible."
~ Matthew 19:26 ~
Chapter Thirty

Butterfly Wings

"The eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to shew Himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward Him."
~ 2 Chronicles 16:9 ~

Comfort eased her into consciousness, a security that had come from holding Terry's hand as she tumbled into sleep. She had reached for him and he had been there, a firm, steadying hand that had let her rest while struggling with all that exhaustion. The lack of sleep had worn her down to nothing, left her with so little to work with that her thoughts had centered around kissing turning on Terry, and not on what had really mattered most last night.

As Madison's eyes flicked open and the darkness of the living room came into focus, she settled down to do some early morning thinking.

A solid night's sleep felt good, for a change. Her thoughts felt like they had feet under them, that if she put them on the ground they could stand and not topple over. And that was good, for after Terry's news about having to wait longer to get married, she had a lot on her heart.

She wanted to think.

Why was it the deeper she plunged into these unknown but happy waters, the more lost she felt?

All those years with the Dragon, she'd learned to crawl inside herself to survive, and it had worked. She'd waited, endured each moment as it had come, and yet, sometimes, the hardest thing to take hadn't been the Dragon, but the knowledge that the world was going on without her, and wasn't missing her at all. For her, time had mostly stood still, not really growing up, not really doing anything but surviving her existence, and the world wasn't missing her, it wasn't noticing that she wasn't there. It was going on without her like she didn't matter. It had been the loneliest feeling in the world.

She didn't want to survive anymore. She wanted to live.

The more she saw of this family, the more she understood there was a difference.

Crawling inside herself had worked when she'd been chained to one spot and she couldn't go any farther than she could reach, but here, she could reach as far as she wanted. The only thing to hold her back, was herself.
After all those years of wishing she could be somewhere else, here she was—she WAS somewhere else, and now she needed to become more. She needed to be more. She needed to reach as far as she possibly could, or else she still wouldn't be free.

If the Dragon saw her right now... Madison shuddered.

He'd be so angry, and yet, he'd probably tell her she was stupid for thinking she could ever exist without him, and that the way he saw it, she wasn't. Look at her, she was a grown woman carrying around a doll. Did Izzy carry one, or Abby? The triplets did, but they were four, going on five. The Dragon would've loved that.

Yet who cared what the Dragon would have thought? what he would have wanted?

This was her life now, not his. He had no say. Not anymore. God had taken that chain off her, and now it was up to her to free herself.

The clarity of her thoughts was startling, and it frightened Madison. She didn't want to think, she wanted to coast, and to not have to deal with what it meant to be free. There was a responsibility here that she was beginning to realize, a responsibility to God, and to that eight-year-old child who'd lost everything when her momma had walked away and never looked back.

She remembered last night, when Terry said they'd have to wait longer than he'd thought for them to get married. Last night she'd been relieved, but now she wanted to take it all back. She wanted to go forward, not stay the way she was.

The problem though-- and it was a very big problem-- was that going forward meant even more change. Change wasn't easy, it meant stepping outside herself and learning even more new things and that wasn't going to be easy. It already hadn't, but more was needed. It made her want to stay on the couch with her Terri doll and watch the world go by... but Madison caught herself.

She didn't want that.

She remembered those treatment goals, and knew she'd never have them by staying like this. No one could live her life for her, she had to do it herself.

Maybe sleep hadn't been such a good idea, after all. She'd been happier running on fumes and not letting herself think too hard, carrying around her doll and crawling inside herself when things got too bumpy.
Madison shoved onto her other side, and let the doll slide behind her back. Her hip hurt, and she didn't want to think anymore. Life was harder than she'd thought it would be. Survival hadn't been a picnic-- it'd been brutal-- but this was hard in a different kind of way. It meant she had to use a whole new set of muscles, muscles she hadn't used since she was a child. Or maybe she'd never used them at all, because now she was supposed to be all grown up and eight years old was far from thirty-four. Which is what she was.

It didn't seem fair. How was she supposed to know how to live?

But did she want to live, or not?

She was thinking too much. Madison reached around her back, grabbed the doll and in the semi-dark tried to see her Terri. She couldn't, not really, but it no longer felt like her baby, something she wanted to take with her everywhere, but a gift the real Terry had given to show how much he loved her. Nothing more.

A strange sadness settled over Madison, like something was being left behind that she couldn't go back and find. It confused her, and she tugged the blanket over her head as hot stung her eyes. With no one to see her, she let herself cry very quietly. Very softly.

She cried for the past, for what had come before, for all the things that led to this moment, for the longing that came from seeing the familiar slip away.

When her tears had stopped falling, Madison dried her eyes, pushed back the blanket for air and felt like a caterpillar coming out of its cocoon. The comparison burned itself in her mind and she felt a fluttering of hope.

God had seasons to things, and maybe this was hers.

How she wished she had wings to spread like a butterfly's. She wanted to fly, or to at least skim the ground and taste what it was like to no longer be a caterpillar, stuck on the ground forever looking up and wishing she could be free. She was free, she was going to be even more free, and hope vibrated inside her at the thought.

Then the old pain flared-- her hip protested as she sat up on the couch, and she was reminded that no matter how much she wanted to change, her body was still the same as it always was, and it was hurting.

So much for her wings.
Something smelled good though. Her roses were still blooming and giving off perfume beside the couch, but there was a hungry, comforting scent of food in the house that made her stomach rumble. She hadn't noticed it until now, but something was baking in the kitchen. Madison pushed off the blankets, saw Izzy's inflatable mattress on the floor, and realized John had set it up last night without making any noise.

At least, not any that Madison had heard.

She followed the hungry smell to the kitchen, and peeked through the doorway. The overhead lights were off, but the cabinets had lights beneath them, and they shone above the counter top and splashed onto the floor in a soft glowing river.

Izzy sat at the table in her robe and slippers, cradling a cup of something that steamed, and reading from a book as if she were enjoying the peace and quiet of the morning.

"Izzy?"

Izzy startled a little, turned to look at who said her name, and smiled when she saw it was Madison. "Here I was praying you would sleep until nine. It isn't even five thirty."

"It's all right. I'm not tired anymore." Madison moved to the counter to get a better look.

"John and Terry put those lights in when we remodeled the kitchen a few years ago." Izzy smiled and pushed up from the table. "Sometimes, I like turning them on at night, or when the sun's not up-- like now. They give the kitchen a cozy feel, don't you think?"

Madison nodded.

"John tried not to wake you last night when he inflated the mattress," Izzy smiled as she went to the counter, "but I think I know what might have gotten you up." She gestured to the bread machine. "It smells good, doesn't it? I set up the machine before I went to bed, but next time, I'll show you how in one of our cooking lessons." Izzy leaned against the counter and sipped from her mug. "How was your sleep? Was it good?"

Madison's smile gave her answer.

"Thank God." Izzy sighed deeply, then motioned to the electric kettle. "Would you like some tea?"
"I know how," Madison nodded, and moved around Izzy to get a mug from the cupboard. She took some painkiller for her hip, then began to fill the kettle from the faucet. Her movements weren't fast, but she knew where everything was at, all she needed to do was not drop the kettle as it filled.

The sight of running water, and the water she'd just drank, caught up with Madison. She shut off the faucet and gave a hurried excuse to Izzy.

Madison sped through the living room, the hall, rounded into the office, and was startled to find Terry at his desk.

"Maddie, we--"

She had no time to talk, but headed straight for the office bathroom. Even in her urgency, it occurred to her that if she ever needed to get out of a tricky situation, she could always excuse herself by using the bathroom.

Was she the first to think of that?

A few moments later, as she finished washing up at the sink, she saw the grocery bags stashed against the wall. Her surprises were safe. She didn't need the Dragon's security cameras to know Terry hadn't been in the bathroom. If there was one thing in her life she could allow herself to go weak in the knees and be silly about, surely, it had to be Terry.

Yeah, she could.

Wasn't he wonderful? Just the most wonderful person in the world. Sweet, wonderful Terry had promised to stay out of the office bathroom, and since he had given his word, it meant that he had done just that-- he had stayed out. Oh, she loved him. She loved him to little itty bitty bits.

If there was anything worth getting off the couch for in life, he had to be one of them.

She opened the bathroom door, moved fast into the office and shut it behind her so he couldn't see anything, and looked at Terry. Who as it turned out, was looking right back.

"Are you all right, Maddie?"

"Oh, yes." She struggled not to hug herself and went to his desk.
He’d dressed in brown slacks and a creamy button up shirt, and the desk lamp cast a warm glow on his hair that made him seem like one big hunk of chocolate. She was hungry, and when his mouth moved, she backed away.

"Maddie, you're scratching."

She was? She looked down, saw the red streaks and forced herself to stop.

"If you have a moment, we need to talk." Terry got to his feet, rolled a chair from the side of the room and placed it next to his desk as though they were about to have a meeting of minds. "Have you had breakfast, yet? This could wait until you've eaten."

He hadn’t eaten, but Madison knew she could fix that.

"Wait here," she told him, and started for the kitchen. It was hard not to let her excitement get away from her, because this was something she could do. Maybe. She didn't know how yet, but Izzy could show her. "Izzy?" Madison hurried into the kitchen. "Terry's up, so can I fix him some bread?"

"You sure may." Izzy told her to put on the oven mitts, then gave her step by step instructions how to take the bread out of the machine.

Madison got out a cutting board, then Izzy sliced the bread and showed Madison how thick she usually made the slices. The knife was the one part Madison couldn't do herself, but she got to put the bread on a plate, smeared the slices with butter and marmalade like Izzy said Terry often did, then filled a coffee mug with his usual mug of java.

The awful stuff.

While Izzy took out a tray, Madison worked on her own plate, and went without the marmalade because Izzy had said it had orange peel. That didn't sound right, but the bread smelled good, and when Madison sneaked a tiny bite, it tasted fresh. Her nerves strained to do everything just right, to not make any mistakes and when her hands began to tremble, Madison took several deep breaths until they steadied.

In her head, she could hear Terry's voice telling her to calm down.

Loading the tray with the plates, and Terry’s smiley mug, Madison started for the living room only to find Terry watching from the kitchen doorway.
"Oh, go back! Go back!" Madison cried, and Terry hurried back to the hall as she stepped into the living room. After the work she'd put into this, they were going to eat in the office if it was the last thing she did. Breakfast wouldn't be as special if it was in the kitchen.

That's what you did on normal days. Today was special, this morning had made it so.

Edging into the hall, she tried not to slosh the smiley mug.

"Do you need help?" Terry asked, as she moved sideways into the office so she wouldn't bump her elbow.

"No, I have it."

"Is that coffee?" Terry came over, took his mug and her sloshing problem was gone.

She moved his Bible over, placed the tray on a corner of his desk and smiled. "Izzy made bread so that's what we're having for breakfast." Madison sat down in the roly chair Terry had pulled out for her, then shifted their plates around on the tray. Her thumb pushed into some marmalade, and when she went to lick it off, she wished she'd had some of the sweet stuff, after all.

"This is a nice surprise," Terry smiled as he took his chair. "But then, you've been full of surprises, lately."

Madison couldn't help beaming. "You really like the pencil sharpener?"

"I do, thank you."

"You can use it in your work?"

"Sure can."

She closed her eyes and waited, and when nothing happened, she looked at Terry. "Aren't you going to say grace?"

He sighed. "I was just thinking how much I love you. Do you mind hearing that?"

Biting her lip, she shook her head and tried not to look at his mouth.

He reached across the corner of the desk, his hand up-- not a demand, just a gentle request, and she filled his hand with hers.
And her heart trembled.

"Dear Lord," he began, and she closed her eyes, "thank You for this food, and for the one who brought it here. Please, give us wisdom, and me, especially. Bless us. Please, bless us. In Jesus' name, amen."

"Wisdom for what?" Madison asked. She eyed the filing cabinet beside his desk and wondered how long she would have to wait for him to find a gift, if she hid one there.

"Maddie, I'd like to talk. A real heart-to-heart."

"About what?"

"About us." Terry leaned forward in his chair. "Please, don't be scared by what I'm about to ask you. I woke up early this morning, and I've been doing a lot of praying, a lot of thinking about you and me. Maddie, I want to help you."

"I know."

He touched her hand. "Getting married will already be hard for you, and I don't want to do anything that will make it worse. That's my biggest concern-- making this harder for you than it already is."

"Terry, what are you trying to ask me?"

He gave a deep sigh, let go of her hand and looked at her intently. "If I gave you a choice of getting married any time you wanted, when would you pick? Or, putting it another way-- how long do you want to wait until we get married?"

"You said we couldn't marry anytime soon."

"If we could-- if you could pick any time you wanted, how long would you want to wait?"

Gulp. Just this morning, she'd said she wanted to take it all back, and here was her chance. Her mouth wanted to work, but no words would come out. It was time to speak-- she knew it was, this was her chance, and she begged God for help. The words had to come, they just had to.

"Yes."
"Yes, what?"

"I-- I meant, I want to marry you."

"I understand that, but when?"

She was confused by the question. She was willing, so what was he asking? She'd said "yes." Last time, that had been enough.

"Maddie, I found out we can get married pretty much anytime we want."

"Oh." Now she understood. This wasn't a figurative question at all, it was very literal. Praying and pleading for help, she didn't want to lose one more chance of reaching her goal of getting Terry. "Could I have a moment?"

"Of course."

She breathed deep, steadied herself, braced her palms on the seat of her rolly chair and made up her mind to try and speak as honestly as she absolutely knew how. "If I could marry you anytime, I would want to marry you, today." There. That was honest. She swallowed hard and kept going. "Sometimes, I want to be with you so bad, I need to cut. It's easier to not touch you after I cut my stomach, and I don't want to cut anymore." Madison felt a little faint for having said that, but it was the truth. "I think that would help me, so that's my answer. Yes, that's what I want."

Terry looked a bit surprised, and yet he didn't. Not really.

"I've been wondering if waiting might be hard on you. I haven't forgotten what you told Carol--that thinking about me made you hurt yourself, last Sunday. That was only six days ago."

Madison nodded.

It took him some time to speak again, and when he did, it was very carefully. "Then would being married help relieve some of that tension? I'm not talking about sex, but--"

"Things like kissing?" she asked.

"Yes."

"It would help, I know it would." She bit her lip. "We'd better not kiss so much we couldn't stop, though. And when you're really turned on, I'd need to stop."
His expression softened even more. "I'll go you one better, Maddie. I'll do everything I can to stop before that even happens. I know what it's going to do to me-- it's just the way I am, kissing has always done that to me, but I can stop before it gets too bad. You aren't ready for anything more, and it's up to me to make sure you feel safe. If we work together on this, I can stop."

"Thank you, Terry. Thank you." She loved him so much for saying those words, even though they didn't surprise her. They stunned her because a man had said them, but the fact they'd come from Terry, didn't surprise her at all. "And touching? Terry, what about touching?"

He shook his head. "No touching beyond that."

"Please, Terry, what if I'm ready for just a little bit?"

"I didn't think you liked that kind of contact."

"I don't, but--" she sighed and realized she wanted to say more than Terry might be ready to hear. "I don't like a lot of touching, especially if I'm not ready. Or, if I'm touched where I don't want to be handled. Which is a lot of places," she admitted. "But I want... to be touched... a little. As long as it's you. I want that, because I want you." She couldn't look Terry in the eye after admitting all that, but tried to peek up at him in a round about way. His dark socks with the yellow seams on the toes, the mug on his knee, his chin, that lopsided mouth that parted just enough to show white teeth. His chocolatey brown eyes as they peered into her soul.

It was too honest a gaze, and she had to look down at the carpet.

"I didn't see that coming." He put the mug on the desk and blew out a breath. "Wow, Maddie, you really know how to knock me for a loop. I don't know what to say."

"Say we'll get married today."

"Before we get back to that, let's come to an agreement on something. Intimacy will go at your speed, not mine. If you say 'stop,' then I'll stop. I'll soak my head under a faucet if need be, but you're in control. Are we agreed?"

"Thank you, yes-- I agree." Madison hugged herself, she had to hug herself or explode. "I love you, Terry. I love you so much it hurts."

"Are you sure, Maddie?"
"I'm sure I love you."

His gaze held steady, as though he wanted to make absolutely certain she knew her mind and heart.

"I want to be your wife, Terry. Whatever happens, I want it to be with you, I don't want to be with anyone else. If I'm going to be a butterfly, then I want to fly with you. I want to fly with you, Terry."

"A butterfly." His gaze was so wistful, it dipped away from her, as if he didn't want to push her from him.

"Terry, please."

When Terry spoke, husky emotion choked his words and she knew he was feeling a lot.

"I'm so proud of you, Maddie. So delicate, and yet so bold. Just look at you. You'll fly." His voice broke, then pushed on with a fierce certainty that made his face blaze with feeling. "You have such moxy, you keep trying, you don't give up. Even though you've had it harder than most, you still believe in God. You still have faith. It takes strength to come away from so much evil, and to not let it strip you of your humanity."

She wanted to look over her shoulder and see if he were talking to someone else, and not her, but he was-- he was looking right at her and those words were all for her.

Madison smiled. She was just grateful Terry wanted her in his life.

"You remind me to keep up the good fight, Maddie." Terry reached over, took her hand, bowed his head and started to pray. "Dear Heavenly Father, please bless what we're about to do. We know this marriage won't be easy, but as it's written in the Scriptures, 'Can two walk together, except they be agreed?' We are in agreement, Lord, and we will continue to work for that agreement in the days to come. Bless our love for each other. Give us grace, and remember Your promise that where sin abounded, grace did much more abound. Surely, Lord, the Dragon's sin was great, so give us greater grace, greater help, and make that help abound so much the more. In Jesus' name, amen."

When Terry let go of her hand, she opened her eyes. He looked so quiet and pensive, like he was thinking very deep thoughts, she used the desk to pull her roly poly chair closer to his. She watched him carefully, smiled when he cast her a studied look.
"What?"

"Are you changing your mind, Terry?"

"Not a chance."

"Then we'll get married today?"

He struggled not to grin. She could tell.

"I can't promise it'll be today, Maddie, but I'll do my best. I'd like very much for it to be today."
He then explained a trip they'd need to take to Las Vegas, and added with a smile, "I guess you'll get to fly sooner than you thought."

That wasn't exactly what she'd meant, and when he asked if she minded having a second wedding in Three Mile Bay, she shook her head.

"I don't mind-- not if we'd already be married. We would, wouldn't we, Terry?"

"That's the point of going to Vegas." He sighed, and gestured to the laptop with his chin. "I need to read up on this, but I'll let you know what I find out. Brian seemed pretty certain of his information, so I don't think we'll come up against anything we can't easily solve."

"This was Brian's idea?"

Terry smiled and nodded, "yes."

"Did you thank him?"

"I did."

"Should I?"

"Probably now's not the best time. They're getting married today, and I'm guessing a call from us might disturb Stan at a time when Emily is trying to keep things as happy and upbeat as possible. We'll call later and thank them then."

Madison nodded, and got up from her chair as Terry pulled his laptop forward. She watched him a moment.
Hope, strong love, and something else, something that made her want to back away, surged through Madison and it took real effort to sort out the things that were the Dragon's, from the things that were Terry's. They got mixed up if she wasn't careful. Her body was so used to one man, she had trained herself to hate the Dragon's touch for so long, that it was hard to tell her senses that it was now good. That it was now okay. How could it be good? How could it be anything but ugly, even with Terry?

She went to the hallway and waited until her heart slowed to a steady beat. Behind her, she could hear Terry at his laptop, hopefully doing his best to set up their first wedding.

Please, God, help me.

Hugging herself, Madison made her way into the living room, snapped on the lighthouse lamp, then pulled her Bible and notebook out from under the couch. She wanted to tell Izzy her news, but not now. So much was on her heart, she curled up on the blankets, unclipped her pen and began to write. She wrote down all the thoughts she'd had that morning. She wrote until her hand cramped, and her writing grew so tired it became hard to read—even more than usual. Writing it down made it real to her, and it calmed her to see the form of the words and to see that they were truly making some sense. Even a little.

That she wasn't crazy beyond belief.

When her hand gave out, Madison opened her Bible and read slowly from the New Testament until the beating in her chest steadied and she felt calmer.

The kitchen sounded very quiet, and even though Madison had switched on the lamp in the living room, Izzy hadn't come in. It was as though Izzy didn't want to crowd her since Madison didn't have a room to herself. Especially while the house was so quiet and empty and you could have the living room as your own.

Madison put away her notebook, Bible, then got up and went to the kitchen.

The sun had yet to come up, and at the table, Izzy was still reading from her book. Izzy looked up and smiled when Madison came in.

"Did Terry like his breakfast?"

Madison nodded, and took the chair next to Izzy.

"Did you two have a long talk?"
Again, Madison nodded and sensed Izzy already had an idea of what was going on. Which meant Terry must have talked this over in some degree with Izzy and John the night before. Madison pressed her hands together and wondered if any of her dreams in the basement had ever pictured her like this, on the brink of something so big and so normal. This was what normal people did. It made her feel strangely different, and yet she still had two arms, two legs, one head, and Izzy was still watching her as though she knew something important was being decided.

"I told Terry I didn't want to wait. He's going to see if we can get married today."

"Do you feel frightened?"

Madison hugged her middle and stared at Izzy's book. "I feel different."

"That might be because you're changing," Izzy brushed the hair from Madison's face and Madison leaned into her friend. "When you find the things you value in life, hang on to them, and change with them, and as you grow, you'll take them with you. The things that aren't important, will fall away, but spend yourself on the things that are worth the effort."

"Terry is worth the effort."

"That's called love." Izzy patted Madison's arm, then handed her the book she'd been reading. "I was thinking you might like to have this. John gave it to me after we were married, and I found it encouraging."

The title was My Beloved, My Friend: Married and Walking Together in the Lord and it had a Scripture entry and a thought for each day of the year.

"Look up today," Izzy whispered.

Madison opened the well-worn book and turned the pages until she found today's entry.

October Seventh
"Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour of the LORD." (Proverbs 18:22)

Below was a thought based on the verse, about God's favor and blessings, and it gave Madison tiny shivers up her arm, as if whoever had put the book together had known she was getting married today. She looked at Izzy.
"When Terry said last night that you and he might be getting married soon, I thought of this entry. I wasn't sure if this verse would be on the seventh or the eighth, but there it is." Izzy sighed happily. "I don't believe in luck at all. Whenever a small thing like this lines up, I just nod, smile, and say, 'Thank You, Lord,' and go on my way. It's providence, a happy providence."

Curious, Madison flipped to the next day to see what she would find, but it didn't say anything remarkable or telling, and Izzy got up from the table while the house began to stir. If God paid attention to tiny little details, which Madison was sure He must, then it gave her more assurance about the bigger things, the things she often couldn't see anyway around.

God cared.

She'd already known that, but it was like getting a hug from Heaven, and on her wedding morning.

* * * *

Madison had left the office thinking they could get married today, and though he didn't think it unlikely, Terry didn't want to let her down. He sifted through the information, grabbed a legal pad and started to take notes as John dragged himself into the office in his PJs looking like he'd slept on his face.

"Morning." John tugged the chair from his desk, dumped himself in the seat and started up his laptop. "I need coffee."

"You know where to find it." Terry wrote without looking up, then looked back to his screen to check something.

"Any news?" John got up and checked Terry's smiley mug.

Since he still had some java left, Terry moved the mug to the other side of his computer where it would be safe. "Maddie gave the green light. She wants to get married as soon as possible, so I'm trying to set it up." Terry looked over to his friend. "Are you and Izzy available for a two day trip, say today and tomorrow?"

"Sure. If we can find a sitter for the kids." John looked thoughtful, and scratched at the stubble on his cheek. "Is this going to be a big deal, or just a small party like you were suggesting last night?"
"A small party with just the six of us. Besides Maddie and I, you and Izzy, and Abby and Jake. If they're awake, maybe you could go check things with AJ and make sure they can come."

"We could ask the Hopkins to babysit the kids," John nodded.

Terry made notes. "That's what I was hoping."

"What are you doing now?"

"The pre-application for the marriage license is online, so I thought I'd fill it out now and save us some time at the marriage bureau."

"You're getting married." John said it as though he were waking up for the first time that morning, and Terry looked up to see him grinning. "Whew." John shook his head and got to his feet. "I'd better go see about AJ so you can buy those plane tickets when you're ready. And I'll get Izzy to call Agatha." He started for the office door, paused then looked back at Terry. "How long have you been up?"

"Long enough to know she wants to get married today, and that I have to get moving." Terry took a gulp of his now cold java, then went to the filing cabinet to dig up Maddie's birth certificates and Social Security card. He brought them to his desk, looked them over, then started in on the pre-application while John went to go talk to AJ and Izzy.

This was sure to wake up the house in a hurry.

Five minutes later, he heard John shout back, "They're coming!" and Terry tried to ignore the fact that there was now someone watching from the doorway.

Out of the corner of his peripheral vision he could see Maddie.

"Do you know yet?" she asked.

"I'm afraid not. I'll tell you as soon as I do." He kept working and was thankful when she left. This had to get filled out, but as soon as he could, he'd start making reservations and then they'd know for certain.

With no waiting period to get married, it was basically a matter of getting down there today. He glanced at the time, figured he'd better buy the tickets now, make the hotel reservations, so Maddie would have an answer to her question. Then he could go back to filling out the paperwork while everyone packed.
He scanned flight departures and arrivals, figured in enough time to get to the airport and get their bags checked in, then tried to factor in getting married before tonight.

They could always get married tomorrow, but he had asked Maddie, and this was what she had chosen.

"Izzy?" Terry waited, and when no one came to the office, he pushed up from the desk and nearly collided with Izzy in the hall. "Have you called Agatha yet?"

"I have." Izzy kept folding the blanket she held as Abby came from Terry's old room and listened. "Agatha said they're more than pleased to babysit. I passed along our thanks, but she made me promise-- on a stack of Bibles-- that you and Madison would have that second wedding in Three Mile Bay. I told her that was your plan."

"Thanks." His mind at work, Terry nodded, moved past Izzy and his niece and went into the living room where Maddie was helping to put away her bedding.

When she saw him, she dropped what she was doing and stared at him intently.

"We can get a flight out of Syracuse this morning, and land in Las Vegas in the afternoon. Meaning we can get married today, if that's what you want."

She nodded that it was, and hugged herself around the middle.

"Instead of running hard to get back, I was thinking we'd just stay at a hotel, then take a flight back in the morning. That way, we can take things easy and won't risk pushing you to exhaustion again."

She paled a little but kept listening.

"I need to know how to book the hotel rooms, Maddie. I could put all the women in one suite, and all the men in another, or I could pair us off as couples. What do you want?"

Maddie kept hugging herself.

"I'll make sure each suite will have a separate room with a couch so you won't have to sleep in a bedroom. You won't have to be concerned about the beds, all I need to know is whether you want to be with Izzy or not."
"I need someone to wake me." She shifted on her socked feet and looked like a delicate butterfly braving a strong wind. This was an aspect of their marriage they were going to have to face--Terry knew it and so did she, he only wanted to make that wind as gentle as possible. "I need someone there so I don't get really bad dreams, so if you don't mind, I'd like it to be you."

"I don't mind at all." Terry let out the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "We're getting married, and it'd be an honor. I don't want to scare you, but maybe you could do the same for me. Wake me if you notice I'm dreaming heavy?"

She smiled and nodded.

"We can do this, Maddie. This will take some teamwork and a lot of love and looking after each other, but we can do this."

Her sweet smile had him feeling twenty feet off the ground.

He nodded, backed away and started into the hall. "I'll get you one of my carry-ons. Our plane will take off at nine thirty this morning--we'll need to leave here with enough time to get to the airport, so try not to take too long packing. If you forget anything, don't worry. We'll buy it in Vegas."

Maddie bit her lip and looked at him so deeply, Terry had to remind himself to breathe.

"I'll get that suitcase." He turned, went into the hall and found the door to his bedroom open. Knocking first, he looked inside and saw Abby and Jake arranging clothes in an overnight bag while Ricky watched. "I just need to grab a few things."

"Sure. Did you get the tickets?" Jake asked.

"Not yet." Terry opened his closet, dug around the back and pulled out a duffel and a small suitcase. He yanked out some clothes, stuffed them into the duffel, went to his dresser and added underclothes, then hurried to the master bedroom to collect his electric shaving kit. It went against his grain to stuff and not fold, but he promised himself he would later. Like after they arrived at the hotel.

Terry moved down the hall, dumped his duffel by the recliner and gave Maddie the suitcase.

"Will this do?" he asked.

She looked at the upright carry-on with wheels and gave an overwhelmed smile.
"I'll take that as a 'yes,'" Terry grinned.

He went back to the office, dropped back in front of his laptop as Debbie and Lizzie came in with their breakfast.

Munching homemade bread, the girls stood on either side of him while he bought the plane tickets, their eyes watching his web browser as though they could read every word. Which he very well knew they couldn't.

"When are you coming home?" Debbie asked.

"Tomorrow morning." Terry tapped his trackpad and the printer came to life. He did a search of hotels in the area while Lizzie ate so close to his arm she spilled crumbs onto his shirt. He carefully checked the photos of the suites, needing to find one with enough space so Maddie would be able to sleep on a couch outside of the bedroom.

The girls kept eating, and when the crumbs stopped falling onto Terry's shirt, they left to go pack for Mrs. Hopkins' house.

This hotel looked good. It didn't take long to make a call and book three suites, especially since he didn't make an issue about the pricing. The rooms were available and he had the money, and after going over some of the other details, it was back to the marriage license.

"Hey." John stuck his head into the office. "You got the tickets?"

Popular question. "Yup."

"Hotel reservations?"

"Covered-- and I reserved a private shuttle to take us there from the airport."

Buttoning his long sleeved shirt, John came over to the desk and planted himself over Terry's shoulder. This was becoming a spectator sport. John grabbed a chair, and before Terry knew it, he had a volunteer to help think things through on the application.

Not long after, Maddie came through the office pulling her upright suitcase, and went into the bathroom to pack. She kept her clothes and most of her belongings in the bathroom, and since that was also the place of "the bags," Terry kept his attention away until the door had shut and there was no chance of him seeing anything he wasn't supposed to.
He had to knock on the bathroom door a few times to ask some questions about her side of the marriage license, but the job got done, and Terry submitted the online pre-application and was rewarded with a reference number.

The process had officially begun.

He then called the Office of Civil Marriages, and made an appointment for a ceremony for later that day.

The printer spit out its contents as laughter came from the triplets' room. John got up a minute, and when he came back, shook his head and muttered something about the kids still deciding what to take with them to the Hopkins' house. It was an unusual morning, which, knowing the munchkins the way Terry did, probably meant they were having fun.

Collecting his printouts and ID papers, Terry placed them, and the pad, into a document holder, and zipped the holder closed. John put on his shoes, then went out to get the minivan ready. Both men were frequent fliers, or they had been before they'd cut down on all that traveling, and Terry felt they were well versed enough to make this trip without turning prematurely gray.

Of course, he'd never gone anywhere with the express purpose of getting married. That was a new one, but aside from that life-changing event, travel was no big deal. Maddie, however, probably hadn't done much, and he was glad he'd opted to stay overnight in Vegas rather than subject her to fourteen hours of round trip flying. Better to split it up so she could take it in smaller doses.

"How are you coming along in there?" he called to the bathroom.

"I'm almost done."

"Come get me if you need help. I'll be outside with John."

Pocketing the all-important wedding bands, Terry picked up his documents, coat, and moved into the hall as Ruthie hurried past him into the triplets' bedroom with a stack of storybooks--probably to see if she could find room in someone's backpack. Terry chuckled. Four years old, and on her way to becoming a literary nut.
Everyone was busy, everyone was packing, all except for one. When Terry came into the living room, he found Ricky, calm and composed, sitting on a small suitcase by the couch with Stan, all ready to go.

"You're a cool customer," Terry laughed in admiration. "I'm impressed."

"My Daddy packed me. He said I was easy because we've been living out of our bags mostly."

"That's a mixed blessing." Terry tucked the document holder beside his duffel. "Have you ever been on a sleepover before? Then for a guy like you, this should be a piece of cake."

Ricky grinned, and kept playing with his firefighter.

Terry put on his coat and headed for the front door.

Things were well on their way and Terry was feeling the joyful hum of knowing he was where he was supposed to be. And so was Maddie. Their faith was being answered and the sound of it filled Terry's heart, echoed in his soul and made him want to shout. The future lay ahead; they would walk it by faith and not by sight, but it encouraged Terry to keep walking, to keep praying.

It seemed fitting to him that this smaller journey should start a larger one, one he and Maddie would travel for the rest of their married lives.

The minivan sat in front of the house while John strapped in the boosters needed to take the kids to the Hopkins' house. Not a small task when it meant four kids and four seats. As John hunched over his work in the minivan, Jake came from his truck with the fourth booster needed for Ricky.

When Jake saw Terry, the young man grinned. "Thanks for including me and Abby on this wedding."

"Thanks for coming," Terry smiled.

"Are the kids almost ready?" John asked over his shoulder. "Except for that last booster, we're all set. I figure we drop off the kids, come back for the girls, take out the boosters, load up the luggage, then hit the road with time enough to spare at the airport."

"Sounds good to me. As soon as you're done, I'll get the munchkins." Terry waited until John had strapped in the fourth safety seat, then headed into the house. "The minivan's ready for all those
going to the Hopkins’ place,” he called in his announcer voice, and a stampede of mini proportions came barreling into the living room while Ricky pocketed his firefighter.

Their mothers followed with coats, and Izzy had three backpacks and a bag that she handed over to Terry. Faces were kissed, small bodies were hugged, and promises were made that all would get a surprise tomorrow when their parents came back. Terry figured if all else failed, they could bring back something sweet and the kids would be just as happy.

“We’ll call you tonight,” Abby called after Ricky as they filed out the front door. “Be good, and make sure you thank Mr. and Mrs. Hopkins.”

Ricky waved, and got in line as John, Jake, and Terry started loading the kids and their bags into the van. It wouldn’t take long to get the little ones situated, then the guys would come back for the girls and the luggage, and it wasn’t even seven thirty yet. Not bad for a large family on a little-notice trip.

* * * *

Though she hadn’t had many clothes to pack, they were in there. They weren’t folded or anything, but under the circumstances, it was probably good that she’d been able to pack at all.

She was getting married.

The only thing that kept her from panic was the fact it would be to Terry-- that and the battle cry she’d read from her notebook this morning.

There were other things that kept her from panic, but those were the two main things she kept repeating as she wheeled the suitcase into the living room. Her Bible was the next to go in, and then her notebook. And then Jane Austen.

Just for good measure.

The suitcase wasn’t heavy, but she wasn’t strong and the wheels came in handy. She moved it to where the family’s other small bags sat for the overnight trip, stepped back, looked at them and took a deep breath. There. She was ready. She looked up as Izzy came into the room in slacks and a light blouse, looking comfortable but elegant as only Izzy knew how. (At least as far as Madison was concerned.)

"The men will be back in a few minutes, but I’m afraid we’re going to have to let them wait." Izzy gave Madison a kind smile. "We have enough time to do this now, and that’s what I’d suggest.”
"Do what now?"

"It’d be nice if you had a shower. A quick one-- do you have another change of clothes besides what you've packed?"

Madison nodded.

"We could wait for Terry to come back, so he could walk you through the master bedroom--"

"Could you take me?"

"That's what I was hoping you'd say," Izzy smiled. "This shouldn't take long, and we can clean your stitches while we're at it. Abby, would you lock up the house?"

Wanting to smell nice for Terry when she kissed him, Madison went back to the office bathroom, pulled out her gray T-shirt with the butterfly on the front, a clean pair of jeans, some underclothes, then met Izzy in the hall. She didn't want to anticipate it too much, wait too long, just grabbed Izzy's hand, squeezed her eyes shut and prayed as they moved along the carpet.

"Don't tell me until we're in the bathroom," Madison asked, and Izzy kept quiet until the bathroom door sounded and Madison could feel the tile beneath her feet.

She'd made it.

There was no time for relief, or even much surprise, and Izzy helped her get into the shower and clean up without going too slow.

Much too soon, Abby knocked on the door.

"They're back, Mom."

"Tell them we're hurrying," Izzy said, but Izzy didn't start rushing things. She kept moving with purpose, but she wasn't hectic or frantic, and it kept Madison from plunging about without thinking. Izzy plugged in the hairdryer, and while Madison dressed, Izzy dried Madison's hair.

While Izzy cleaned up the damp towels, Madison brushed her hair then put on a little hairspray. She was done.
This was as ready as she ever got, and Madison closed her eyes for the return trip through the master bedroom. It wasn't until she heard Terry's voice that she realized she'd more than cleared the bedroom.

"I like your shirt," Terry said, and she opened her eyes to see him smiling.

The others didn't know what he'd meant, but Madison did. She was wearing a butterfly, the one she and Izzy had gotten at the MegaMart not long after she'd arrived in Three Mile Bay. As everyone moved about to gather coats, sweaters, and luggage, Madison concentrated on just being calm.

It was all she could do not to tremble.

They joined hands-- Terry caught hers-- and John said a prayer, and before Madison could remind herself to keep breathing, she was stepping out the front door between Abby and Terry.

Cool air filled Madison's lungs, making her colder than usual since she'd just come from the misty confines of a warm bathroom. She shivered in her coat as the men loaded in the luggage, and instead of thinking about what lay in front, she stared hard at the gravel and tried to study each stone as though her life depended on it.

"Maddie--" she heard her name and looked up. Terry held out his hand, and helped her into the minivan's middle row of seats.

Terry took the seat next to hers while Abby and Jake climbed in behind them. The smell of car exhaust wafted in from outside as John started the engine, and Terry slid the side door shut.

Stay calm.

She fumbled with her seat belt but couldn't get it to click. Terry's jeep was easier to work than this, and when Terry offered to do it for her, she let him. Abby laughed from the back seat, John said something from up front and all Madison could do was focus on the small spot on the upholstery in back of John's seat.

Had one of the triplets done that? Was it candy? Did Ruthie do that?

Stay calm.

She was thinking too much about staying calm.
I'm not trembling.

Don't notice. I don't want to notice.

"Have you ever been on a plane before?" Terry asked.

"I-- I don't know."

"Want some music?" Terry pulled out his phone, plugged in a white cord then tried to hand her the whole thing. When she didn't move, he put one bud in her ear, the other in his, then started to do something on the phone's screen as John pulled onto the main road.

She didn't want to watch what Terry was doing, she wanted to watch her spot. The spot on the back of the seat that had been working up until she'd gotten nervous. Terry moved through screens of photos with text on them-- he moved so fast she couldn't read what they said, and then he tapped one and a list came up. He tapped again and music sounded in her ear.

Someone started to sing "Jesus Loves Me," and Madison took a deep breath, then let it out until she was breathing on her own and could do it without thinking. She turned to look out the window but the bud in her ear tugged away from Terry's and she moved her shoulder closer to his.

Forget the window, all she needed was right here.

When the song ended, Terry scrolled to something else, distracting and entertaining her through the long drive with hymns, songs about God, life, and hope, and others that had no words at all. And when he scrolled past something that caught her attention, she touched his hand and he went back and played the song. A few were from a long time ago, when Terry was a boy, for the people sang to a rhythm and style that Madison remembered on TV as being called classic, which was another word for old.

The minivan slowed, then came to a stop, and she didn't want to know where they were. She was too busy not paying attention, too busy being distracted.

"We're here," Terry apologized, and shut off the music as Jake slid open the side door.

She pressed her hands together, sat still and tried to find the spot on the back of the seat again, the one that had almost kept her calm. When she couldn't find it, she looked about for something else, then saw a loose shirt button on Terry's seat as he climbed out. She dove for it,
felt it in her hand and focused all her thoughts on the small object. It felt like it came from a shirt. Blunt edges, not stylish, very basic.

"Maddie, time to get out." Terry unfastened her seat belt, then he helped her from the minivan while Jake passed bags to John through the side door.

She stood in the blustery wind, her hand clutching the small button.

Stay calm.

Wind tugged at her coat, Izzy said something to Abby, Abby picked up a bag, John and Terry closed the minivan and Madison looked about, saw her upright suitcase and pulled out the handle to roll it at her side like she had in the house. The button, the suitcase, then she was walking at Terry's side into a building.

Was it bad that she wished she could feel her hip? She could feel it-- it just wasn't very bad right now. She'd taken painkiller earlier, and it was doing it's job.

"Do you want me to take your suitcase?" Terry asked, and she shook her head.

She desperately wanted to take care of it herself. It gave her something to do besides think. She kept her head down, watched Terry's shoes and did her best to keep up with them. He was wearing dark ones that squeaked a little on the shiny floor-- someone bumped into her suitcase, she pulled it closer and hurried to get closer to those dark shoes.

The dark shoes waited in a short line, and so did she, and when she needed something to do, her eyes followed the edges of the large grey-flecked tiles of the airport.

A large hand nudged hers. She looked up, and saw Terry's encouraging smile.

"Do you want to sit down?"

She shook her head, but took his hand and hung on to him with the happy relief of borrowed strength. She was calm, she wasn't trembling, and he gave her fingers a reassuring squeeze.

"What's this?" He took the button from her hand, looked at it with a thoughtful face but gave it back when the lady at the counter motioned them forward.

While he talked to the woman, Madison waited with the others.
So much went on around her, she didn't have time to do anything but keep Terry in her sights and move when Terry told her to move.

It was time to move now.

They had to put their carry-on bags and things on a conveyor belt to be x-rayed, then she followed Terry down a long hallway-- the longest she'd ever seen. She kept close to Terry, saw Izzy and John, and AJ following from behind.

Then Madison saw the plane through a small window, and took a deep, deep breath. They were getting on an airplane now. She followed Terry-- he said something to a woman in a uniform, and they kept moving between rows of seats while Terry read from something in his hand.

"Do you want a window seat?" Terry asked it as if it was a good thing, then motioned to some seats. "These are ours. John, Izzy-- you're in front of us, and Abby and Jake are across the aisle."

To get out of everyone's way, Madison hurried into the row Terry had said was theirs, and decided she would sit next to the window. Whether that was a good idea or not, she didn't know. She'd never been on an airplane before, or if she had, it'd been so long ago she couldn't remember. Right now, she didn't care, only that she hadn't lost her button, or her nerve, and she wasn't trembling.

So far, so good.

Terry put their luggage into the overhead bin, took the seat next to hers, then showed her how to buckle the seat belt.

More people filled the seats, though there weren't many. An older man with a big mustache stuffed his bag into the overhead bin, then took the third seat next to Terry. The two men struck up an easy conversation about how uncrowded this small airport usually was, and how that translated into getting in and out quickly-- talk that made them both sound like frequent travelers.

Hunkering down with her button, Madison was grateful when they didn't pull her into their conversation, though the man cast a congratulations her way when he learned she and Terry were getting married. A smile was all the reply the man seemed to need.

A safety video played, then the engines grew loud and the plane began to move.

"Do you want to close the window?" Terry asked, as the world sped by.
"What's the good of having a window seat if you don't look out?" The man chuckled, but quietsed when he saw Madison. "First time on a plane?"

Madison nodded. She wasn't sure, but it might as well be.

"Terry, is she all right?" Izzy asked from in back.

"I'm okay." Madison locked onto Terry's hand, looked out the window and said a quiet prayer. She was doing things she'd never done before, and this was just one more.

"You're doing good," Terry said, as the plane lifted off the ground.

Buildings grew small, and the sensation of speed lessened even though it didn't feel good to look out there and see trees look like small green blobs against green and brown. Ribbons of road cut through the landscape, and then fuzzy white stuff crowded around her window.

"Clouds," the man next to Terry smiled.

Sure enough, they came out to blue sky and beneath them was a blanket of soft, billowy white. The engines weren't as loud now, and when Terry spoke, she could hear him much better.

"Would you like something to listen to?" Terry pulled out his phone, plugged in the earbuds, gave her the whole thing and let her play whatever she wanted.

The man beside Terry took out his laptop, and Madison started to explore the contents of Terry's phone. Terry had audiobooks, too. She tapped one and a man with a nice voice started reading from the book of Genesis. It wasn't music, but it was calming, and the more she listened, the more she realized she could understand what was being read. When she read the Bible on her own, it took her forever to make progress, and it didn't make it very easy to understand the passages.

But this way flowed, she didn't have to struggle to figure out each word, and she could pay attention to what was actually being said. It made a big difference.

She pulled a bud out of her ear, stuffed it into Terry's and saw him smile.

When the chapter finished, Madison tried another book-- Ephesians, then jumped to Esther, Habakkuk, then John, then selected a song before playing two minutes and thirty seconds from the book of Psalms. Then Madison got fancy and started arranging music by themes-- titles with
hope in them, interspersed with Psalms and Proverbs. She tried to find the next one before the current one finished, so the moment the sound stopped, she could start the next thing and Terry wouldn't have to hear silence.

She looked up and saw he was listening.

If she knew the music better she could keep going, but the pressure to find things that matched before the sound stopped was beginning to trip her up. Getting tired, she finally left it on random on the music side, and watched the clouds.

She shut her eyes for only a moment, and when she opened them, she heard the last part of something being said over the loudspeaker. Confused, she looked to Terry.

"We're about to land," he explained.

She'd been asleep for longer than she'd thought. There was no time to focus on being calm. She looked out her window, saw the houses, roads getting bigger, saw train tracks pass beneath her. Her seat belt was on. She wasn't trembling, she'd survived takeoff, but she reached for Terry's hand, anyway.

The ground rushed closer, the wheels touched and the engines became even louder as the plane slowed. Things were going smoother than she'd thought they would, and she felt the relief of knowing they were on the ground.

"Las Vegas?" she asked hopefully.

"Sorry," Terry chuckled, "this is a layover. We'll be here for half an hour."

"Where is here?"

Just then, a man over the loudspeaker came on.

"Good morning ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Detroit. The time is eleven fourteen..."

Madison watched as the plane taxied to their gate.

When they came to a stop, she heard the sound of seat belts clicking off, saw people getting up and pulling their things out of the overhead compartments. Terry lifted down her suitcase, tugged out his duffel while Izzy reminded Terry to make sure they didn't forget anything.
"We'll eat lunch in the airport," Izzy said as John, and the rest of them started out of the plane. "Madison, how are you doing?"

Madison was tugging her suitcase beside Terry with one hand, carrying her coat and button with the other and didn't have a free moment to respond. She was too busy trying not to bump into anyone. Terry helped her, and they moved into a passageway, and then another building. She followed Terry and kept moving until they stopped at a large screen. While Terry read what he wanted about their connecting flight, she saw Jake put an arm around Abby.

"I usually don't get to do air travel with him," Abby said with a returning hug around Jake. "Every time this guy would leave for the advisory board, I'd stay on the West Coast and pray his plane wouldn't crash."

Grinning, Jake pulled Abby close for a kiss. "See, Baby? God answered your prayers."

Abby laughed, and Terry came away from the screen.

"Okay, our flight's on time," Terry announced. "We have thirty minutes to eat lunch."

They glanced about the terminal, John saw a burger joint and they picked up their bags.

Unlike the last airport, this one was large. It had lots of light, had enough people to make her prayerful about sticking to Terry's side, and seemed to have some very clean floors. She knew, because she spent so much time staring at them.

They found a table, and while John took their order, Madison felt safe to relax and look around. The others were having a good time and it was beginning to rub off on her. She didn't necessarily like being in new places, but she was with the people she loved. Old places or new, as long as she was with her family, that's all that really mattered.

The fact they were on their way to make her an official part of that family, put a lump in her throat. Today was special, and the nervous excitement took away some of her appetite.

"Just fries, please."

"Come on, Maddie, you have to eat more than that." Terry looked at her with a pleading smile, and she nodded.

"And a small burger."
"How about a cola? A small one?"

"Okay." She smiled back, and stuffed the button in her pocket when Izzy passed around the hand sanitizer. They didn't have long to wait for the food, and after a prayer was said, she started in on the burger. The first bite coaxed back some of her appetite, until she soon found herself enjoying the meal. The others had taken off their coats and were wearing sweaters, but since Madison's only sweater was stuffed into her suitcase, she kept on her coat to keep out the Detroit chill.

When she couldn't finish all her fries, she let Terry have them, and sat back to sip at her cold cola. After a few moments, she zipped up her coat.

"Sitting in this terminal--" John sighed as he finished off his hamburger-- "it makes me a little nostalgic for the old days. We were really logging those frequent flyer miles, but with the way we're working now, we're proving we don't need to get around as much to get the same job done."

"Amen to that." Terry wadded his napkin and tossed it into their trash pile.

"Terry--" Madison whispered in his ear.

"The ladies' room is over there, I think." Terry nodded to his left and Izzy got up.

"I might as well use the bathroom, too." Izzy picked up her purse and Abby joined them. "Terry, how long will the next flight last?"

"About four and a half hours."

"Then if it's all right with you, we're leaving you guys to watch the bags. We're going to stretch our legs while we can and do some walking."

"Go right ahead," John smiled, and Terry waved to Madison as Izzy led the way to the ladies' room.

After they used the bathroom, and washed up, the three of them strolled at any easy pace through the terminal and did a little window shopping. Madison had already spent her salary, and then some, at the MegaMart, so she looked but didn't touch.

They passed a clothing store, and Izzy stopped, pulled them in and went to a display of sweaters. Izzy sorted through a few, pulled out a thin, pink sweater that opened down the front, and held it up to Madison.
"I think this will fit you nicely." Izzy smiled. "What do you think?"

"I think I don't have any money."

"You don't need any. This is a small wedding gift, and you need a nice sweater besides Terry's. Something feminine."

"It really is nice, Mom," Abby smiled, "but I'm afraid we don't have a lot of time."

"I know-- let's check out, then get back to the restaurant before your father comes looking for us."

"Thank you, Izzy."

Izzy smiled as they headed to the counter.

After Izzy had paid for the sweater, the cashier cut off the tags so Madison could put it on right then and there. It was a very soft sweater, and it looked pretty over the gray butterfly T-shirt. When Madison glanced in the mirror by the store's entrance as they left, she almost wanted to go back and see who the reflection belonged to, if that was really her.

She looked more feminine now, more attractive.

Not sure how she felt about that, Madison put her coat back on and took a deep breath as they neared the restaurant. She could see the men standing around their table with the luggage, talking and looking ready to leave.

"If everyone's ready, we should get going," Terry said, as Madison zipped up her coat.

"Thanks for waiting," Izzy looked about to make sure they didn't leave anything behind. She was always making sure they had everything, and Madison figured with three little girls, Izzy had plenty of experience keeping track of things. "We're ready."

Since she'd been through this before, Madison tried telling herself this was no big deal. The thing was, the next time they would get off the plane, they'd be in Las Vegas, not another layover. As they walked, Madison felt for the button in her pocket, kept pulling the luggage at her side and kept next to Terry. She'd already made her decision, she wasn't backing out.

It was only a matter of putting one foot in front of the other and moving forward.
This time, when they boarded the plane, there were more people and it came as a greater relief when she was safe in her seat by the window next to Terry. As he took off his coat and pushed it in the overhead bin, Madison knew she needed to take off hers, as well. She unzipped it, handed it to Terry, and he put it away without noticing her sweater.

Then he turned to take his seat. And smiled.

"You look nice."

"Izzy bought it for me in the terminal. She said it was a wedding present."

"I'll go thank her." Terry went one row forward, then came back with a smile and got comfortable in his seat. "Do you mind if I take a nap? I'd like a little shuteye before we land."

"Terry?" Madison moved close to his ear and whispered so no one could overhear. "Is the sweater okay? It's not going to bother you?" She bit her lip. "I don't want to make things hard for you. I know I look nicer than I did before. It wouldn't be such a big deal except now we're..." she couldn't finish. "You know... our agreement."

"The way I see it, Maddie," Terry let out a breath, and whispered so softly she almost couldn't hear him, "you could wear a potato sack and still look fetching. That's just the way it is. I'll deal with it."

"What's fetching?"

"It means I love you, and that no matter what you wear, we'll go at your speed, not mine. The sweater looks great. Don't give me a second thought."

"I love you, Terry."

He sighed, leaned his head back and closed his eyes. "I love you right back."

The engines grew loud, the plane began to move and somewhere a baby started to cry. It's momma quieted it down, and Madison looked out the window as they lifted off the ground and everything below them fell away.

Even if these wings were borrowed, she was touching the sky. If only for a few hours. Settling against her seat, she watched the clouds drift past her window.

* * * *
The sound of people talking woke Madison. She hadn't expected to sleep the entire four and half hour flight, but the chatter in the plane was expectant, and that probably meant the plane was about to land.

When she looked out the window though, she realized they already had, and that they were taxiing to their gate. All at once she had to remember to stay calm. Where was her button? She felt in her pocket for the round object she'd been focusing on, then found it next to her leg on the seat.

She looked to Terry. He was about to say something, but he glanced up as the flight attendant's voice came over the speakers.

It was a little after one p.m. and this time, they were in Las Vegas.

She fisted the button, looked out the window as the plane came to a stop. How she wished her rubber band wasn't in the suitcase, but on her wrist.

Madison unfastened her seat belt. She stayed where she was as Terry lifted down their things from the overhead bin. This was going to happen. She was getting married. It seemed no matter how many times she told herself that, it still seemed amazing.

The old defenses were made: Men were scum. Yes, she knew that, but not Terry. And not all men. Getting married was giving yourself over to a man, and letting him do to you whatever he wanted. And for the rest of your life. She trusted Terry though, and the thought of being with him for the rest of her life made her happy. So that was out. Men were stronger, they could hurt you and when they were alone with you, you couldn't stop them. Except that Madison trusted Terry.

This came down to trust.

Taking a deep breath, Madison pushed to her feet, took the coat Terry had placed on her seat and got ready to leave the plane. Her insides were shaking, her heart couldn't stop thumping in her chest, and now, she was trembling.

Not even her button could save her.

The moment Terry had a free hand, she took it and held on.
He looked at her, gave her fingers a squeeze, and she nodded that she was ready. The others
joined them as they filed out of the plane, all smiles and excitement, and it was all Madison
could do to keep her feet moving. She was happy, she just couldn't show it too much without
either crying uncontrollably for joy, or turning and running like the chicken she feared she was.

Butterfly, child of God, not a chicken.

"Terry-- our battle cry?"

He repeated it over the crowd, and she tried to say it over and over but there was too much
going on around her. They'd started out at a relatively small airport, worked their way up to a
busier one, but this one was large and it teemed all over the place with people.

"Stay close to me," Terry said, and Madison knocked into his side in ready willingness. He
shouldered his duffel, took her upright suitcase, then offered his arm, which she accepted
readily.

John, Izzy, and AJ were next to them and Terry moved past the airport slot machines and
headed for wherever. Madison didn't know what was going on, only that Terry did. Even Abby
seemed overwhelmed in all of this.

They made their way through the crowd, and Terry nodded to some doors. Then Madison had
to wait with the others while Terry went to see about their reservation for the private shuttle.
Madison didn't ask questions, but hung onto her coat and suitcase and stayed close to the others.

"Have you or Terry ever been here before?" Jake asked John.

"Can't say we have." John checked his watch then nodded when Terry came striding back.

"Everything's all set." Terry took Madison's suitcase, then led the way outside. A van was waiting
just for them, and it didn't take long for everyone to pile in and be on their way to the hotel.
Terry sat on Madison's right, Abby on Madison's left, and the others on the benches all around.

It took Madison a moment to catch her breath as they moved through the Las Vegas traffic.

The thin sweater came in handy for all the air conditioning in the van, but outside was warm.
This sure wasn't coat weather like it was up in Three Mile Bay. The climate was very different
here-- instead of trees, they had palm trees, and instead of water, they had desert. And
advertising. Everywhere.
"If we're all in agreement," Terry said as he took out a document holder from his duffel, "I thought we'd check-in, have our bags sent up to our rooms, then go straight to the Marriage License Bureau. Maddie, is that okay with you?"

Madison nodded. There wasn't any point in prolonging this. They'd come to get married and she wanted to get it done. She needed to get it done. The van turned and she swayed as she tried to get the top of her suitcase open. The zipper stuck, then she noticed her hand was shaking so badly the zipper wouldn't work.

Calm down. She needed to calm down.

Abby opened the zipper, and Madison worked her hand inside to find what she wanted. Brush bristles, clothes, then her fingers felt the strap of a purse and she tugged that out.

She opened the compact gray purse, and pulled out the rubber band, slipped the rubber band around her wrist and gave it a solid pluck. The pain steadied her, and she was able to close the suitcase on her own. A breath, then another, and she was breathing again, and then she remembered to hold onto her button.

"Maddie?" Terry's voice called her back and she felt solid enough to smile. "Remember to pray."

She nodded, and slipped the purse strap over her shoulder. "Could I read from your phone?"

He took out his phone, turned it on and gave it to Madison.

The notes app was easy to find, and she located their battle cry, first thing. Her heart was full to overflowing, she was pouring all her energy into steadying her nerves, and she didn't have much left over to remember battle cries. But she needed to.

"From the end of the earth will I cry unto Thee, when my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the rock that is higher than I."

"Maddie--"

She grabbed Terry's hand and he stopped. She wanted this more than anything in the world, or she wouldn't be here. He knew that and so did she. So did probably everyone here, except the driver. The driver was just doing her job, but John knew, Izzy knew, and Jake and Abby especially knew.

Terry took a deep breath, kissed Madison's hand then looked up as the van slowed.
Everyone looked out the side window at the large building coming into view. The building stood so tall, so impressive, that when Madison leaned back in her seat, she couldn't see the top of it from their van. The driver followed a fancy brick avenue with palm trees until they arrived at a-- Terry said it was a "portico"-- that stretched from the building to the other side of the avenue.

The van parked beneath the shelter, Terry got out, then helped Madison climb outside. While she stared at the palm trees swaying lightly in the desert breeze, someone came from the hotel with a cart for their luggage.

Taking off her sweater, Madison stepped beyond the shade of the portico and stared up at the blue Nevada sky. She could now see the top of the building, and it wasn't even the tallest in Las Vegas. She stepped back into the shade, went back to the others and followed them into the hotel.

Sticking next to Izzy, Madison watched from a distance as Terry went to the large desk up front. Terry opened his wallet, showed his ID, then everyone else's, nodded in Madison's direction, then opened his document holder.

The man at the desk didn't look satisfied, and Madison was beginning to feel embarrassed.

Terry, though, didn't seem at all embarrassed, even when an important-looking woman joined them. Terry again nodded in Madison's direction, showed the papers, then put them away like he was done and there was nothing more to say.

The important woman said something to the man at the desk, and Terry smiled. The woman smiled, looked relieved, then went back to wherever it was she came from. Terry leaned against the counter and began signing things, then pulled out his credit card and gave it to the man.

John looked back at the rest of them and nodded.

Everything was all right.

The uniformed man with the luggage cart was told to take their bags up, and Terry was given three cards which he passed out to John and Jake.

"They're calling taxis for us," Terry said as he came back to Madison. "This," he said, holding up a card, "is our room key. Remind me not to lose it."

"They had a problem with me, didn't they?"
"Not anymore, they don't." Terry slid the keycard into his wallet. "When they objected to the fact you didn't have more ID, I told them we'd just have to go somewhere else. The manager wasn't about to lose all this business, especially when you aren't the one paying the bill."

John clapped Terry on the shoulder, and Madison watched her future husband with wonder as he turned on his phone and did something smart. Whatever Terry was doing, she was sure it was smart.

"Okay, let's see if our taxis are here." Terry pocketed his phone, offered Madison his arm and they stepped outside as Izzy commented on what a nice day it was to get married.

October seventh.

Madison's insides began to tremble again, or they really had never stopped-- she wasn't sure. She wanted to be a butterfly so bad, but she had butterflies in her stomach and they were all fluttering hard to get out.

Two taxis were waiting for them, and Terry opened the door of the first, told the driver where they wanted to go, went to the second, told that driver, then came back and helped Madison into the taxi. She'd been in a taxi before, but never a Las Vegas one. It didn't matter. Terry climbed in after her, then Izzy and John, and AJ got in the second.

Soon they were back in traffic and Madison was rubbing the button between her fingers. She wanted to ask for Terry's phone, but there was no time.

They pulled up to an official looking building with a flashy sign that read, "Marriage License Bureau." They were here, obviously. Terry paid the driver, John and Izzy got out, then Terry, then Madison with her purse and sweater.

The second taxi pulled up, and AJ climbed out while Terry went over and paid the driver.

A mild breeze caressed Madison as Terry came back and took her hand.

The group went into the building, and Madison saw the ropes meant for long waiting lines, saw a handful of people already there, and braced herself to wait. She was all ready and willing to stare at the polished floor, when Terry spotted the pre-registered area, and she quickly found herself facing a woman behind a counter and a glass window.
Terry handled everything, and unlike the hotel, there was no need to say they would have to go elsewhere. Besides, there was probably no elsewhere to go to do this. Terry showed all their ID, Madison had to sign some things, then instead of meeting the eyes of the woman behind the counter, Madison studied the spicy-brown granite that matched the floor.

John, Izzy, and AJ stood outside the line and watched, John snapping the occasional picture with his iPhone.

About fifteen minutes later, Terry thanked the woman and started to leave. It surprised Madison. She had yet to get her feet sore, and she tugged at his sleeve to understand what was going on.

"We've got our marriage license," he smiled, and pulled her out of the line to their family. "Now we need to get married."

"So we're not married yet?"

"Oh, no." Terry slipped some paperwork into his document holder, then zipped it closed. "We've only got a license to get married. Something to make it legal. Now we have to get to the Office of Civil Marriages, which is supposed to be a very short walk from here. About one point five blocks, according to the website."

They left the building, and this time, Madison was feeling the butterflies in full force. She grabbed onto Terry's arm, and he let her hang on as tight as she needed.

She had to calm down or pass out-- it was that simple. She was almost there, if she could just hang on, she could relieve some of this after they got married. All she had to do was last out the nervous excitement.

They soon came to the office, everyone started to go in and she forgot how to breathe.

In out, in out, she could do this.

Madison kept moving but felt numb to everything and everyone in the world but Terry, and God, and the fact she was trusting God to get her through this. She was very aware of Terry as he touched her hand and gave it a squeeze as they went inside the building.

Since Terry had an appointment, they were expected, and she let him do all the talking. She couldn't get her mind to work past the fact she was getting married. To Terry. To. Day. The
world reeled a little, but not out of fear. It was shock. Like sticking your finger into a light socket, but instead of a jolt of electricity, you got a jolt of joy that blasted you out of your socks.

That’s what today felt like.

It overwhelmed Madison, left her stunned and feeling well toasted on both sides.

And she hadn't even kissed Terry.

"Traditional vows." Terry looked at Madison. "I think that reflects us best, don’t you think, Maddie?"

It took a moment to figure out what was being decided.

"What version of civil marriage vows do we want?" Terry asked. "Non-religious, or traditional?"

"Traditional." Madison hugged herself, and a witness was picked.

John.

They were led to a room with a white arch covered with green ivy. Benches were in front, and Izzy, Jake, and Abby found places to sit while the man who was going to preside over the wedding stood under the arch and told Terry and Madison where to stand. Izzy took Madison’s purse, and Madison put her sweater back on since this place had the air conditioning turned up and she was trying hard not to tremble.

Off to one side, John stood as the witness.

The man opened his book, smiled at them, then began.

"We are gathered together here in the presence of these witnesses to join this man and this woman in matrimony…"

Madison prayed and listened to the words, and then she heard Terry’s name as she’d never heard it before.

"Terry Edward Davis, will you take this woman to be your wedded wife, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love, comfort, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep yourself only for her, so long as you both shall live?"
"I will."

Gulping hard, Madison fought for control.

"Madison Olivia Jones, will you have this man to be your wedded husband, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love, honor, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep yourself only for him, so long as you both shall live?"

Just like Terry, she didn't hesitate. "I will."

"Take her hand and repeat after me."

Madison trembled as Terry took her hand and began to repeat the words.

"I, Terry Edward Davis, take thee, Madison Olivia Jones, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death us do part."

Then it was Madison's turn.

"I, Madison Olivia Jones, take thee Terry Edward Davis--" she stopped, unable to remember what came next. The man repeated the words, and she prayed really, really hard that she would get this right. When she was done, the man smiled and Madison was relieved when he didn't tell her she had to go back and try again.

"You may exchange rings now."

Terry took out a silver band and slipped it onto Madison's finger, so it paired with her engagement ring. Terry handed her the other band, but her fingers were shaking so wildly she almost dropped it. Sucking in a deep breath, she locked eyes with Terry, willed herself to stay calm, then looked down at his hand and steadied herself long enough to slide his wedding band onto the correct finger.

"Forasmuch as this man and this woman have consented together in holy wedlock, and have witnessed the same before God and this company, and thereto have given and pledged their troth, each to the other, and have declared the same by giving and receiving of a ring, and by joining of hands; by the authority vested in me by the State of Nevada, I pronounce that they are man and wife. You may now kiss each other."
There was a moment’s pause, and Terry looked at her, as if asking for permission.

She nodded.

Terry leaned in, touched her lips with a light kiss as though he were afraid of breaking her, and was about to step away, when Madison caught his shirt and pulled him back.

Now was her chance. She shut her eyes and let herself kiss Terry.

She could feel everyone watching them and didn't hold him long, but when she let Terry go, he looked dazed. Like he'd just been spun around several times and now couldn't walk a straight line. He blew out a breath, and before he even looked halfway recovered, the congratulations began to fall.

She was hugged, and so was Terry, and though Madison tried to be aware of what was going on so she could thank everyone, it was hard to get past the tingly warmth of those two kisses. Pleasure still zinged across her skin, making her want to hide until it passed. She felt some relief, yet if she could just hold onto Terry awhile longer, she was sure she would feel even better.

All day, Madison had been calming nervous excitement, and now all she wanted to do was hide with Terry.

Izzy gave her another hug, and Madison squeezed her as hard as she could.

"Thank you, Izzy."

"You'll take good care of each other, I know you will." Izzy gave her a rocking back and forth hug. "God love you both."

"Could we have a wedding picture?" John asked. "Just one-- in front of the arch?"

Everyone moved out of the way for the picture, and Madison and Terry stepped under the arching trellis. After the kiss she'd just given Terry, she couldn't meet his gaze as easily. She shifted in a little as John asked, then Terry moved around until she felt Terry at her back.

Oh, Terry.

She looked down, saw Terry's hand hanging at his side. She touched it, brought it up to her side and let it rest there in a one-armed hug from behind.
A kiss was pressed to Madison's hair, a deep sigh grazed her ear.

Somewhere, their picture was taken, though Madison wasn't very aware of it happening.

She was breathing and yet she was breathless, she felt joy and yet she wanted to weep. If given half a moment she could grow silly and lightheaded, and if Terry didn't catch her, she might pass out.

His hand drew away from her side and she turned into him. She looked up at his brown eyes, and he turned away. Her heart stopped. His hand grabbed hers-- he squeezed it tight and life pumped back into Madison.

Terry didn't let go as he started to talk with the others in his casual, smiling way. The way Terry usually was, when he was around John and the others.

She watched as Terry took care of the paperwork, then put in a call for two taxis to come pick them up.

They were done here.

Collecting her purse from Izzy, Madison took off her sweater, then stepped outside with Terry as a married couple. John was smiling, Izzy was still a little teary-eyed, and AJ couldn't move five feet without hugging each other. Abby had said she wasn't a touchy-feely person, but with Jake, Abby was-- she really was.

As they stood waiting for the taxis, John looked to Terry.

"Where do we go from here, Buddy? What's next on your plan?"

"Well, the hard part's done." Terry nodded in Madison's direction. "I didn't want to wear her out, so the plan was to go back to the hotel, stay the rest of the day, then fly back in the morning."

"That's fine by me," Abby smiled. "Did you see where Uncle Terry booked us? I don't think I've ever stayed anywhere so fancy. Not even in San Diego."

"It's just a hotel," Terry shrugged, as Madison took his hand. "By Vegas standards, I don't think it's very much."
"Meaning it’s not a casino.” John checked his watch. "So, what are the plans when we get back? It's only three o'clock. What if we rent a few movies, maybe ordered room service and had a small family holiday at the hotel? Would that relax Madison? What do you say? The tab's on me."

Terry looked to Madison, and Madison buried her face in Terry's shoulder. She wanted to hide with him, but even this much contact was better than nothing.

"That's nice of you," Madison nodded into Terry's shirt. "Thank you, John."

"Of course," Abby offered up, "if there's any here who would rather not come, all they would have to do is not show up and the rest of us would understand."

"We would," John said, and Jake agreed.

It took courage, but Madison peeked out from Terry's shoulder to see Izzy smiling at her daughter.

The others were smiling as well.

Thankfully, the taxis Terry had called for arrived at the curb and Madison climbed in first. She was already thinking about hiding and not coming out until it was time to get on the plane and go home. This wasn't hiding-in-her-shell hiding, but hiding to make herself stronger. Hiding with the one she loved. Hiding with Terry.

That's what Madison told herself, and she knew her wings were too weak to do very much. She'd just come out of the cocoon, and her wings were still brand new. They were drying in the desert wind, craving for the sky, craving to do what they were meant to do.

Fly.

She was meant to live, she was meant to be with Terry, and she was only getting started. Madison took out the dark chocolate button she'd been holding onto all day, and gave it to Terry.

"Does that belong on your shirt?" she asked.

"Now that you mention it, I think it does." He looked at her. "Do you need it back?"
Madison shook her head. She no longer needed the button when she now had its owner. As soon as Terry's hand was free, she held onto him and didn't let go. By now, she'd managed to memorize their battle cry and could recite it by heart—just not under stress, so she needed to work on that. She'd faced down their first wedding and had said "I will," and had kissed Terry and hadn't passed out. Yet.

Her butterfly wings weren't dry, they were brand new, but as their taxi pulled in front of the hotel, Madison knew her time would come. She knew it wouldn't come today, but she also knew something else.

She and Terry wouldn't be watching movies with the others.

"The hope of the righteous shall be gladness..."
~ Proverbs 10:28 ~

"I [Madison] will sing unto the LORD as long as I live: I will sing praise to my God while I have my being."
~ Psalm 104:33 ~
"Turn away thine eyes from me, for they have overcome me..."
~ Song of Solomon 6:5 ~

The taxi slowed to a stop in front of the hotel, and Terry pulled out his wallet to pay the driver. The fact he could remember such things as money, or the need to tip the driver, was evidence that Maddie's wedding kiss hadn't blown every fuse in his brain. That he was still able to run on rational thought. Considering what had happened, it was miraculous his brain was working at all. Terry leaned over, popped open Maddie's door while John and Izzy got out on Terry's other side.

Newfound wonder stirred in Terry as he watched his wife climb out. Maddie was his now, though the thought seemed incredible. He glanced down at his left hand to make sure there really was a white gold band on his finger, one put there by Maddie.

"Congratulations, man."

Terry looked at the front seat, saw the taxi driver smiling and remembered the guy had picked them up in front of the Office of Civil Marriages.

"Thanks." Terry felt a little embarrassed as he stepped out of the cab and into the shade of the hotel's portico. The day felt surreal, almost like he was witnessing someone else's life, and not his own, and yet this was all happening to him.

He had just gotten married.

The second taxi pulled up as Maddie came to his side. He tried not to linger as her eyes sought his, or feel too much when she took his hand in her own. That intensity he'd felt from her in the past and hadn't known what to do with, was spilling off her now, and he still wasn't sure what to do. They were going at her speed, not his, and that, he reminded himself as she leaned her head against his shoulder, was very, very slow.
He could do slow. If his jackhammering heart didn't count, he was doing slow right now.

"Maddie--" he gently pulled away-- "I have to pay AJ's driver." Terry resisted looking into the gray eyes he knew were watching him, and went to pay the taxi as Abby and Jake climbed out and joined the others.

Steady. Steady.

Terry took in a steadying breath, gave the man his money and headed back to the hotel entrance where everyone was gathering. Terry didn't want to think about the kiss. He didn't want to think about Maddie. He didn't want to think about the fact he and Maddie were married now, or the fact Maddie was taking his hand again.

He could feel her pulse, and it was racing-- just like his.

"So." Terry inhaled slowly as everyone moved inside the air conditioned building. "Are we still on for movies and room service? Is that the plan?"

"It is, unless you have somewhere else you'd rather be." John strolled over to the elevator, tapped the console, stood back and waited for their ride. No side punches, no jokes about newlyweds, nothing but ordinary John waiting for the elevator.

Not that Terry had expected to be harassed, but still. Terry was deeply grateful.

"As long as Maddie's resting," Terry struggled for casual confidence, "movies and food sound good to me." He checked the quiet woman at his side to see what she thought, and found her staring at the marble tiles beneath her feet.

The marble was nice, but it wasn't that nice.

"Are you very tired?" Terry squeezed Maddie's hand and she leaned into his side without looking up. "Do you want to rest before going over to watch movies with the others?"

She nodded as the elevator doors slid open.
Everyone moved inside, Terry tapped their floor and Maddie moved against Terry’s arm. At first Terry thought she was afraid of elevators, but then her head cozied into his shoulder and Terry fought the urge to look down. He steadied himself, held her hand and focused his eyes on the mirrored panels. The others were talking among themselves, and there at his side, Terry could see Maddie—eyes closed, a happy curve on her lips, and looking quieter than he’d ever seen her awake.

He allowed himself to breathe in a little, still cautious of feeling too much, but at the same time very much aware of the love standing next to him.

The doors slid open, Jake pulled out his door key and so did John. They were all on the same floor, though not grouped together.

"Would you get a load of this place?" Abby’s voice barely registered above a whisper, as if she were trying not to wake the afternoon sleepers on the thirty-fifth floor. "Uncle Terry, I hope you didn’t pay an arm and a leg to get us in here."

Izzy looked like she was also having a good time, and since Terry didn’t feel like talking, he just smiled and kept moving.

The layout of the suite was all that mattered to Terry— that and making sure Maddie didn’t have to endure the night with a bed in the room. Abby was right though, this place was fancy. They moved down a richly carpeted hall with small tables between suite doors, and Terry kept reading off the etched numbers on the small gold placards.

He slowed when he came to the number on his door key.

"This one’s ours." Terry looked to John, and John gave a long look at the hallway carpet.

Well now. Terry felt outrageously awkward. As though he were standing in noonday traffic in his boxers, though noonday traffic in Three Mile Bay was fairly mild. It was the gawking that would kill you.
"We'll see you later." With a small nod to Terry, John started everyone down the hall at a nonchalant stride. As though there were nothing at all to be embarrassed about. As though John had known what Terry had been feeling.

Which, as Terry took a moment to think about, he found a bit unnerving.

But really, there was no reason to be embarrassed, or nervous-- though Terry was feeling both. No reason at all. This was Maddie, not someone else, and this was no honeymoon. Okay then. Steeling himself with those last mental words, Terry pushed the keycard into the slot, opened the door...

And stood in the hall with Maddie.

Neither of them went in.

He looked at her, and she looked at him.

"Would you mind if we kept tradition on this?" he asked. "You know-- could I carry you over the threshold?"

"Like on TV?"

"Well, yeah. I guess. It's not just done on TV, real people do it, too."

She gave a pretty smile and nodded, "yes."

"Okay." Terry rubbed his hands together and took a deep breath. Nothing to it. Just pick her up and carry her inside. Like on TV.

"I thought you said real people did this?"

"Hey, give me a moment." Terry took another breath, looked her over and decided where to put his arms, then scooped her up-- purse, sweater, and all. "Am I hurting you?"
Maddie shook her head, her eyes wide, her mouth smiling though he could tell she was more than a little nervous, herself. If her heart had been racing before, it was now a flat out pedal-to-the-metal kind of pulse that made him wonder how she managed to stay conscious. It had taken an extraordinary amount of courage for her to get this far, and he could still feel that courage pulsing through her body.

Looking either way in the hall and seeing no one, Terry nudged their suite door completely open with his foot. An engraved table sat off to the left, an entertainment cabinet stood further inside, and against the opposite wall, was a large, plush sofa with Maddie’s name all over it. Figuratively speaking, that is. He resisted a look down at her, stepped over the threshold, then turned, and drew the door shut with his foot.

He shifted Maddie and started to let her down when he felt her lips soft on his mouth.

Everything ground to a halt. Terry’s world stopped functioning and his mind screamed that he needed to think.

He HAD to think.

He eased her down, drew his arms away, then stepped back until they were no longer breathing the same warm air.

"Maddie, I--" Terry moaned when he saw the hurt in her eyes. "Please, don't cry. I have to slow down a little, but I love you. I love you with all my heart, Maddie."

She nodded, hugged herself, and waited expectantly. Very expectantly. Like he would come back to her at any moment.

"A little slower than that, Maddie."

She was fixating again, and this time, it was solely on him.

"What about this room, huh?" Terry moved around her, looked about the suite as though he were seeing it for the first time, even though it was pretty much as advertised on the website. Which wasn't bad for an upscale place as this. "Look at that flat-screen TV-- the others have one
in their suite too, and when we go over and watch movies, it’s really going to be something. That baby’s twice the size of the one we have back home.” Terry glanced at Maddie.

She wasn’t looking at the display.

“There’s a balcony out here.” He moved to the sliding glass door and shoved it open without stepping outside. Desert wind filled his face, and he stood and let it embrace him until he could breathe without trembling inwardly.

He heard footsteps behind him, felt the aching touch of a soft hand on his.

"I love you, Maddie. I don't want to mess this up."

"You aren't."

He sighed, looked at her as she moved closer.

"Maddie--" he couldn't get out another word before her mouth met his, and he was breathing her air, feeling her lips and losing himself in Maddie’s kiss. She kept her hand in his and didn't let her touch stray, but when she stepped back, Terry shut the balcony door and went to find some cold water.

Locating the bathroom off the kitchen, Terry stepped inside, turned on the faucet and splashed water on the back of his neck. When he was done, he saw her in the mirror.

"I promised to keep you safe, Maddie, and I have every intention of honoring my word.” He grabbed a towel. “I know I said we’d go at your speed, but we have a limitation here-- me. We can’t go so fast I put you in danger.” Slapping the towel onto the rack, he turned to face Maddie and was dismayed to find very little alarm.

"I trust you, Terry."

"Thank you for that-- that means the world to me, but I need more. I need cooperation.” He rubbed his face with both hands, leaned back against the sink and looked at her. "Maddie, I love you, but if you could come on a little less strong, I'd be grateful."
"I want to kiss you."

"I know you do." He couldn't help but smile back. "I feel the same about you, but I have to take things more slowly. For your sake."

Maddie bit her lip, looked down at the floor and nodded.

"Where did you learn to kiss like that?" she asked.

"Why? Am I any good?"

She nodded.

"I guess that's good to know."

"Where?" She looked up at him and Terry didn't really want to answer.

It wasn't a big mystery. He pushed off the sink, moved past her into the living room and she followed at a distance.

"Where, Terry?"

"Let's just say I had to learn, or else." He moved to the table by the entrance where their bags had been placed, and started to open his duffel. Maddie had dropped her purse and sweater after he'd carried her inside, and they lay at his feet as a reminder of how careful they needed to be in the future. He picked up the items, put them on the table as Maddie came to his side.

Terry moved a little away from her as he zipped open his bag.

"You know what I wish, Terry?" Maddie had understood his comment about having to learn, for her voice sounded wistfully sad. "I wish I could've taken your place for you. It would've been worth it, if it meant you didn't have to be hurt."

Terry stopped what he was doing, and looked at her.
She had meant every word.

An ache the size of all the world crammed itself into Terry's heart.

She inched closer to him, and when he didn't move, she pulled his head down in a kiss that he let himself return. Sincere sweetness-- that was Maddie. He deepened the kiss a little, then reigned himself in when he felt her start to back away. As though she’d either changed her mind, or had remembered that he was a man, after all, and not just her Terry.

He prayed she didn't hold that fact against him.

Catching his breath, Terry returned his attention to the duffel as Maddie recovered at his side. He folded some jeans, then looked at his wife.

His wife.

She was half smiling, half hugging herself, and when he kept looking at her, she leaned her head against his shoulder and rubbed her face against his shirt.

"Maddie," he whispered, and lightly touched her hair.

She pulled away in a retreat to the couch. There was a happy smile on her lips, a general sense of relief about her that Terry admired, rather than felt, himself-- like she was grateful that she'd gotten some of the passion out of her system. Steady. She looked steadier now.

He was glad one of them was.

"Thank you, Terry."

He sighed, shook his head and went back to his folding.

"Terry?"
It wasn't his name that had him smiling, but the way she said it-- all lovable and huggable, and every bit of it Maddie.

"Do we really have to watch movies with the others, Terry?"

He slanted a glance at the couch.

"Abby said all we had to do was not come, and they would understand. So couldn't we just not come?"

He really didn't want to ask the reasoning behind her thinking, but he didn't want to answer the question either, and since that pretty much ruled out speaking, he pretended he hadn't heard her and kept on working.

"Couldn't we hide?" she asked. "Just until it's time to go home?"

"Hide?" It had been impossible not to hear that word. Terry didn't know how she meant it, and tried not to ask.

His heart sank a little as she crossed the room and came to watch him fold his clothes.

"Please, I want to be with you, but I can't-- not the way I want to, so couldn't we just hide? Please, Terry?"

He chanced a look at her and winced. The plea in her eyes was something he knew he couldn't turn down. Man, was she ever making this hard.

"If that's what you want, then I guess, but Maddie--" he leveled what he hoped was a no-nonsense look-- "you do what you need to, but I'm going to do what I need to, to keep you safe. You are my top priority. Are we clear on that?"

She nodded, leaned in and planted a quick kiss on his mouth before getting out of his way and beating a hasty retreat.
"I mean it, Maddie." He tossed a shirt into his duffel as Maddie went to the far end of the couch, sat and hugged her knees to her chest. Her wide-eyed nervous look didn't make him feel any easier for just having caved. He zipped his duffel, stowed it under the table with the other suitcase. "Please don't look at me like that. You were the one who chased me around this hotel room, and not the other way around, so don't think you can look at me like that, and make me feel guilty. It's not going to happen."

He moved to the chair opposite the couch, sat down, and they stared at each other until Terry scrubbed his face and groaned in defeat.

"Oh, Maddie. What are you doing to me?"

She relaxed a little, as if it heartened her to know that she had some measure of control over him. He didn't mind letting her know that.

"All you have to do is smile in order to make me happy, and when your hand isn't in mine, it feels empty. I've never been in love before, and I freely admit I'm a beginner in all of this. Add to that, we're both survivors in our first romantic relationship, and it means I'm learning as I go."

She propped her chin on her knees and showered him with a smile.

"You've got me running in circles, and I've never been happier. Which is absolutely nuts, since I'm trying to keep a level head in all of this and take care of you. That reminds me--" he nodded to her legs--"is that pulling your stitches? Does it hurt you to draw your knees up like that?"

"It pulls a little, but not much."

He nodded, ran a hand behind his neck. "Does that mean they're healing? How are they doing?"

"Do you want to see?"

"May I?"
She lifted her shirt a little, just enough to show her wounds and nothing else, and Terry came over to the couch to get a better look. He braced himself for the worst, for the sight he'd seen when he'd tried to apply first aid, but when he came close and saw the pale skin, his heart eased.

"It looks better." He sat on the couch so his shadow wouldn't get in the way. "It looks a lot better." He glanced up at Maddie. "The last time I saw them, they were red and--" he stopped, looked over the old scars that streaked her stomach with the new ones, and shrugged. "Never mind. You're healing, and that's all that matters." Terry sat back and stared at the empty TV while Maddie covered her stomach.

It still wasn't easy to see those scars, to know the pain that had caused them, but she was healing.

"Jake said you'd heal differently than him, and you are." Terry held his breath as Maddie's hand stole across the couch and took his. "Apples and oranges, Jake had said. Find out what works, and what doesn't."

"I don't understand, Terry."

"It's all right. It just means we have to take things slowly and be patient." Terry felt Maddie cuddle against his shoulder, and thankfully, nothing else. She wasn't ready for anything else, not even for some of that touching she'd talked about this morning. It was all right by him if this was all they did for a very long time.

Holding perfectly still, Terry did his best to let her rest.

After several minutes, he looked down and saw her casually watching the blank TV.

"I thought you were tired."

"That's what you thought, but I never said I was."

"In the elevator--" he smiled, sensing a chance for a bit of healthy conversation-- "I asked if you were very tired."
"And I didn't answer then." Maddie looked up at him, and despite his momentum, he had trouble remembering where he was.

She blinked at him and he smiled. This close, he could catch the faint scent of shampoo and soap and a little bit of perspiration from the day. It was nothing special, but it was from Maddie and that made it perfume to Terry's senses.

"You asked if I wanted to rest before we went over to watch movies, and I nodded, 'yes,' but I never said I needed to rest. Wanting and needing are different."

Maddie had the most beautiful smile.

The fact she was using female logic, didn't seem nearly as important as the fact she loved him and was holding his hand. It wasn't empty. That might have been man-in-love logic, but there it was. Terry was a goner, and he knew it.

When she started to give him a word for word account of the conversation in the elevator, Terry chuckled.

"How can you remember all that right now? The fact you can think at all, is disconcerting."

"Maybe it's because I'm not a man."

"Please, Maddie."

"But you're having a harder time at some things than I am, so it proves men are--"

"Don't say it. Please." Terry blew out a breath.

"I wasn't going to say animals."

"Thanks."

"I was just going to say, more trouble than women."
"Oh, I don't know about that." Terry kicked off his shoes and let his feet breathe. "I was running pretty hard just now."

Maddie punched Terry in the arm, a maneuver she must've of picked up from Izzy, and he smiled.

"I did not chase you."

Silence.

"If maybe I did, are you going to tell the others?"

"Only if you won't tell them that I'm a good kisser." Terry chuckled. "Now, that would be embarrassing."

"But you are."

"Then let's call it even, and keep this to ourselves."

"Thank you, Terry." She rubbed her face against his shoulder and Terry tried to get off the couch. "Where are you going?"

"Nowhere. Just seeing if there's anything in the fridge. Don't worry, you wanted to hide, so I'm officially going into hiding. The Witness Protection Program will have nothing on me, I'll be invisible to everyone but you. And maybe room service." He was rewarded with a heart-tugging smile. "I need to get off this couch. You hungry?"

She nodded, and watched as he went to the TV to hunt for the remote.

"I'm guessing there's nothing in the fridge, so how about we have our own party and order up some snacks?"

"Could I have strawberries?"
"Whatever you want, my love, you got." Terry found the remote, tossed it to a smiling Maddie, then headed for the kitchen. "Providing they take requests, of course, but I'm guessing a hotel like this one goes out of their way to keep guests happy." Terry opened the fridge and found fancy bottled water, but nothing else. Right. Room service it was. As he started back for the living room, he caught sight of what was probably a silverware drawer and opened it to see what he would find.

Among the silverware, were sharp steak knives-- something Maddie really didn't need to face right now. He gathered all the sharp things, hid them in the cupboard under the sink, then pushed into the living room with a mental note to put it all back before they left in the morning.

"Turn on the TV, maybe check out the pay-per-view movies." Terry located the hotel menu then grabbed the chair next to the TV to avoid sitting beside his one true love. "Okay, let's see what they've got here." He opened the menu and tried hard to ignore the fact Maddie had yet to turn on the TV. "You wanted strawberries, but how do you feel about some dipped in chocolate?"

"They can do that?"

"Have done, Maddie, have done." He glanced at the couch and saw her biting her lip. "Would that be a 'yes'?"

She nodded.

"It's early for dinner, but I'm in the mood for popcorn. And something to drink." He looked over the beverages, passed over the alcohol and paused at the soft drinks. "Any requests?" he asked. When Maddie kept silent, he looked over and saw her hugging her knees. "If you want something in particular, speak up."

"Would you read to me?"

"Sure. Root beer, ginger ale, apple cider--"

"No, I meant something else."
"There’s only one menu, Sweetheart." Terry got up, went over to the phone to call in their order. He gave the beverage choices one more perusal before turning back to Maddie. "Apple cider sound good to you?"

"I don’t know. I’ve never had any."

"Then this will be a first." Terry picked up the phone as Maddie climbed off the couch. It made him a little nervous at first, but she moved around him and went to the table to her suitcase, so he was able to breathe and call the concierge desk in peace.

When he'd placed their order, Terry hung up and noticed Maddie was back on the couch and cradling her huge copy of Jane Austen.

Then it hit him.

The pleading eyes, the loving way she held that thick tome. She wanted him to read to her. From that.

"You brought Jane Austen in your suitcase?" Terry crossed the floor, plopped down on the couch beside Maddie, and she eagerly shoved the book into his hands. "What else did you bring? I don’t suppose you managed to fit the kitchen sink in your bag?"

"Please, Terry? I go slow when I read, so I don’t get very far."

He slanted her a look. "You’re not going to get all starry-eyed, are you? I know how you are over the movie, I just want to keep things nice and sane over the book."

"I can be nice."

"But not sane?" Warily, he opened the book at the red marker and flicked her another glance.

Maddie had caught her bottom lip between her teeth in a hopeful expression of barely contained excitement he found irresistible. If his heart hadn’t been so completely undone, he would’ve read from anything but *Pride and Prejudice*. She had a thing for Lizzy and Mr. Darcy,
and Terry really didn't want to get caught in between when he was trying hard not to get kissed again.

"Just don't go nuts, okay?" Terry sighed when Maddie settled in next to him and he started to read.

Her toes curled on the edge of the cushion as she followed every word. She didn't want to miss anything--Terry could tell by the way she moved against his arm to see each page as he read it out loud.

She hadn't been kidding when she'd said she hadn't been able to get very far.

It was early in the story yet. Mr. Darcy was far from losing his pomp, and Mr. Bingley was trying to urge his prideful friend to dance with one of the ladies at the Assembly Ball. Terry found himself at the point of Mr. Darcy ungraciously refusing, and about to utter the infamous words that always had Terry wincing, when Terry noticed Maddie's reaction.

She was eating it up, to the point of silently quoting Mr. Darcy as Terry read:

"She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me..."

Maddie giggled, and when Terry paused to listen, she tugged at his arm to get him going again.

It struck Terry, that whatever he was in for in this marriage, there were definitely going to be moments he would enjoy. This was one of those moments. As he continued, Maddie snuggled up against his elbow and soaked in every chapter, the huge flat-screen forgotten in all its HD splendor. Terry found himself not minding in the slightest, for he was too busy making Maddie happy, too busy sneaking a peek at that peaches and cream complexion to see if she was smiling. When she was, it was Terry's greatest reward.

The door sounded, and he had to stop reading.

"That's probably our food," he explained.

"But--"
"We'll go back to the book after I get our food." Terry pushed off the couch, went to the door, and let in the room service waiter and his cart. A cart? He hadn't expected there would be so much a cart would be needed. Not for what basically amounted to pricey snacks.

"Where would you like this set up?"

"Oh-- the table, I guess." Terry watched as the waiter set a shiny champagne bucket on the table and began worrying that their order might've been mixed up with someone else's. "Besides ice, what's in that bucket?"

"A bottle of our best sparkling apple cider."

Stepping back, Terry nodded, and let the waiter do his work.

A towel was pulled off the bucket, then the man chilled the cider before adding two stemmed glasses that had Terry thinking champagne again. "The strawberries need to be kept refrigerated," the man said, as he placed a heart-shaped box and a large bucket of popcorn on the table.

Nodding, Terry gave him a tip for his trouble.

When the door closed and they were alone again, Terry pulled the bottle out of the champagne bucket. The label looked impressive, but for all its finery it was a simple apple cider in a very slick bottle. The strawberries had also undergone star treatment, having been packaged in a heart-shaped candy box with a heavy pink ribbon.

Terry sighed. This was Las Vegas, all right.

"The food's here, Maddie." He opened the apple cider, filled the glasses, then brought them over to the couch.

She took one and he waited as she tried a sip.

"Like it?"
Smiling, she nodded and drank some more.

Terry set his glass on the floor by the couch, went back to the table and retrieved the box of chocolate and the bowl of popcorn. It was an odd mix, but then, so were they.

"Your strawberries, m'lady." Terry set the box on her Jane Austen, then retook his seat. "I don't expect you'll be able to eat all those berries, so when you've had enough, I'll put your leftovers in the fridge." He prayed over the food, then started one-handing the popcorn while tugging Jane Austen off of Maddie's lap.

It was going to be a challenge, but he could fit in a mouthful between paragraphs and still advance the story.

He popped in some kernels with his food hand, located his reading place with his clean hand, then noticed Maddie. She wasn't doing anything, but sitting there admiring her pretty, heart-shaped box.

"That needs to be refrigerated when you're done, so you'd better not spend too much time getting down to business," he chuckled.

With a sad little sigh, she gently pulled the velvet ribbon. Next came the cutting of the seals with her thumbnail, then she could lift off the lid and see what she had got. If it wasn't strawberry dipped candy, the concierge desk would be getting a call. Below some brown lining paper were several rows of large strawberries, all dipped in thick chocolate and drizzled in this and that and looking very sophisticated, and very rich.

"I give you five minutes, tops." Terry slanted her a challenge. "After one of those berries, you're going to be begging for a taste of my popcorn. Yeah, it came with a girly ribbon, but this-- this is real butter and salt, and it has the whole popcorn thing going. I dare you to take a whiff of this corn and not want a taste."

Maddie picked up a strawberry, and without warning, stuffed it into Terry's mouth.
He gagged, rich juice spilling down his chin. She palmed it away, and watched him try to down an icy cold strawberry the size of his tongue. The fact it was drenched in chocolate and had been injected with some kind of filling, didn't help.

He had already tasted sweetness from Maddie, and it left him dazed, but sugar and fructose were bursting into his senses and blowing them wide open. He wasn't so sure he liked the over-sweet nectar, but then Maddie came and tasted his lips, and then Terry no longer cared. Her mouth pulled away and he was left to suck in air and sort out Maddie from the strawberry and the chocolate.

"I like it," she smiled, and tried one on her own.

He gulped and swallowed and finally caught his breath.

"Using me as a guinea pig, huh?" Terry smiled, but his heart ached when she didn't feed him more and come to claim another taste. He was getting spoiled for Maddie and her love. He needed her like he needed his next breath.

As she ate her strawberry, her eyes met his.

Terry inhaled a deep breath, and found where he'd left off in their book. He read a few lines, ate some popcorn and felt Maddie cuddle against him with her box of chocolate. She started to feed him one bite of candy at a time, but didn't come close for another taste. It wasn't the candy he wanted, but her, though it was just as well, or he'd have to find someplace else to sit and read.

As he went on about Mr. Bingley, Maddie started to feed Terry popcorn, as well, until he had trouble making much progress. When he'd had enough, all of her coaxing couldn't get him to eat another bite. He wanted to save room for dinner, and knew it would never happen if he let Maddie feed him a quarter of the box and all of the popcorn.

"I've fished my limit," he smiled, and watched as she got up to put the candy in the fridge.

When she came back and sank onto the couch beside him, Terry breathed deep.
He was having a sugar buzz. Either from all those berries, or from sweet, sweet Maddie. Probably from both. Now it was his turn to recite the battle cry, and Terry whispered it from his poor, overwhelmed, sugar buzzed heart.

As he read Jane Austen and let Maddie hold his hand, a helplessly happy sensation settled over him. Maddie was quite a woman.

* * * *

This was a new kind of wonderful that Madison had never had before. Certainly never with the Dragon. The Dragon had never really liked to kiss, and because of that, it was the one thing Madison could give and not have to fight against memories of someone else. It was all Terry’s.

It was good that she had backed off. If she stayed away from Terry completely, it could be bad, but things wouldn’t be good if she got too close to him, either. She had to find that in-between where she would be all right, where she could rest because she was with Terry, and not without him. That precious in-between that meant she wasn’t thinking about the knives he had probably hidden in the kitchen with all that silverware noise, or plucking the rubber band still around her wrist. Letting off some of that steam meant she could breathe now, and it felt good to be able to relax in the quiet with Terry.

She belonged to him now. She’d always hated the thought of that kind of prison, but this was different, this was wonderful.

The thought made her squeeze his hand extra hard.

The look in his eyes warned her to calm down again. She knew he was feeling a lot, and knew it was her fault that he was having to struggle as much as he was. Though it sent a shot of cold into her system, she remembered what he’d said in the jeep about what kissing did to him, and scooted away just enough to make the cold stop.

His words paused, his eyes blinked, and the grip on his hand let up a little, as if to give her the chance to leave his side if that’s what she needed.
She didn't move, and she watched him as he stared at the page. The words came again, and she tried not to smile. Wasn't he lovely? She wanted to hug him as hard as she possibly could, just to say "thank you." Abby was right. The difference between a monster and a man was self-control, and Terry had more self-control than anyone Madison had ever met.

The reading paused again, and Terry gave her a small glance over the book.

"Would you do me a favor?"

"Yes, Terry?"

"Please, could you stop looking at me like that?"

"Like what?"

"You know-- like the way you are."

"I don't know."

"Then never mind." He sighed as she rubbed her cheek against his shoulder-- she had to-- she loved him so, and before he went back to reading, she scooted away from him completely.

He looked at her as though she'd maybe abandoned him, but she hugged her knees and prayed he would understand. There was so much emotion running back and forth between them, it was easy to get lost in something good and wonderful like what they had. Especially when he looked so pretty and his voice sounded so comforting and she knew she could trust him.

"I love you, too," he sighed.

It took all the self-control she had to stop from crawling over to him, but Madison focused on staying where she was and loving Terry from a distance.

She had to. She couldn't love him up close like a normal woman.
Leaning her chin on her knees, Madison pretended not to watch Terry so he could feel easier. He could read so nice, he was going through *Pride and Prejudice* and not stumbling. He didn't have to go back and reread things and try to make sense of the hard words, and he moved around in the book like he belonged there. Her own Mr. Davis was reading Mr. Darcy. It was too good to be true, she had to kiss him.

And yet she held back.

If Terry knew how many times she wanted to kiss him and didn't, he'd be in the bathroom right now splashing water on his face.

"Would you excuse me a minute?" Terry put down the book, got up from the couch and went around to the kitchen.

She heard a door close, and Madison guessed he was in the bathroom.

See? It was a good thing he didn't know.

Several moments later he came back, dropped back on the couch and picked up the book.

"Terry?"

He bowed his head, a reluctant but happy smile on his lips. "Yes?"

"Are you sorry you married me?"

"That sounds like a question Jake asked Abby after they got married." Terry opened the book. "I know, because Abby told me about it."

"What did she say to his question?"

"The same thing I'm telling you-- I'm not sorry."

"Not even though you have to hang your head under the faucet?"
"I'm a big boy," Terry smiled, "I don't mind a little cold now and again if it means I get to have you in my life."

As he resumed the story, she gave Terry a mental kiss.

Even though she could make Terry feel a lot for her, he didn't mind letting her know that she held that power over him. It had never been that way with the Dragon, but with Terry, there was an open helplessness about him that disarmed her. Terry didn't try to bully her to even the score, or hurt her to show that he was still in control. There was a give and take to their relationship where the one had the power to hurt the other, where each held the other's happiness to some degree, and it was night and day different from the Dragon. It made Maddie never want to use that power to hurt Terry. Not ever. Not even by accident.

Accidents were bound to happen though, especially when Terry seemed to be more sensitive than she was about certain things.

The next time she needed to kiss and accidentally made Terry need to splash water on his face, she would make it up to him. She would find a way to be a good friend to him, while trying to figure out how to be a wife.

The light coming through the sliding door was fading into darkness, and the lateness of the day made her feel timid. Night was squeezing in on them and she didn't want to think about bedtime, or exactly where Terry would sleep. She'd asked him to stay close enough to wake her from any nightmares, and that's what made her so timid.

She needed him.

The story paused as Terry yawned and stretched where he sat. "I just noticed it's getting hard to see in here."

"Are you tired of reading?"

"Some." He looked over their progress in the book and smiled. "I'm having a good time though, aren't you?"
She nodded. It felt strangely grand to sit in the growing dark with him and hide. They had spent the last several hours without seeing anyone else but room service, and it really felt as though they were in hiding.

Letting out a relaxed sigh, Terry leaned his head back and stared up at the ceiling. "Just listen to all that quiet. I don't mind this at all. It's like God wrapped up today and put a large bow on it, just for us. Today is a gift, Maddie. Days like this are gifts." Terry closed his eyes and breathed in softly. "Do you mind if I take a break for awhile? My voice could use a rest."

"I don't mind."

She reached across the couch and touched his hand.

"My sweet one." He gave a deeply contented sigh. "Thank you for marrying me."

As she watched him slip further into sheer happiness, she wondered if now would be a good time to ask.

"Terry?"

"I'm right here, Maddie."

"Where are you going to sleep, tonight? I mean, I know it's going to be in here, with me, but what are you going to use for a bed?"

"I hope you're not frightened." Terry rolled his head to one side and looked at her. "However we decide to make my bed, I'll leave you alone. You know that, don't you?"

She nodded.

"Well," Terry paused in thought, "I could haul the mattress in from the bedroom, and sleep on the floor. Kind of like Izzy and her inflatable, though I don't know if you'd be very comfortable with the idea."

Madison didn't want to answer, for she understood what Terry had meant.
"It's not so bad when it's only Izzy, but you're a man and--"

"And I'm not going to be hauling in a mattress."

"I'm sorry, Terry."

"It's okay. I knew what I was getting into when we got married." There was no self-pity or hint of complaint in his voice, just good-natured statement of fact.

"If I slept sitting up--" she pulled on Terry's hand to get his full attention-- "there would be more room on the couch for someone else." She tugged again when he looked puzzled, as if by tugging, he would understand. "I'll share my couch with you, Terry."

When he smiled, she couldn't help feeling a little bashful at the way it might've sounded.

"I appreciate it, but the couch is yours. I'll sleep in the chair."

The phone in his pocket rang, and Terry pulled it out to check the caller. Madison hoped it wasn't John, because they were in hiding right now and what good was it to be in hiding if everyone still called you? Terry was supposed to be invisible to everyone but her and room service, remember?

Then she pictured Terry trying to sleep in the awful chair, and she struggled with guilt. While she struggled, Terry answered the call and her heart sank lower than the ocean was deep.

The world was getting in, and it wasn't even tomorrow. Their day wasn't over yet. It couldn't be. Please, God, not yet.

Both seated on the couch, she listened as Terry spoke to someone Madison didn't know-- someone who sounded like a client of his-- and Madison waited for him to come back to their hiding place. He laughed, and Madison hugged herself.

It was stupid to be jealous, and she made up her mind that she would not be jealous. She would not.
He apologized and Madison wondered who the caller was and why Terry was being so gentle. He listened, deferred to John and she understood that Terry was trying to get out of something. It gave her hope.

She knew he shouldn't have answered that phone.

When Terry finally hung up and put the phone away, he looked apologetic.

"Sorry about that. She's a longstanding client of ours, and had an IT emergency." Terry gave a helpless shrug. "I did the best I could for her and passed her to John."

"It was a her?"

"I passed her to John."

Madison moved back to Terry's side and claimed his hand. He looked down at their joined hands, then back at Madison.

"She and I aren't even friends, so there's nothing to be jealous about."

"I'm not--" Madison stopped herself and Terry smiled.

"Let me try saying that another way." He pulled the phone from his pocket, turned it off, and gave it to her. "I'm all yours, Maddie."

Overcome, and not finding the words to say "thank you," Madison crushed her head against Terry's shoulder and hugged his arm as tightly as she could.

"Could I kiss you, Terry?"

"Only if you must."

She must.
Even before she reached him, his eyes were closed as if ready and waiting. She brushed her lips against his, and when she backed off, a reluctant smile tugged at his mouth.

"You're taking advantage of me. You know that, don't you?"

"I won't kiss you anymore, Terry. I'm done for now."

Even though she knew he was trying to sound severe, he shook his head and smiled back.

"I'm going to hold you to that." He was quiet a moment then, "You still have my phone?"

"Why? I thought you said you were all mine."

"I am. I just want to make sure the phone didn't get lost while we kissed."

With her free hand, Madison searched the couch cushion, found it next to her leg and nudged the phone at Terry. He didn't try to take it from her, and when she started to put it in her own pocket, the sound of his soft laughter made her feel warm inside. Like she was getting a hug without being touched, and it felt oh-so good.

"I have to get off this couch," Terry sighed. "I need to use the bathroom."

Madison's heart tripped and fell. "Why?"

"I'm not in the habit of giving out reports," he chuckled. "Why do you ask?"

"I was going to make it up to you the next time I accidentally made you dunk your head under the faucet."

"Thanks for the thought, but this would be a toilet run." Terry kissed her hand, got up from the couch and she could hear him chuckling softly.

"I don't want to hurt you, Terry."

"Don't worry. You aren't."
He left the living room with Madison's heart glowing as brightly as it possibly could and not show up in the dark. She began to count the seconds until he came back, and when that became too much, she drew up her knees and hugged them until the sound of his footsteps signaled his return.

"It's past dinnertime, and I don't know about you, but those strawberries and popcorn have worn off."

The lights in the suite came on and Madison blinked at the sudden brightness. Terry came to the couch with her sweater, and lightly placed it about her shoulders.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

Madison touched his hand and savored the warmth of his skin.

"Maddie?"

"I guess." She looked up at him. "Do we have to eat, though? Couldn't we just live off our love?"

"I may love you with every fiber, but I'm not risking you to starvation." Terry traced a finger around her mouth. "Please, try not to focus on me to the exclusion of yourself. I'm not worth it."

"Oh, yes, you are, Terry."

"Let me rephrase that before you build picket signs and start marching back and forth," he smiled. "I love you, and we both need to eat. If you love me back, then let me order dinner."

"I do love you. I love you with all my heart."

A hand caressed her cheek, and for a moment she thought he might change his mind and forget about the food. Maybe sit with her and just hold hands, but no. He left her and went to get the menu. He was taking care of her, and she tried to work up an even bigger appetite than what she felt. Just to please Terry. But if she got sick and overate, he would be sad, so Madison tried hard to just be as hungry as she was, and no more.
She hugged herself as he came back to the couch and plopped down beside her.

"Let's see what they've got for us." Terry opened the menu to the dinner section, but all she cared to look at was him. "Maddie, please. Concentrate on the food."

She looked away but watched him out of the corner of her eye.

"Smoked Balik salmon? Lobster bouillabaisse? How about one of the chef’s specialties? Las Vegas steak tartare?"

"I'll have what you're having."

"Okay." Terry brightened, the answer seeming to please him.

She hugged herself even harder, and without looking up from the menu, he gave her his hand and she latched on to that, instead of herself.

"How about we start things off with the Salmon dish? You don't mind caviar, do you?"

Not knowing what on earth he meant, she shook her head.

"Then I think we'll have a Caesar salad, and for the main event, one of the chef’s specialties--boeuf bourguignon with all the trimmings. What do you say? Sound good?"

She nodded, just happy that he was letting her sit next to him and hold his hand.

He got up, and she was no longer holding his hand.

"What do you want for dessert?"

"You."

"Besides me." He picked up the hotel phone to place their order, then gestured to the menu he'd left on the couch. "Jokes aside, what do you want?"
She hadn't been joking. For her dessert, she would have loved even more time with Terry. To hold his hand, to sit with him, to kiss him. As far as Terry-desserts went, that would have been right up there with chocolate dipped strawberries. No, he would've been better, much better. When she kissed Terry, he was the best thing she'd ever tasted.

"Come on, help me out here," he begged. Before he could say more, he had to start talking to the person on the phone.

Reluctantly, Madison picked up the hotel menu.

The desserts all had fancy names to them, as she expected, but she did understand what ice cream meant. She found one that sounded nice, took it over to Terry, and pointed to the name. He smiled and nodded, and since he wasn't using his left hand for anything important, she claimed it for her own.

When she started to press a kiss to each of his fingertips, Terry gave her an alarmed pleading look.

She stopped.

She looked away from Terry, and the view from the balcony door caught her attention.

The night was doing something beautiful out there, but she refused to leave Terry to get a closer look. She followed the conversation as Terry talked with the person taking their order, and wondered at her new husband. Terry had the knack of getting along well with people, something she never could, because she didn't understand them. He did though.

She gazed at the balcony and wondered what it was like out there. She'd "chased" Terry to open the door earlier, but he hadn't stepped out onto the ledge and neither had she. No way would she let him go out on something suspended several stories off the ground, just to enjoy what looked to be a wow of a nighttime view.

"Okay," Terry hung up the phone and gave her hand a small squeeze, "they said to give them about half an hour, so we should have our dinner fairly soon." He must have seen her looking at
the balcony, for he started in that direction and pulled her after him. "It does look beautiful, doesn't it? Do you want to go out and see the view?"

Her first impulse was to say "no," but she bit her lip and felt the strength in Terry's hand. If it was a reckless thing to do, then Terry wouldn't be asking if she wanted to go out there.

"You won't let go of me?" she asked.

"Not if you don't want me to."

"I don't want you to. Ever."

He smiled and slid open the balcony door. Cold wind rushed inside and Madison huddled under the sweater Terry had draped over her shoulders. The sun wasn't up to heat the air anymore, and the desert had grown chilly while they weren't looking.

"I'd better get our coats. Don't go out there without me." Terry tossed her a wink, and when he left, Madison began to rethink the situation.

It was awfully high off the ground. It was windy out there. And what if an earthquake happened while they were on the balcony, the ledge dropped off, and they plummeted to their death? This was on or near the West Coast, and she knew all about the earthquakes they were supposed to have. Were they tempting God by doing this? And what if Terry leaned against the safety railing and it gave way, and he grabbed her, and she wasn't strong enough to hold him, and he fell to his death? Or what if someone fell from a balcony above them, struck Terry, and it knocked him off theirs?

Who's crazy idea was it to put these things on hotel rooms, in the first place? Madison wanted to know.

Terry came back with their coats, took one look at Madison and paused.

"What is it?"

"Could we pray before we go outside?"
"Of course."

Taking a deep breath, Madison grabbed onto Terry's hand and let him lead in prayer. This had to be fairly safe, or else hotels wouldn't be so dumb that they'd let their guests go out there; the balcony doors would be bolted shut if people kept getting killed, wouldn't they? Terry wouldn't do anything to put her in danger knowingly, and if they prayed, then she could trust God to take care of them.

Was this making sense? Even if she couldn't trust the hotel, she could trust God, and she could trust Terry.

As Terry helped her into her coat, she eyed the balcony in nervous excitement. This probably shouldn't be a big deal, but it was. It was to her.

"We need to leave the door open so we can hear room service when it comes." Terry sounded like he was having a genuinely good time. "Mind if I have my phone back for a while? I'd like to try taking some pictures from up here."

Madison fumbled in her pocket, handed Terry his phone back as she gazed out the wide open balcony door. They were high up, and not only was a cold breeze pouring in, but so was life-- life filled with things she couldn't name because she'd never lived it before. They raced in her veins and mixed with love and anticipation, and she was about to go through that door. As of today, she already had.

So much of this was because of Terry. Because of him, she was finding courage she didn't know she had, and when she turned to watch Terry as he got the camera part of his phone ready, she knew God was using Terry in a huge way in her life. She had never been the same after meeting Terry, and now that they were married, he would influence her for always. A thought she absolutely loved, because she knew she was stronger with him, than without him. His faith in God, and his love, made her a better person.

"What is it?" Terry zipped up his coat. "What can you possibly see that's worth staring at me like that?" He glanced at her as she began to answer. "Never mind, you'll probably just embarrass us both. Ready?"
She nodded and grabbed onto Terry's hand.

"I love you, Terry."

"I know, sweet one, and I love you, too." He kissed her cheek, then stepped onto the balcony first. "That's it-- I've got you."

"And I love God for making me," she pushed on, "and then for giving me to you."

"I'm sure God appreciates that," Terry smiled, "and I'm grateful, too, but try to calm down before you pass out. I'm sure God will understand."

"But--"

"Breathe," Terry took in a deep chestful of air and Madison tried to follow his example. "Take a look around you and enjoy the moment."

Madison shook her head. She wouldn't take her eyes off of Terry. Couldn't was more like it. The air was crisp and it filled her with zings of excited electricity. She was on a balcony, thirty-five stories straight in the air with Terry, and she was alive.

Just thinking about it made her crowd into his shoulder and hide her face against his coat.

"Oh, my Maddie is braver than that."

"No, she's not."

"She married me today, and kissed me several times. What's a little height, compared to that?"

She wanted to tell Terry that her bravery had gotten her exactly this far, and that was victory enough, but the words wouldn't come. They were steps away from the balcony door-- or far enough she figured if she reached behind Terry, she might feel the safety railing at his back. It was enough to make her pray really hard. She gripped Terry's hand, his coat, and wouldn't let him go. The wind pushed at them, and she prayed God would keep them safe.
"Maddie? Why don't we turn around so we can see the view?"

She shook her head.

"I thought that's why we came out here?"

"Then you look."

"Come on, I'll just edge us around if you'll let me..."

"Terry--"

"Easy, Maddie, I've got you. That's it, you're doing good."

Even though Madison could feel the wind strong on her face, she felt Terry's arm even stronger around her shoulders and knew she wasn't going to fall. God wouldn't let her, and neither would Terry.

"There we are, you're all set now. Open your eyes. Come on, open those pretty eyes and see your view."

The smile in Terry's voice teased her so gently, she tried a small peek. She gasped, and opened them all the way. Before her, Las Vegas sprawled in vivid color. It pulsed, sparkled, and glowed like some live thing that came out only at night. Cars moved down streets that passed below their balcony, but since she refused to get that close to the edge and look down, she couldn't know for sure. Now that she was looking, she saw Terry hadn't taken her as close to the edge as he could've, and she hugged him for his thoughtfulness.

"This is quite a sight." Terry squeezed her shoulder as he took in the view. "Too bad it represents what it does. Just look at all that electricity. I wonder how many hamsters it takes to keep this place running."

"Hamsters?" Madison swiped at the hair pushing into her eyes.
"Yeah, you know-- hamsters." Terry looked at her as though she didn't know basic science. "Electricity is generated by hamsters running in these large turbine wheels. The bigger the city, the more hamsters needed to turn the wheels."

This was Terry speaking, and Madison was ready to trust everything he said, because... well, he was Terry. But hamsters?

The small tug at the corner of his mouth gave him away.

"Terry!" She punched his shoulder and he chuckled. "Next, you'll be telling me giraffes run the elevators."

"And here I thought no one knew." Keeping his arm around her shoulders, Terry gently let go of her hand and pulled the phone out of his pocket to start taking pictures. "The hotel imported those giraffes at great expense, I'll have you know."

Watching the landscape move about on his iPhone only made her dizzier, so she tried to keep her focus on the horizon, instead.

She hung on to his coat and let his arm keep her steady.

He turned the camera on her, she summoned a smile and the phone clicked a picture. He moved himself into the frame with her, took a picture, then showed her the lit up screen with her face and Las Vegas in the background, then the next with them smiling together with a glowing sphere peering from behind.

Terry moved to look over her head.

"Would you look at that moon-- glowing its heart out for everyone to see-- and here we are, busy looking at a bunch of manmade lights. Maddie, look up."

"Up?" The thought of looking up, when they were already so far up, was absolutely dizzying. "I can't. I'll fall."
"Lean on me a little more. Just look up a few inches at a time and you'll see the moon. It's just past the edge of our building, sailing in the night sky, pretty as you please. See it?"

She nodded wildly. Her fingernails were digging into the arm of Terry's coat, but she could see the moon-- large, brilliant, and extremely welcome. She was borrowing strength like crazy from Terry, but she was beginning to have a really good time.

"That's the very same moon we get over Three Mile Bay. It's quite a thought, isn't it?" Terry leaned his head against hers and her heart sighed for joy. "When I was little, I'd run around and see if the moon was still following me, and here I am, a grown man, and the moon has followed me cross-country for my wedding. It's like being remembered by an old friend."

Resting against Terry like this, she could stand and brave the heights and even faith came a little easier. Her eyes couldn't roam the landscape, but she could set her sights on that moon and keep them there and not lose her balance and topple off the balcony.

For probably the hundredth time that day, her soul whispered another thanks to God for sending her to Terry.

"You asked me something, Terry-- you asked me what I see when I look at you." Madison lacked the courage to check if Terry was listening, but kept going in the hopes that he was. "When I see you, I see lots of things that I like, but it's the things you can change, the things you have control over, that I like the most. Your eyes are deep brown, and I love them, but I love the depth of your patience even more. I love your hands, but the strength of your kindness is what makes the strongest impression. And even though your face is the nicest one there is on earth, your heart is what makes you handsome. At least, to me." Madison gulped hard, hoping against hope she was saying it right. "I just wanted you to know what I saw."

After a long moment, Terry blew out a deep breath. "Thank you."

"I didn't say that to be kissed."

"That may be," he turned her face to his and caressed her cheek, "but I can't let an incredibly sweet thing like that get away without one."
She smiled.

"Inside, or out here on the balcony?" he asked.

"Out here, please." Madison's heart beat fast as Terry tilted her chin up a little more. Love was in his eyes, and when his lips reached hers, love burst into fireworks inside Madison, and didn't stop, not even when his kiss did.

"Oh, Maddie." Terry leaned his forehead against hers and his breath warmed her face. "Thank you."

She wanted to thank him back, but was too dazed to speak.

The door to their suite sounded.

Terry groaned softly, and started to lead her away from their view. "That would be room service. Time to go in." He paused long enough to plant a kiss on the tip of her nose, and she couldn't help gazing at him, the gentleness in his eyes, the small creases around his mouth, the--

The door sounded again and Terry took her inside while her heart was still busy marveling and sending off fireworks. She pulled off her coat and swayed to the hum of her deliriously happy soul. She was marinating in love, every pore of her soul was dripping with it until she was sure she couldn't hold another drop.

Then Terry gave her a heart-melting glance as he let in the waiter with their dinner, and she went woozy in the head. Giddiness was beginning to set in, the kind that left her reeling, and pleasantly numb and tingly all over.

For someone who'd once starved for kindness, this great abundance of love was almost more than Madison knew how to handle.

* * * *
Their table was looking on the romantic side, and it pleased Terry. It now wore an off-white linen cloth, and had a vase with a single long-stemmed red rose. Not only was it a quiet tribute to the hotel's attention to detail, but it was also a nod to the fact this would be a dinner for two.

Terry watched as the room service waiter laid out plates and silverware like someone who'd probably done this millions of times in his sleep, and was grateful when no attempt at conversation was made. It was late, but there was probably a dinner rush right now, and Terry didn't want to get in the way of progress.

Silver platters with domed lids were arranged, silverware straightened one more time, then Terry tipped him for a job well done, and wished him a good night.

It was a very good night, one of the best in Terry's life, and he sang as he moved to the kitchen to hide the knives the waiter had just laid out, and put the ice cream in the freezer before it melted. Oh, dinner smelled good. The aroma of it was beginning to fill the suite.

"Hey, Maddie?" Terry snagged the half full bottle of apple cider from the fridge, then went and filled their glasses until they threatened to overflow. "Dinner's ready when you are."

When she didn't come, he looked across the room to see what was keeping her.

She was curled onto one side on the couch and hugging her coat with both arms.

A flashback? The meal was forgotten and he rushed to the couch to help his poor sweet Maddie. Terry's heart had just ratcheted up, when he got closer and saw the dreamy-eyed look on her face.

"Maddie?" He knelt by the couch, laid a careful hand on her shoulder, and was rewarded with a half aware smile. "Are you all right?"

"I'm Maddie."

"Yes--" Terry tried to get a better look at her face-- "did the room service waiter feed you something while I wasn't looking? Did he drug you?"
She gave a deep contended sigh, closed her eyes and Terry put a hand to her forehead. No fever.

"There isn't any other Maddie you love, but me."

"No, there isn't."

"I'm the only one."

"Yes," he smiled, "you're the only Maddie I love."

She seemed to breathe in his words like someone deeply relishing a rare and exquisite thing. It was flattering, but still. It was only him.

"Maddie, dinner's ready."

She sighed again and hugged her coat. Terry looked at her feet and saw her small, socked toes curling in pleasure.

"Are you sure the waiter didn't drug you?"

Her eyes opened a little. "You're the one making me feel like this, Terry."

He nodded, trying desperately not to kiss her and make her even worse.

"Dinner's ready." He watched her a moment, then took her coat as she stretched out on the couch. "I hope you're hungry. When I told you we were going to have boeuf bourguignon with all the trimmings, I wasn't kidding. Come on, up you go." He took her by the hand, and gently pulled her to her feet as he stood.

"I LOVE you."

"Thank you, I think we've established that." Terry smiled, and led her across the suite to their table. "When was the last time you had anything for your hip?"

"I can't remember. It doesn't matter, I can't feel pain, anyway."
"Any moment now, the euphoria will wear off and you're going to want something besides me," he warned, and helped her into her chair. "Where's your acetaminophen? in your purse, or the suitcase?"

"Purse." She sighed happily. "Or my suitcase-- I can't remember."

Terry went off to find it. "If you forgot to pack some painkiller for the trip, I'm guessing Izzy didn't."

"But we're in hiding."

"Maddie, your hip--"

"Please, Terry, I'll be okay. Couldn't I go without it for tonight?"

"Wait a moment--" Terry rounded into the kitchen, looked in the cupboards, then the drawers, and nearly shouted when he spotted a generic bottle of ibuprofen. It was better than nothing, and he went and plunked it next to Maddie's glass where she couldn't miss it. "The Lord has provided." Terry took the seat next to hers, and tried to hide his pleasure when Maddie scooted her chair closer to his.

She was so sweet, it was hard not to gather her in a bone-crushing hug.

After she'd taken her pills, Terry said a prayer over their food while Maddie held his hand.

"Thank You, Heavenly Father, for loving us so thoroughly, so richly, that You gave us Your only begotten Son. Thank you for loving us that much. Thank You for today, and thank You for giving us each other." There was much more in Terry's heart, but his voice began to give, so he ended the prayer, blinked the wet from his eyes and tried not to look at the woman now watching him.

Their appetizers were around here somewhere...

Terry lifted the silver lids until he found the dish he wanted.
"Here we are-- smoked salmon."

"What are those small round things?" Maddie asked, as he scooped some onto a small slice of fish.

"It's caviar."

"What?"

"Fish eggs-- caviar." Terry bit into the smoky flavor of the salmon and nearly fell off his chair. "You have to try this. It has to be the best smoked salmon I've ever tasted."

That dreamy-eyed look? It was fading fast. "Fish eggs?"

Terry smiled, glad for a change in subject and helped himself to more. "I'm guessing you've never had any. Come on, this is supposed to be a delicacy. Eat up."

"Fish eggs?" she said again, but this time with more teasing horror than anything else, for he could see her fighting back a smile.

He didn't hide his satisfaction when Maddie took a slice of salmon, then tried the smallest amount of caviar she could get away with on the serving spoon. She took a thin bite, then her face lit up as thousands of taste buds went to work. He made no comment as she added a little more to her salmon.

It was an extravagance, but they were in hiding and Terry's heart didn't feel like this every day. This was special. Then he saw the overcharged look begin to come back in Maddie's face, and made a concerted effort to ease things up.

He moved his foot so it no longer bumped hers under the table, sat back in his chair and took a sip from his glass. She was starting to concentrate on him again, or in this case, pretend not to for his benefit-- in the way Maddie had of focusing her whole being on him and giving it her all. Terry figured this came from all those years of never having love; now that it was here, she was soaking it in like a dry sponge seeking water.
Even so, time to divert her attention elsewhere, before she hurt herself. Maybe quite literally.

Stuffing another bite of salmon in his mouth, Terry got up, hunted for the remote, then came back and clicked on the huge flat-screen. A program about the human genome looked interesting and Terry turned up the volume a few notches so Maddie could easily hear. When her eyes tracked the TV more often than it did in pretending not to track him, he knew he was winning.

As the lid came off the *boeuf bourguignon*, Maddie needed no coaxing to start helping herself to the food. Beef and potatoes didn't scare her away, even in their best prepared state, and it did Terry's heart good to see her appetite rise to the occasion. She even took a warm croissant and ate it with her meal. Bit by bit, she was calming down, and from the look of her, also growing sleepy.

While Maddie finished the last of her croissant, Terry went to the bedroom to collect the things they'd need for the night-- two pillows, two blankets, and a sheet for Maddie to sleep on. He brought them to the living room, placed a pillow and a blanket on the chair by the TV, and the rest on the couch for Maddie.

When he came back to the table, Maddie was frowning.

"I told you I would share the couch," she sighed. "I can sleep sitting up."

"And I told you the couch was yours." Terry cleared away the dishes, then went to the kitchen to get their ice cream. "I appreciate the gesture, Maddie, but we've been through enough for one day. Let's not risk you getting a flashback, okay?" He carried in two small bowls, placed one in front of Maddie and tried to coax her into a smile.

"Terry, if I took one end of the couch, and you took the other, I don't think I'd be risking anything. I really don't." Maddie looked at him as he retook his seat. "Please, don't sleep in that awful chair."

He glanced at the chair in question and had to admit it wasn't very comfortable.
"I'll agree to this on one condition." He turned back to his pretty wife and she nodded readily, even before hearing the one condition. "If there's any moment you feel like it, then kick me off the couch. I give my word of honor that I'll leave without a fight."

"Thank you, Terry."

"You're sure about this?"

"I'm sure."

He looked at the couch. It was probably long enough to do the job, and if they kept to their own territories, she might feel safe enough to get some sleep and not have any flashbacks. Of course, he could sleep on the floor and she could still have bad dreams, so even that wasn't the perfect solution to all their problems.

Promises. They needed promises, and he wanted to pray those promises before they went to sleep.

He absently tasted a spoonful of ice cream and startled when its sweet tang surprised him. Maddie looked thrilled that he liked it, and Terry was grateful that he'd showed his pleasure.

"You picked raspberry sorbet?" he asked, and she nodded happily.

"It's very good," he complimented. "It reminds me of walking around Las Vegas during the heat of the day, and suddenly finding a cool breeze."

"Or air conditioning," Maddie smiled, and he had to laugh. "The more of it you eat, the colder you get."

It was very true.

After dinner, Terry let Maddie use the bathroom first. When she came out still dressed in her day clothes, he followed her example and simply brushed his teeth. By the time he came back to the living room, the TV was off, and Maddie was playing with the suite’s dimmer switch.
"Which side of the couch do you want?" he asked.

She gave a non-caring shrug, but stayed closer to the side next to the wall, so Terry took the side next to the balcony. He propped the pillow against the armrest, sat down, tucked his blanket around himself in as non-threatening a manner as he could, then leaned against his pillow to get comfortable. Which wasn't very easy, since Maddie was turning the lights up and down like she couldn't decide how she best liked them.

Of course, she could also be stalling.

"Are you sure you don't mind me on the couch?"

"I'm sure."

He sighed, watched as she finally dimmed things to around the softness of a night-light, then went to her side of the couch.

She tucked her blanket around herself as well, cuddled hard around her pillow, and carefully kept to her side of the boundary so not even their arms could accidentally touch in their sleep. Terry understood, and tried to make sure he didn't encroach on the one couch cushion that separated their sides.

Then, in the half-dark, Terry asked God to give them sweet dreams, which for a pair of grownups might seem odd, but for them, it was very important. 

"[God] giveth His beloved sleep." [Psalm 127:2] That was the main promise Terry prayed for them both, and that was what he clung to as he ended the prayer.


"It's okay. We're already tucked in, and I think the kiss on the balcony probably counts."

"Terry?"
Wincing, Terry waited and hoped Maddie wouldn’t say or do anything to restart the Maddie-engine he’d been trying all dinner to distract.

"Good night, Terry."

"Good night, Maddie." He wanted to add, "I love you," but thought better of it. She needed to sleep right now, not think about how much she loved him.

Outside, the world went on, but in this small hideaway, two hearts were tucked beneath separate blankets on opposite ends of the same couch, listening to sounds coming from the same closed balcony door.

Neither one said anything more, and it wasn't until Terry at last heard the quiet breathing of Maddie's slumber, that he finally let himself relax. If she hadn't been able to fall asleep, he would've felt responsible. It would've meant a prompt move to the carpet, but that soft breathing meant she truly did feel safe with him on the couch.

They were married now... his mind wandered back to the wedding, but blacked out after that first kiss.

He was tired.

As he tumbled into sleep, his heart beat to an exhausted but happy rhythm that all belonged to Maddie.

"Thou hast ravished my heart... my spouse; thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes, with one chain of thy neck. How fair is thy love... my spouse! how much better is thy love than wine [sparkling apple cider]! and the smell of thine ointments than all spices! Thy lips, O my spouse, drop as the honeycomb: honey and milk [strawberries and chocolate] are under thy tongue..."

~ Song of Solomon 4:9-11 ~
Chapter Thirty-two
Hand in Hand

"I sleep, but my heart waketh..."
~ Song of Solomon 5:2 ~

Silence hugged Madison as she opened her eyes and saw the morning sun play on the ceiling. Her gaze drifted down to the man sleeping at the end of the couch, just one whole cushion away.

Slumped on one side, one arm under his head, the other draped over his stomach, Terry had the look of someone who wasn't exactly comfortable but was still managing sleep. His lightly messy hair, the half open mouth as he snored, the beard just showing on his chin— it all made her long after Terry. She cozied with her pillow and watched him, the small moments as he stirred and shifted and then fell back to sleep.

Everything made her happy; he could have scratched his nose, and she would've sighed with delight.

Madison glimpsed down at her gray T-shirt and saw the butterfly. She was a newly born butterfly and her wings were trembling with longing for the sky.

How she wanted to fly. To be where she belonged.

Pushing back her blanket, and hoping she wouldn't wake him, Madison crawled across the cushion separating his space and hers. She paused when Terry's snore grew a little louder, then edged closer to him when he kept on sleeping. Careful not to jostle him, she settled against his arm and hugged his shoulder ever so lightly.

This was her sky.

A snore caught in Terry's throat and she looked up to see him struggling against sleep and surprise.

"It's only me." She touched his face and he relaxed. "Sorry, Terry."

"It's okay. For a minute, I thought you were someone else." He yawned, then broke into a groggy smile when she felt the stubble on his cheek. "I can't even begin to tell you how good that feels, Maddie. You might want to stop."
She touched her cheek to his and let his beard scrape against her skin.

"Maddie--"

"Please, just one kiss. Just one?" He didn't try to stop her, and they kissed until she had to push away. Her hand clutched his shirt, but she pushed away and hugged his shoulder while Terry struggled without her. He was awake now, and he deserved more than what she'd just given him. "I know what you've said already, but you're going to be sorry you married me, Terry. I just know you are."

"Cut it out."

"I can't help it."

"Don't do this to yourself." His voice had a sleepy tug to it, an inviting closeness that made her want to crawl inside one of his pockets, just to always be near him. "We went into this trusting God, so let's not panic, okay?" Terry took a deep breath and she could see him collecting his thoughts. "We're about to leave this hotel suite, and I want us to do it in faith. God got us this far, didn't He?"

Madison nodded.

"That should give us reason to hope for the future. We've got a Bible full of promises to feed our courage with, and as far as you and I are concerned..." Terry took a moment and Madison could see his determination grow. "If God shows us that you can't be intimate, that it's not a part of His plan for us, then that's what we'll accept. I will accept it, Maddie. I'll love you, and cherish you, and I believe God will bless us. I also believe He has more in store for us, but even if He doesn't, as long as God gets what He wants from us, then who am I to complain? I'll have your love, and that won't change what I have in my heart for you." Terry touched her cheek and let out a long breath. "Are we in agreement? I don't want to wake up one morning to find you've left me because you thought it was for my own good."

A lump pushed down Madison's throat. She nodded in agreement as Terry's hand went back to her shoulder.

"No more talk about my being sorry, okay? Unless I tell you differently, you're to assume I'm outrageously happy, just as I am. Married to this sweet woman right here."

She bit her lip.
"Whatever it takes, Maddie. We're going to do this together."

He was speaking so earnestly that when he stopped, she pulled close and kissed his chin. He had such a nice chin, but he had a nice forehead too, and so she kissed that, as well. The ear closest to her was so handsome, so distinguished-- it needed a kiss, too. In fact, it was so handsome, she gave it several.

His lips parted, his head came down, nibbled her earlobe and Madison giggled. His face was scratchy but fun and his breath tickled her neck.

Nervous laughter filled Madison, but couldn't get out.

His hand moved across her back, from one shoulder to the other, and she tried not to pull away from his touch. Another man, a very different man flashed before her and she blinked to keep him away. She wanted the man holding her right now, not him. Never him. She pulled Terry close, and Terry's lips grazed her neck. Pain flashed before her and Madison squeezed her eyes shut.

Little tripwires set off inside of her, tripwires of memory and emotion.

Her eyes stung, she willed herself to stay where she was, to endure the closed in heat, but before she could dig in and endure, she noticed things letting up. The tripwires weren't being set off anymore. She wasn't being touched.

Madison opened one eye, then the other, then looked up and saw Terry watching her in concern.

"Are you all right?" he whispered.

She nodded. She was feeling better with each passing second.

"Why didn't you tell me to stop?" Terry sighed when she didn't have a ready answer. "I don't want you to suffer. Next time, say stop, and I will. I'll honor that word, but Maddie, I need you to say it, or I won't always know what you're feeling."

"Terry, if I don't say stop, then I don't expect you to."

"I want you to tell me. I don't want to keep going."

"But how am I going to learn to fly if I don't endure some hard things first?"
"Maddie--"

"I have to be willing to risk myself, or I'll never learn."

Groaning, Terry dropped his head back and stared at the ceiling. It took him time before he could speak, and when he did, he sounded cautious.

"I don't want you to hurt yourself. You'll learn to fly, but don't hurl yourself off a mountain before your wings are ready, okay?"

"Thank you, Terry."

He looked at her. "Tell me--please, tell me when you need me to stop?"

"I will."

She could see his concern grow again. "Unless it's one of those times you've decided to gut it out?"

Madison thought it over. "Whether I gut it out or decide to stop is my decision, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," he sighed, "which only proves we need good communication in this relationship. Just because you're not telling me to stop, doesn't mean I won't, if I think I'm hurting you. If you want me to hold you more, then talk to me. Okay?" Terry waited a beat, grunted when she nodded "yes," and looked as though he were trying to calm himself when his phone rang. Madison thought he could use the interruption, and reached into her pocket for the phone.

She came up empty.

"Sorry, I forgot to give it back to you after we came in from the balcony." Terry grinned a little as he dug the phone from his slacks, took a quick glance at the screen then started to turn it off altogether. "It's all right. No one I can't get back to some other time."

"Before you turn that off-- when does our plane leave?"

"Seven thirty."
"Then you might as well leave the phone on." She pointed to the clock, and Terry shook his head.

"That can't be the right time. It can't." He puffed out a breath, leaned forward on the couch and punched the phone icon on his screen. "I'd better make sure the others are ready. Which is more than I can say for us. They're probably up and have already eaten breakfast, and here we are, sitting around like we have all day. Hey, John?"

Madison smiled as Terry talked to his friend.

Nothing like a little panic to get your mind on something else.

While Terry sorted things out on the phone, Madison grabbed what she needed from her upright suitcase, then ducked into the bathroom. Though she'd only brought one pair of jeans, after she changed into a fresh white T-shirt with yellow daisies, she felt some satisfaction that she didn't look as rumpled as before. She washed her face, brushed her hair, then came out to find Terry still talking to John about their plans for the trip home.

"Okay, we'll meet you in the hall in ten minutes," Terry said, and hung up. "AJ had breakfast with John and Izzy, but I'm afraid we don't have time to order anything. We spent all our time this morning, on the couch."

Madison smiled, and Terry moved around her to the suitcase under the table.

"There's leftover strawberries in the fridge," Terry said, yanking some clothes from his duffel. "I suggest we take the box with us, and eat a few berries on the way to the airport so we won't have to leave on an empty stomach."

"I'll get it." Madison went to the fridge, pulled out the pretty box, then went about the suite gathering all their things. Coats, sweaters, Jane Austen, her purse-- she stuffed everything but the candy into their luggage so they wouldn't get lost, then put on her shoes. "Don't forget to put the knives back," she called to the bathroom.

A muffled, "Thanks," came from the closed bathroom door.

"What about the dirty dishes in the kitchen?" she wondered out loud.

"Housekeeping will take care of it." The door opened, and Terry came out in blue jeans and a navy T-shirt, looking more casual than when he'd arrived. He shoved his clothes in the duffel,
pulled out his electric razor and switched it on while he glanced about the room. "Do we have everything?"

"Uh-huh. I checked."

"I can't believe I didn't keep track of the time better than this." Terry moved back into the bathroom and left the door open.

Curious, she followed and looked inside.

"We have enough time to make it, but still. Another half hour, and I'd probably be booking another flight."

Madison leaned her head against the door.

"I need to finish this up." Terry paused as he caught her reflection in the mirror, and a lopsided smile tilted his mouth. He groaned, then pushed on with his shaving. "You're distracting me, Sweetheart."

Smiling, Madison hugged herself, and went to wait for him on the couch. When he came out and put the razor away, all the lovely stubble was gone.

It was such a pity.

While Terry went into the kitchen to make things right with the hidden silverware, Madison carried their luggage to the door and did one last check of the suite. She picked up the box of chocolate as Terry came from the kitchen, and smiled at him.

"I think that's everything." He gave a final look about the place. "Are we ready to go?"

When she nodded, Terry took her hand and said a prayer for their trip home. Then he picked up their bags, she opened the door, and they stepped into the hall with Madison clutching their strawberry chocolates.

She felt a bit sad, leaving a place where she'd been so happy, and Madison tugged at Terry's arm.

"Take a picture?" she begged, and he grinned, opened the door a moment to snap a photo of their former hiding place.

He showed her the screen, and she felt better.
As he closed the door the second time, voices came down the hall-- familiar ones that sounded relaxed and happy and not at all intimidated like yesterday when they had come up in the elevator.

Abby and Jake were the first Madison saw, and then Izzy, and John. Everyone was smiling, and when Madison pinned the box of candy under one arm so she could hug Izzy, she noticed Izzy was carrying a glossy white bag.

"Oh, Izzy! Did you see it last night?" Madison excitedly hugged her friend, and almost bumped into Abby. "Did you see the moon? Wasn't it wonderful?"

"I'm afraid I missed that." Izzy returned the hug, then moved back and smiled at Madison. "Look at you, you're throwing off light of your own. It must've been a record-setting moon to make you glow this bright."

"Terry took me out on the balcony, and Izzy, it was so wonderful. I-- it was just wonderful."

Izzy gave an understanding look, squeezed Madison's hand, and moved aside as a couple tried to get past them down the hall. Before they got in someone else's way, Terry started the group in the direction of the elevator.

Then John nudged Izzy as though they had a secret to tell, and Abby smiled, and Jake grinned.

"Last evening," Izzy said as they neared the elevator doors, "we bought some things for the kids as a surprise--"

"Mom," Abby rolled her eyes, "just tell them!"

"We bought some things for the kids," Izzy said patiently, as they stepped into the elevator, "and while we were shopping, John had an idea, so he went off on his own to see if he could get something done on such short notice."

"Mom--"

"I'm getting to it, Abby." Izzy smiled, and handed the bag to Madison. "This is for you and Terry, and it's from all of us."

"It was Dad's idea." Abby looked around Madison's shoulder and grinned. "I guess sometimes even Dad can be romantic."
"There's nothing like offspring to keep one humble." John chuckled as he tapped the console and the elevator started its descent. Izzy gave John a hug and he slung an arm around his wife in an easy show of affection. "Go on, open the bag," John coaxed, and Madison smiled.

Madison looked up at Terry and saw him grinning ear to ear.

The white bag was glossy and heavy. Not sack-of-potatoes heavy, but heavy enough to suggest something important. Re-pinning her box of chocolates under one arm, Madison opened the bag. She saw glittery silver tissue, pushed it aside and pulled out a porcelain picture frame. It had tiny bluebirds decorating the edge, and cursive at the top that read, "Mr. and Mrs. Davis." The photo was the one John had taken just after their wedding, when they'd stood under the arch for their picture and Madison had placed Terry's hand on her side, and Terry had kissed her hair.

It was a quiet moment that had been saved because someone had been there to take their picture.

The elevator doors slid open but Madison couldn't move. The look on Terry's face in the photo said so much, his heart was so full in the picture, she wanted to melt into a puddle of happy tears.

She and Terry had many moments like that in the hotel suite, but now she had a picture to prove it.

One she could look at and hug whenever she wanted.

"Maddie--" Terry coaxed her along with the others, and without being conscious of it, her feet stepped from the elevator. "It was thoughtful of you guys to do this. Thank you. It means a lot to me, and I know it means a lot to Maddie."

Madison nodded, her eyes fixed on the couple beneath the glass. They looked so happy, so normal, she wanted to cry.

She showed Terry the picture and he smiled, and looked a bit concerned.

"You'll stay calm?" he whispered.

She nodded and hugged the picture to her chest. He kissed her forehead, slipped the box of chocolates from her arm so she wouldn't have to hold them anymore, and handed it to Abby. As he went to the front desk to pay their bill, Madison took another peek at the photo.
"What’s this?"

Madison glanced over and saw Abby looking over the heart shaped box.

"May I?" Abby asked, and Madison smiled and nodded. When Abby lifted off the lid, the expression on Abby's face made even Izzy smile. "Wow. These are some fancy strawberries."

"Terry and I didn't have breakfast, so we thought we'd try to eat a few on the way to the airport. They have to stay refrigerated, so we can't take them on the plane."

"Happy eating." Abby served the box to Madison.

"If anyone wants chocolate dipped strawberries, help yourself." Madison took one and looked over a good place to take a bite. "Terry ordered a big box, and even after I fed him several, we still had all this leftover."

She looked up in time to see Abby exchange a smiling glance with Jake. The young couple made no remarks, but both picked out some candy. Izzy passed out tissues from a packet from her purse, and John went to the front desk to pay for their room service.

"Dad ordered dinner for us last night, and we watched two movies. One for the girls, and one for the guys. We had a good time." Abby looked as though she was savoring each bite of her strawberry, and laughed when Jake needed another tissue from Izzy. After picking a second candy from the box, Abby looked thoughtful. "Madison? Do you mind if I ask you something? It's more along the lines of a favor, than really a question."

"Okay."

"Would you mind it very much--" Abby sighed, paused and seemed to be trying to find the right words. "Would it be okay with you if my sisters, and Jake and I, called you Aunt Madison?"

The question surprised Madison. Her hands started to tremble, and she gripped her sweet picture frame so it wouldn't drop from sheer joy.

"I don't mind."

"Really?" Abby beamed. "I didn't think you would, but I wanted to ask first. It didn't seem right to just start calling you that without asking."
"Thanks, Abby. It's an honor. It really is."

Abby smiled in delight, and took a bite from her candy.

The men came back and John's eyes popped wide when he saw the box they were eating from. Abby pushed the box John's way, and when he balked, Izzy gave him a taste from her strawberry.

"Where'd this come from?" John asked, as they started for the glass doors.

"Uncle Terry and Aunt Madison," Abby moved out of the way as Terry and John handled the luggage and Jake hurried to wipe his hands and help.

John paused a moment as Abby said the words, "Aunt Madison," and John glanced at Terry. The men smiled, and Terry nodded as though that was the way things should be. It made Madison warm inside, and she looked at her picture again to see if it was still as she had last remembered it-- her with Terry at her back, and him giving her a one-armed hug from behind.

It was. It hadn't changed at all.

"Maddie?" Terry smiled when she looked up, and he helped her into the waiting taxi. Abby passed him the chocolates, and he passed it to Madison.

Madison didn't care about food anymore, only their picture, the one that said, "Mr. and Mrs. Davis" at the top in glorious detail. It wasn't stamped on, but looked to be painted in by hand, probably by the person who had sold John the frame.

"I'm glad you like it." Izzy's voice sounded, and Madison looked about and realized Terry was sitting beside her in the taxi, and beside him was Izzy, and John. "When John showed us how nicely the picture had turned out on his phone, he said he had to do something about it."

The taxi was moving, but Madison didn't care. She moved the box of strawberries to Terry's lap and kept gazing at the photo.

"It's perfect, John. Thank you for this."

She looked up, and John smiled at her and helped himself to a strawberry. Terry looked at the photo, ate some candy and kept silent, but Madison could feel his happiness even though he was trying to keep her calm. Terry leaned his head against hers, sighed, and ate his makeshift breakfast in silence and she knew he was happy.
They were a Mr. and Mrs. now.

Mrs. Madison Davis; Mrs. Terry Davis. Madison tried different ways of saying her name, but she liked Terry's best. She loved the sound of his name, and what it stood for. She touched the edge of the picture frame where the "Mr. and Mrs." had been painted and heard Terry sigh.

"I hope you're staying calm," she teased.

Terry nuzzled her ear, and it tickled so much, she fought back a giggle.

"Easy," he whispered and backed away.

She sucked in some air, nodded that she was calming down and Terry looked apologetic. She probably shouldn't have teased him, though-- not if she wasn't ready to giggle in front of John and Izzy.

"Are we done with the candy?" Terry asked.

She nodded, and Terry put the lid on.

"With everyone's help, we managed to finish most of it, though there's still a few left. How about I offer it to the driver when we get out?"

"Terry, isn't it a beautiful picture?"

"Yes, it is." Terry sat back and wiped his hands on a tissue Izzy passed him.

"Isn't it just wonderful?"

He smiled, and nodded.

"Terry--"

"Let's remember to breathe, Maddie."

She nodded and he reached for the duffel at his feet.

"If you're ready, I'd like to pack that. We can take it in our carry-on, but I'd like to bury it in some clothes so it won't break when we push it into the overhead bin."
Taking one more look, Madison gave him the precious frame. Terry slid it between some clothes, padded it with underthings, then zipped the bag shut.

"What if it breaks?"

"Then we'll have to send John back to get us another."

At this, John laughed and Madison tried to settle down. To breathe, to relax and enjoy the ride. She hugged Terry's arm, took his hand in hers and watched the traffic outside her window.

This was so much better than holding onto a button for dear life, and trying not to drop it somewhere along the way. Hand in hand was so much better.

The taxi pulled to the curb and everyone started to get out with their bags. Madison's hip ached, but she refused to let a little pain ruin her morning. She watched as Terry paid the driver, tipped him, then offered him the unfinished box of candy. Though Madison couldn't hear what the man said, she could hear him laugh, and saw him accept the strawberries.

She hoped he liked the few pieces left, and was glad she'd saved the ribbon. It was something to remember the candy by, besides the cavities she was probably getting from not having brushed her teeth after their hasty breakfast.

People moved past them on the curb and Madison stayed close to her family until Terry had taken care of both taxis. Then she glued herself to Terry's side so close her shoes kept stepping on his. A nip here, a scuff there, but they were both wearing sneakers and Terry didn't seem to mind. He only smiled and moved them through the busy airport to where they needed to be.

He was so wonderful, even in this crowd she had to remind herself to breathe.

She didn't mind the lines, or when she had to step inside a machine that searched her, for life was happy. Life was good, and it was easy to not feel the need to cut, or to even think about cutting.

She'd heard about vacations before, and she felt like she was coming back from one. Her first ever. It was like she'd done a real hard thing and had been rewarded, and it felt great, but now she was going back to life. Or what life would be like now that things were different.

"Maddie, your limp is worse." Terry slowed as they moved down a long corridor. "We forgot your painkiller this morning, didn't we?"
"It’s okay. I can take some after we’re on the plane, and we’re almost there."

She stuck so close to Terry as they moved inside the cabin, she stumbled a little when she stepped on his heel. He looked behind, and when she smiled, he kept moving.

John and Izzy’s seats were further up the aisle than hers and Terry’s, and AJ’s were across the row where Madison couldn’t see. Terry explained this was a busier flight, and it had been harder to book their seats together. Her disappointment was softened though, when Terry once again offered her the window seat.

She took it happily.

"You’re getting to be quite the traveler," Terry joked as he lifted his duffel into the overhead bin. "Do you want to get your painkiller out before I put your suitcase up?"

She nodded, unzipped her bag as a young man came to their row and claimed the aisle seat. Hurrying so they wouldn’t get in the way, she pulled out her purse, closed the bag and Terry didn’t waste time putting it into the bin.

The man smiled at her and she busied herself with trying to find the painkiller. It was probably in her purse.

How she wished the stranger would stop smiling.

"You got a boyfriend or something? because I’m available." He was about to say more when Terry took the seat between him and Madison. "Oh, Sorry." He was young, maybe even fresh from his teens, and Madison struggled with her prejudice against men to work up some pity. "I didn't see you. Really."

"It’s okay." Terry sounded of good humor, though the man must’ve been staring at Madison and nothing else, not to have seen Terry.

She half didn't believe him, but then, his embarrassment had sounded real.

"I don't suppose you're her uncle?"

"We just got married."

"Oh. Wow. Congratulations."
"Thank you."

"Yeah, I’m thinking about taking the plunge one of these days." The man sniffed as Madison found her bottle of acetaminophen. "I just need to find the right one, you know?"

"I know." Terry watched as she pulled off the cap, and nudged her elbow. "Izzy bought water after we came through security."

"That’s all right." Madison downed the pills so Terry wouldn’t get up and leave her alone with the man. Her hip was hurting after all that standing in line, and she needed the relief. The seat belt sign was already on, so it was too late, anyway.

Then the man started to talk, and talk, and Madison tried not to listen. Some of the things he said were so shockingly personal, she felt like an intruder just sitting there. He began to be so frank, Madison wanted to stuff fingers in her ears and shout the National Anthem. Men were animals and this one was proving it. She wanted to tell Terry that, when Terry pulled out his smartphone, plugged in some earbuds and passed it to Madison.

Thank you. Escape.

She turned up the volume and the stranger was no longer a problem. A few minutes later, she felt an earbud tug away, and Terry joined her.

The man had stopped, and except for their earbuds, their row was finally quiet. When Terry winced, she realized just how high she’d turned up the music to get away from the man. She mouthed, "sorry," and took it down a little, and Terry smiled, and closed his eyes.

For the rest of the three and a half hour flight, they listened to music and audiobooks, and when they preferred quiet, kept the audio off but the earbuds in, and the man left them alone. Only when they had to get ready to land, did Terry shut off his phone and put it away.

Through her window, Madison watched the ground rush up, and smiled when she saw the runway beneath them.

"You people getting off here?" the man asked.

"No, our trip isn't over." As Terry spoke, the engines revved and the plane began to slow.
You couldn't talk without nearly shouting, and it stopped the man from easily asking more. When the plane came to a stop at their gate, and they could take off seat belts and start collecting their carry-on luggage, Madison breathed a sigh of relief.

She wanted off this plane.

The man gathered his things, shook hands with Terry, and before leaving, gave Madison a long surveying look that had Terry moving between him and Madison.

He put his hands up in mock surrender, then sauntered down the aisle with his bag slung over one shoulder.

Terry's jaw was working, but he said nothing and watched until the man had left the plane. Terry let out a heavy sigh and she could see him shaking off his anger.

She affectionately bumped Terry's shoulder, and he smiled.

"Thanks," he sighed, and he started to look about to make sure they had everything.

As Izzy and John came by, Terry and Madison joined them in the aisle, and AJ waved to them from a few people behind.

"Ready for lunch?" John grinned as they filed into the corridor. "One o'clock is later than we usually eat, but better late than never."

"I'm ready," Terry, as well as John, looked as though they knew the airport, and Madison and the others followed them through the crowds. "There's a pizza joint around here that was decent. Nothing special, but it was good eats."

"Yeah, where was that?" John looked about, and Abby shot a glance to her mother.

"There's a salad bar ten feet away, and they're searching for pizza." Abby sighed but followed after them when Terry spotted the restaurant he and John had wanted. She looked tired and ready to eat, even if it wasn't exactly the healthiest meal around.

When they had ordered an extra large pizza with "the works," and were waiting at their table, and Madison was busy getting the sweater from her suitcase, Jake asked something that got everyone's attention. Madison had missed the question, but from everyone's looks, it had been important.
She bit back her impatience and tried to follow what was going on.

Something big was about to happen. She could feel it.

"Abby and I talked about it on the plane," Jake went on. "Since you and Aunt Madison are married now, we were wondering if it was no longer necessary."

"No, I admit it isn't." Terry sighed. "I've loved having you with us, though. And I appreciate what you and Abby have done. You really helped me out. I owe you."

"That goes for me, too," Madison smiled, beginning to understand.

"You kids put your lives, as well as your careers, on hold for your family," John put in, "and we're grateful."

"We'll try to make it up to you," Izzy nodded.

"Hey," Jake laughed, "you don't owe us a thing. This family is a unit. We pull together. You've impressed me with that often enough, and I've seen the way you've raised Abby." Jake shook his head. "When one part of this family has a need, we all do what we can to help out, and when one of us has a milestone, we celebrate with them. The fact Uncle Terry thought to invite Abby and I with Dad and Mom, only proves my point. This family is close."

"We can still be close from our house," Abby smiled.

"It's a short walk." Izzy looked as though she were comforting herself, as well as the others. "It's much shorter than a cross-country flight to San Diego."

John nodded, and looked grateful. "Much shorter."

It took a moment for Madison to realize what this meant.

AJ wouldn't be in Terry's bedroom anymore.

And Terry would be in the living room, sleeping on the end of the couch, when he should be in his room, sleeping on his bed.

And it was Madison's fault.
She needed him in the living room, not in some far away place down the hall, but the memory of him slumped sitting up on the couch, hit her hard. She would have him do that? For the rest of his life?

It made her want to cry.

She loved him too much for that.

He should have his room back, even if it meant she had to endure the ugly dreams without him.

The pizza was being served and she shoved the words back into her heart and kept them for later. She’d tasted what it could be like with him, and it made this decision all the harder.

They prayed, then started in on lunch.

A foot nudged hers beneath the table, and she looked up from her untouched pizza and saw Terry watching her.

"Try to eat."

She nodded, and though her heart was heavy, she was able to get down a slice of pizza. When he coaxed her to eat one more, she just couldn't.

He would fight her about the room-- she knew he would. He wouldn't want to move back in, but she'd make him see it was for his own good, and began to form the argument in her mind, and the comebacks for when he resisted.

Terry nudged her foot again, and she looked up.

"Do you want to take a walk?" he asked.

She nodded and started to get up even before he had a chance to pull her chair out. The others looked puzzled, but didn't ask questions as Terry wiped his hands on a napkin, then pulled away from the table.

"We'll be back in a few minutes. Save us some pizza?"

John nodded, and took a drink from his soda cup.
Hugging herself, Madison led Terry from the restaurant and into the noisy terminal. She didn't want the others to hear, and Terry acted as though he understood.

"Okay, Maddie." Terry pulled a hand free from around her middle, then gently tugged her closer to his side so they could talk more in private. "I think I know what this is about." He looked at her. "This is about AJ moving out, isn't it?"

She nodded.

"What's on your heart?" he asked.

"You should move back to your room."

"Without you? Not going to happen."

"But you can't sleep sitting up forever."

"Granted, but I'm not leaving you in the living room while I sleep down the hall."

"But, Terry, it's for your own good."

"No, you are for my own good." Terry touched her chin and she couldn't help but bubble over into a smile. "I don't know how we'll arrange things in the living room yet, but we'll figure something out."

She wanted to fight him some more, but he was an awfully good convincer.

"Am I really, Terry? Am I really for your own good?"

He looked about, and so did she, and it didn't seem like anyone was paying them much attention. His lips touched her, and she leaned in and kissed him. He tasted like "the works," like pepperoni and cheese, and lots of zingy spices she couldn't name, and when he pulled away he was smiling.

"We'll find a way to make it work. Agreed?"

She hugged his arm with everything she had. "I agree, Terry."

"Okay, then. Let's get back to the others before they eat our lunch." Terry squeezed her hand, and they strolled back to the restaurant while Madison's heart overflowed with love.
She could eat now.

* * * *

Thankfully, there was no young man on the connecting flight to Syracuse to stare at Maddie, a fact which made Terry deeply grateful. He was newly married, probably a bit jealous of her right now, and he was glad for the peace and quiet. The elderly woman in their row occupied herself with a book, and between the book reader, and a napping Maddie, it made for a tranquil flight.

It was a good time for thinking, for trying to work out their problem. And it was a problem. They had more than one, actually, but the sleeping sitting up was the most pressing.

There was no way, short of physical torture, that he'd ever admit to Maddie how he'd passed last night. His back was sore, he'd kept waking up and shifting to try and find a comfortable position, and the thought of going through all that again tonight, was disheartening. Napping sitting up was one thing, but it was hard to get deep, recuperative sleep when you kept waking up every few hours. It appeared she'd had an easier time of it than he had, and for that, he was extremely thankful.

But he had to work something out. A sleeping bag?

Terry rubbed his eyes and looked at the woman beside him. If he had to have a problem in his life, she was most definitely worth it.

He passed the rest of their flight in thought, and prayed for wisdom.

When they began their descent, Terry woke Maddie. The flight had only lasted two hours, but the green outside his window announced they were nearing home and he was eager to see the kids again. While he enjoyed aspects of travel, he enjoyed being home with his family even more.

The wheels touched down, and Terry felt the eagerness of someone ready to be home. He waited as they taxied to their gate, sighed when he could take off his seat belt, and smiled when John spoke up from across the aisle.

"Anyone mind if we grab some food and eat in the minivan on the way home? That way, we get back as soon as possible."

"Sounds good to me," Jake said with a yawn.
There weren't many people on board and it wasn't hard for everyone to stay together.

Terry knew this airport inside out, as did John, and it didn't take long before they were back in their coats and heading into the parking garage. Though everyone looked tired, he could tell they were happy, and that seemed especially true of Maddie.

While they waited in the garage as John unlocked the minivan, Maddie leaned her head against Terry's shoulder, and her sigh told Terry a lot of what she was feeling.

"You're much more relaxed than when we left," Terry smiled.

"I feel relaxed."

"Good." Terry kissed her nose. "That's very good."

Everyone climbed inside the vehicle-- AJ in the back, Maddie and Terry in the middle row, and John and Izzy up front.

Terry slid the side door shut.

"Everyone's in, who's coming in," Terry said to the driver, and John started the engine.

"We are going to pick up the kids, tonight, aren't we?" Abby asked, as Terry and Maddie buckled in. "I know Dad has to drop us off first, then put in the boosters, but you are going to pick them up, tonight, aren't you?"

"Sounds like separation anxiety," John chuckled.

"I mean it-- we are going to pick them up, tonight?"

"That's the plan," John said, as the minivan wound through the airport lanes.

The conversation went back and forth and Terry wanted to get home. He was tired, and wouldn't mind climbing into bed for some shuteye.

Oh, yeah. No bed.

Terry sighed and looked out the window. He wasn't complaining. His body might be, but his heart sure wasn't.
A hand took his, and he looked down to see slender fingers intertwined with his strong wide ones. He looked up to see Maddie watching the view out her window, so she hadn't done it out of pity. It was just Maddie, being Maddie.

If it didn't trigger any flashbacks for her, he'd haul a sleeping bag out from the garage.

Sleeping bag or not though, he counted himself a blessed man.

After they ordered hamburgers at a drive-through, John stopped in the parking lot long enough to eat his meal, then started the hour and a half drive home while the others ate. They were pushing to get home, for everyone was tired and Abby wasn't the only mother wanting to see her munchkins.

Not feeling very hungry, Terry ate half his food, then stuffed the remains into the bag and leaned back to rest his eyes.

* * * *

Someone was tugging at his hand, and by the gentle pressure, Terry knew it was Maddie.

"Terry? Terry, we're home."

Her voice, her kind soft voice made him sigh. He opened his eyes and she smiled so sweetly, Terry wanted to pull her close for a kiss.

"We're home," she said again, and he nodded.

As Jake opened the side door, Terry looked through the front dash and saw an early night sky.

"I called Agatha, so she knows to expect us." Izzy turned and looked into the back of the van, gathering trash from their dinner as she went. "She said the kids are excited about their surprise."

"That reminds me--" Terry climbed out, then helped Maddie outside-- "what did you get them, anyway?"

"What else? Toys."
Terry laughed, and tried to fight off his tiredness. Everyone else was tired, and he had gotten a nap. That had to count for something. He collected Maddie's suitcase, his duffel, then started for the house with Maddie beside him.

Something caught his attention, and Terry glanced up at the night sky and laughed.

"It's our friend."

She looked up and smiled.

"The moon's followed us home, Maddie." Terry couldn't help yawning. He put down the luggage to unlock the front door, when noise down the street made him pause.

"Hey!" Vince, their neighbor and Terry's fishing buddy, jogged into view, his face one huge grin. "Is it true? Did you do it?" When Terry nodded, he was pulled into a giant bear hug. "Oh, man! Congratulations!"

"Thanks, Buddy." Terry returned the man-hug, then winced as Vince started to hug Maddie.

She extended a hand instead, and though it took Vince by surprise, he shook it and smiled, then turned back to Terry.

"You're still on for the wedding here in the bay, aren't you?"

"We are, and don't worry-- you're invited."

"Good, I'll be on the lookout for the invitation." Vince clapped Terry on the shoulder. "Maybe we could take the girls out in the boat sometime, and get in some fishing? Susan would love the company, and then she'll leave us alone so we can catch something besides weeds. What do you say?"

A lump formed in Terry's throat. Terry nodded, and tried to speak.

"That'd be great."

"Congratulations, Buddy. I'm happy for you." Vince shook his head, smiled, and walked back into the darkness for home.

"Terry?" Maddie touched Terry's hand and it took him a moment to answer.
"That's never happened to me before. I was just included in a social invitation as a couple. And it wasn't because Izzy set me up on a date, or Dick, who's like family, is inviting us to a party. That was Vince, who's just one of the guys." Terry turned to Maddie, and in the glow of the outdoor security light, he could see she didn't quite understand. The others were coming up with their luggage, and since Terry didn't want to explain in their presence, he hurried to unlock the front door.

"Who was that-- Vince?" John asked, as they moved into the dark house.

"Yeah, he wanted to congratulate us."

"Word must be getting around," John sighed.

Terry turned on the light, and while Izzy exclaimed how good it was to be home, it occurred to Terry that John was right. Most of Three Mile Bay must've known about their trip into Las Vegas, for Vince to have been able to congratulate them like that.

Maybe it was for the best. After the gossip about him and Maddie, it was probably a good thing that everyone now knew they were married.

When Terry woke from his thoughts, he noticed Maddie staring at the living room couch.

She didn't look happy.

As John and Jake went to the garage to start taking boosters seats out to the minivan, Terry went to help.

He would face the couch later.

* * * *

It had taken her a moment to understand the importance of what Terry had been trying to tell her, for she valued social invitations from women much more than she did from men. But she did get it. She had made Terry into a couple, one who could be invited to "take the girls out in the boat," or whatever else his buddies did as couples.

She was glad Terry was getting something out of this. Something besides the end of that couch.

Leaving her things in the living room, Abby headed into the hall.
"Well," Izzy sighed, "if Vince knows, then everyone in church tomorrow is going to want to congratulate you and Terry." Izzy smiled and started for the hallway. "I'd better unpack before the children come home, and want their surprise. Do you feel all right?"

Madison nodded. It wasn't exactly the truth, but it was the way Izzy had meant it-- she wasn't sick.

"Things will look better in the morning, when you're not as tired. All this travel is enough to drag anyone down." Izzy gave her an encouraging smile, then went to unpack.

Would things look better in the morning? Madison wasn't so sure.

She sank onto the couch, and prayed-- no begged, for wisdom. She needed help, then remembered God sometimes had His angels sitting behind desks. Wondering if it was too late to call and get an answer, Madison dug out her phone and punched Carol's number.

Carol had said to call if Madison needed her, and right now, she did.

The number answered on the second ring.

"Carol, it's Madison. I don't know what to do. I'm praying, and I still don't know what to do."

"First, take a deep breath." Carol's steady, unhurried voice calmed Madison and she took that deep breath. "Let me sit down and get comfortable so we can talk."

"I'm sorry for bothering you."

"It's no bother. This is what I'm here for."

"To be bothered?"

Carol laughed, and Madison could hear people sounds in the background, then a door shutting, and then quiet.

"Let me get over to this chair, and sit down. Now. Let's talk."

Taking another deep breath, Madison explained the past wonderful two days-- the wedding, the hiding, the airplane rides, (she left out the young man), then Terry sitting up all night on the couch. And now they were home, and she was facing Terry sleeping sitting up again, and she didn't know what to do. It was a mess.
"Terry deserves better than this, Carol, and I don't want him to sleep like that for the rest of his life!"

"First, let's ask what your goals are?"

"To marry Terry--" Madison's eyes darted about the room and even though she saw no one, she cupped a hand over the phone and whispered as quietly as humanly possible-- "have sex, and have his baby."

"Do your goals include a traditional bed?"

Madison took a long pause. She knew Terry loved her, that he'd do whatever it took to make this marriage work. She didn't doubt that. He loved her, and she loved him. And like him, she would do whatever it took.

Including an actual bed.

"Yes, my goals include that."

"Why?"

"Because if we were switched around, and he had trouble sleeping on a bed, he'd do that for me." Madison gathered her legs under her, and hunkered in her coat, even though someone had turned the heat on in the house. "When I said--" Madison caught herself from talking too loudly and hushed her voice as low as she could-- "when I said my goals, deep down, I meant a bed. I meant all the ugly things I don't want to face, but I have to face them. I can't sleep on the couch forever."

"So what are your goals?"

"To be with him on a bed." Madison groaned. "But that doesn't help, Carol. I'm so stupid. I get sick to my stomach just thinking about beds, let alone being on one again with a man."

"If someone came to you, and told you they'd been sexually abused and chained to a bed for years-- since they were a child-- how do you think that person might feel about being intimate on one, later in life?"

"Like they wouldn't want to."
"Would that seem reasonable to you?"

"Yes."

"Would you call the person stupid?"

"No."

"Then maybe you might want to cut yourself some slack."

Wet spilled down Madison's cheeks, and she palmed it away before Izzy or Abby came back into the living room and asked what was going on.

"Thank you, Carol."

"That's quite all right."

"But what should I do about tonight?" Madison fished the handkerchief from her jeans pocket.

"What should I do?"

"That depends on what you're ready for."

"I'm not ready for bed." Madison knew it, but it didn't solve her problem. "Terry has to sleep somewhere though, and I don't want him in another room."

"Take a deep breath." Carol's steadiness once again calmed Madison. "I'm going to ask some questions, and let's see if the answers don't suggest a solution. Think carefully before you answer, okay?"

"Okay." Madison blew her nose.

"Which is worse: the blankets, or the actual bed, itself?"

"The bed."

"Terry laying down, going to sleep, or the bed?"

"The bed."

"Please think about that."
"I am. It's the bed-- it'd be worse."

"The mattress or the bed?"

"The bed, though it doesn't make the mattress much better. Izzy slept on an inflatable mattress, and it was all right, but that wasn't real, and she was a woman. A real mattress isn't a whole lot better than a bed."

"Okay, now we know a few things that can help us."

"Like what?"

"We know that Terry doesn't have to sleep sitting up, blankets are just fine, and his bed shouldn't be made on a mattress."

"But--" Madison thought about what it ruled out, but then realized what it ruled in. "He could sleep on the couch. But I'm on the couch. There's only room for one on the couch, and I'm not ready for anything else yet, so that puts me back where we started. Unless of course, Terry sleeps sitting up!" In horror, Madison clamped a hand over her mouth. She'd said all that much louder than she'd intended. She looked about, saw no one anywhere, and prayed Izzy or Abby hadn't heard any of that.

They probably hadn't-- they were too busy doing their own things, but still. That had been close.

"Let's just breathe and relax. Have you prayed lately?"

"Yes, just before I called."

"Then let's look at this again."

Carol hadn't finished speaking, when Abby came into the room with two suitcases and a bag. Then Abby went back into the hall, brought in one more, and piled it with everything else. Looking distracted, she stepped back and noticed the phone. She motioned that she'd keep quiet, and ducked into the kitchen.

"I don't see how my problem is getting any better, Carol. By faith, I suppose it is, but by sight it's staying exactly the same."

A second later, Izzy came into the living room, saw the phone and mouthed the word, "Terry?"
Madison shook her head, and Izzy nodded that she would be quiet, and ducked into the kitchen. It struck Madison how very much alike the mother and daughter sometimes were.

"Let's not give up," Carol said, and it made Madison so glad that Carol was her friend. "What if you--"

"You're what?" sounded from the kitchen.

While Carol talked, Madison hunkered down on the couch.

"You're moving out, tonight?" Izzy came into the living room and stared at the pile of suitcases and things Abby had left. "Sweetheart, what about Ricky? What about your house? You haven't fully unpacked, yet." Izzy saw the phone, motioned Abby back into the kitchen, and Madison tried to talk a little quieter so she wouldn't disturb mother and daughter.

"Sorry, that was Izzy and Abby."

"That's okay." Carol spoke with a smile in her voice. "I was only suggesting that you might talk to Terry. Is he around? Can you talk to him about what sleeping arrangements are available?"

Before Madison could answer, the front door opened and four munchkins tried to crowd through at the same time. Debbie managed first, then Lizzie, then Ruthie, and Ricky trailed in the back with his firefighter.

Madison fully expected a stampede for their mothers, but to her utter delight they came to the couch and wanted hugs.

"Jake said we had a new aunt!" Debbie said, eager to go first.

"Thank you, thank you," Madison dropped her phone and hugged each munchkin, hugging even Ricky, who seemed at first too much of a guy to need one, but at last relenting when his aunts got one and he alone was left standing. "Thank you so much. Oh, it's good to be home."

Ricky nodded in little boy agreement, and yawned.

Movement in the kitchen doorway caught Madison's eye, and she looked up to see Izzy and Abby smiling like they hadn't wanted to interrupt.

"I hadn't realized how much I missed them until just now," Madison admitted.
"You're allowed," Izzy laughed, and came into the living room to be tugged in three different
directions until all three girls had been hugged and kissed and each one had told their momma
about what they had done since the last time they had seen her.

Ricky was scooped into Abby's arms, and even though he was getting big, he looked content to
stay there and talk to his momma.

Loaded down with backpacks and a small suitcase, Jake came through the front door, took one
look at the scene and grinned at Madison. "Home sweet home." Jake edged around the family,
saw his and Abby's luggage and nodded in approval.

As Jake made his way to the hall, Terry stepped inside.

The sight of Terry had Madison digging around the couch cushion for Carol.

"Terry just came back," Madison whispered into the phone. "Maybe I should talk to him now,
like you said."

"If you need to, call me."

"Thank you so much."

They hung up, and not a moment too soon, for Terry waded through the family, moved to the
couch, and sat down beside Madison. He opened his mouth to start talking, but Ruthie came
over and presented something to Madison.

"I forgot. This is for you." She held up a sheet of paper covered with stick figures. "It's us. This is
Daddy and Mommy, Abby, Jake, Debbie, Ricky, Lizzie..."

"Who are these?" Terry asked with a smile.

"That's you and Aunt Madison. And that's me, and that's Three Mile Bay. The water's green
because Lizzie hogged all the blue and then when I got it, it broke in two."

"What broke-- the water?"

"No, the blue crayon." Ruthie smiled. "Can I see the ring again?"

Terry held up his hand and she grinned.
"Can I try it on?"

"It won't fit," Terry said apologetically, and Ruthie handed the picture to Madison.

"Thank you." She gave the little girl a hug. The hug felt nice, and it must've felt nice to Ruthie too, for the girl hopped onto the couch and scooted beside Madison. "What did you do while we were gone?" Madison asked.

"A LOT." Ruthie spoke like some tired soul about to collapse. "Mrs. Hopkins kept us REALLY busy."

Terry laughed. "Well, thank you for taking the time to draw this for us. With your aunt's permission, I'd like to post this on the fridge."

Madison nodded, and Ruthie eagerly climbed down and went with Terry into the kitchen to see it posted.

When Terry and Ruthie came back, Ruthie seemed to have forgotten the couch and went to her mom and sisters and started to ask about the surprise. Ricky asked to be put down, Jake came down the hall, John stepped in from outside, and as Terry sat down on the couch beside Madison, John saw AJ's luggage.

"What's this?" John asked.

"Maddie, I'd like to talk to you." Terry tried to keep his voice low, but John's question had Terry looking up.

"Are Abby and Jake moving out right now?" John asked, and Izzy nodded, "yes."

"It's okay, Dad." Jake spoke up before Abby did, and Abby looked relieved. "Abby and I already talked this over. We've got it handled."

"You've been talking, huh?" John chuckled, but didn't look surprised. "I'm backing off, but don't hesitate to ask if you guys need help unpacking, or moving furniture. There's no shame in admitting you need a little help."

Jake smiled. "I'll remember that when it's time to unpack the aquarium."

"They're leaving?" Debbie looked thunderstruck.
While the house moved about them, Terry moved closer to Madison on the couch. She took his hand, and hid her face against his shoulder until his breath tickled her ear, and his whisper coaxed her to look up.

"Maddie, I need to talk to you."

"So do I."

Terry took off his coat, and it prompted Madison to do the same.

"I was wondering," Terry breathed deep, as if he was about to ask a big thing, "do you think a sleeping bag would hurt you? Do you think it would trigger flashbacks?"

"Terry, I have to tell you something."

He looked pained that she hadn’t answered his question, and she saw patience move his features as he forced himself to listen. This had to do with his question-- it really did-- he just didn't know it yet.

"I called Carol."

"You did? When?"

"Just now. I told her we got married, and she helped me to think some things through."

"That's good." Terry was being patient again. He was tired, but he was patient, and Madison tried hard to hurry.

"She asked me questions about how I feel about beds, and we came to some conclusions." Madison saw Terry's face perk up. "It’s the bed, and a real mattress that aren't so good for me, but there can be blankets and you can sleep laying down."

For a moment, it didn't look as though Terry understood.

"When we rule things out, it can rule other things in."

"Oh." Terry nodded. "I see. So a sleeping bag would definitely be in." Hope reached his eyes, then his mouth tilted in a half smile as the thought sank in. "A cot could even work. Or am I wrong?"
"Are cots those things you fold out? I think I've seen them on TV. They would work, but Terry, they didn't look very comfortable."

"Or," Terry smiled, "a couch. I could sleep on a couch."

"You mean laying down? I thought of that," Madison nodded, "but I'm already using the couch. It wouldn't solve anything. You'd have to sleep sitting up again."

"No, no. You don't understand." Terry nodded to the luggage on the floor. "AJ is moving out."

"So?"

"So--" Terry was grinning so hard Madison was starting to, as well, even though she didn't know why--"we move into my room."

Madison felt her grin start to slip. "But there's a bed--"

"Maddie, we take out the bed, and move in two couches."

"Two?"

"One for you," he smiled, "and one for me."

"Two?" Madison gulped hard. "But what would people think? Wouldn't that make us crazy?" As she said the word, "crazy," she thought about what Carol had said, and wondered if it would be all right to cut themselves some slack.

Would that be all right?

"Maddie, I meant every word when I said we were going to do whatever it takes. I wasn't kidding. If this is what it's going to take, then I say we go for it."

"Okay, Terry."

"Okay?"

She nodded.

"It'll be me and you in one room." Terry was speaking in hushed tones the others couldn't overhear, though they were too busy with AJ moving out to notice a whispered conversation.
"We’re going to have to iron some things out so we’re comfortable, but Maddie, I think we have a chance of this working. What do you say?"

"We were all right in the hotel suite."

"This will be smaller," he warned.

"We can make it work, Terry."

"And if we can’t," he sighed, "then we’ll have to think of something else. But, Maddie, for a shot at having some privacy to kiss and sleep on a couch, I’m willing, if you are."

Privacy to kiss. She bit her lip until it almost bled. It was true. They didn’t have much privacy here. In fact, they had none at all. It was the living room, after all, not a private space.

She nodded, and hugged his arm. "I’m willing, Terry."

His mouth moved behind her ear, he planted a kiss, and she melted like butter on warm homemade bread.

It sounded wonderful, like their own home version of a hiding place, only this one, they wouldn’t have to leave the next day. She looked about and saw John and Jake hauling suitcases from the house, while Abby held open the front door.

"Need help?" Terry offered, and John shook his head.

"Stay where you’re at," John said, and the door closed behind them.

On the floor, the children sat pulling small stuffed animals out of a gift bag. There was one for each of them, and they began deciding who got what while Izzy tidied the room and kept an eye on the little ones. It seemed no one had been paying the couch much attention, and Madison was grateful.

"Terry?" she squeezed his hand. "How soon can we get the couches moved in?"

"It won’t be tonight, but don’t worry-- we’ll get it done as soon as possible. I have a question for you, though. Do you want me to sleep in day clothes?"

It took Madison a while to think about that, but she finally shook her head. He was still Terry, no matter what he wore.
With a sigh, she tuck ed her head against his shoulder and watched the children divide the stuffed animals. Ricky got the horse-- which Firefighter Stan quickly learned to ride, Debbie picked the desert owl and named it, "Sky," Ruthie wanted the huggable panda bear with the sweet face, and Lizzie celebrated when she got to keep the calico cat with whiskers. They were happy and busy with their surprises, and it only added to Madison's joy.

The room she couldn't go into because it had a bed-- the room that belonged to Terry, would soon be hers, as well. He was making changes just for her, and it made her more determined than ever to prove herself a butterfly.

* * * *

When John had finished helping take AJ's things to their house, and John had come back for Ricky, the triplets argued that it wasn't bedtime yet.

"It's past bedtime, but that's not the point," John said as Ricky gathered his toys. "His parents want him to come home."

"But this is home," Debbie sighed.

John gave his little girl a you-know-better-than-that kind of look, and she fell back on the carpet in defeat.

"You'll see him tomorrow." John coaxed his grandson along as Terry grabbed his coat and headed to the door with them.

John looked to Terry, his brows raised in curious question.

"I need a sleeping bag from the garage."

"What about the inflatable mattress?"

"That's not going to work."

"Okay." John didn't press for further explanation, but made sure Ricky had his coat, then stepped outside with Ricky and Terry.

If John wondered whether Terry would be in the sleeping bag from here on out, John didn't ask, so Terry volunteered the information. John nodded and listened, and looked relieved, and again,
John didn't press for more. John lingered before they parted ways-- John to take Ricky the short
distance to the little yellow house, and Terry to get the sleeping bag from the garage.

Night spread above them, and in the light of Terry's friend, the moon, Terry could see John's
face.

John was thinking.

"The office is bigger."

"What do you mean?"

"There's not much space in your room for two couches, but you could do that in the office." John
nodded slowly. "Switch rooms-- you and Madison take the office, and we move our office into
your room."

The offer was stunning. Terry shook his head, but John stopped him.

"Think about it before you turn it down. I'd rather work in a smaller office, than have you move
out. Abby and Jake are just over there, but if you and Madison move away, it's not going to be
that close. Think about it. I have to take this munchkin home." John patted Ricky on the
shoulder, and they started for the yellow house.

It wasn't going to happen, of course, for Terry wouldn't let it. He would get two couches into his
room if that's all that fit in there, but it had been a kind offer by a dear brother.

As Terry moved into the garage and thought it over though, he began to measure the room in
his mind.

His room had officially been the guest room, and that meant it wasn't very big, and it didn't
leave much space for the kind of arrangement he'd been considering. Terry grabbed his sleeping
bag, and even though he couldn't do anything about the move until the day after tomorrow--
Monday-- located the measuring tape, then headed back into the house.

As much as he refused to move the office, he couldn't have Maddie crawling over a couch to get
through the doorway.

In the living room, Maddie was dressed in her pajamas and robe, and making her bed on the
couch. When she saw the sleeping bag, she looked sorry for him, but he didn't have time for
that. He dropped the bag on the floor, moved into the hall, turned into his bedroom and made a quick survey.

"Terry?" Maddie hid in the hallway, unable to look inside. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know if we can easily fit two couches in here." Terry fed out some measuring tape. "John just offered to switch the office with this room so we can put in the couches, and I'm beginning to think we might have to."

"Don't we have enough room to do it here?" Maddie asked hopefully, and she waited while Terry measured.

"There won't be much room for foot traffic. We'll probably have to walk sideways just to get from one side of the room to the other, and depending on the size of these couches, you might be squeezing just to get in and out the door." Terry sat on the edge of the bed and tried not to let it overwhelm him. "This isn't going to be easy, Maddie."

"It's only temporary." Her voice came from the hall. He couldn't see her, and Terry pictured her by the doorway, hugging herself, trying to stay calm.

He pushed up from the bed and joined her.

Sure enough. Hugging herself.

"What do you mean, temporary?" he asked, pocketing the tape measure.

"I'm going to--to--" Maddie stopped cold when Izzy came out from the girls' room, then disappeared into the master bedroom.

Terry smiled to coax her to calm down. "It's okay."

"I--I'm going to sleep on a bed, Terry." Her voice wasn't steady, and it was just barely a whisper, but he did hear each word and it sent him for a loop. "I can't right now, but that's my goal. To sleep on a bed. With you."

Terry stepped back. He looked Maddie in the eye and she looked down at the carpet.

"It's one of my goals."

"When did this happen?"
"Tonight. Carol and I talked it over."

"So the couch thing is--"

"Temporary," Maddie nodded.

"Oh." Terry scratched the back of his neck. In a way, he’d kind of assumed she’d sleep on a bed in the far distant future, and in a way, he hadn’t. Until she said it, he hadn’t let himself believe it, and now that she had, he felt taken aback. "Is this something you want, or do you feel like you have to?" he asked. "We can move the office, Maddie-- or better yet, we’ll renovate and make the bedroom larger, if need be. I just want to make sure you don’t feel like you’re being pressured. I can get by with a couch."

She nibbled her lip, looked at him and then came close and buried her head in his shoulder. He loved it when she did that. It made him feel so close to her, like she trusted him with her heart, as well as her body.

Her breath warmed his shirt, and Terry closed his eyes.

"I want this, Terry."

He breathed deep, touched her blonde hair and caressed it until he heard her breath catch. He stopped, pulled away and kissed her lips just as someone came down the hall.

"Don’t tell--" Maddie buried her face against Terry’s neck.

For the life of him, Terry didn’t know what he wasn’t supposed to tell.

"You kids ready to turn in?" John smiled.

"Kids?" Terry laughed as Maddie leaned even more into his shoulder. "Thanks a lot."

Chuckling, John shook his head and moved past them. He paused, looked back, and nodded to the bedroom. "Give any more thought about switching rooms?"

"I think we’ll pass." Terry rubbed Maddie’s shoulder. "We’ll make do with where we’re at. Thanks, though."
"You're sure? We can always add on a room, or push out a wall and make yours bigger. If you change your mind, let me know." John gave him a solid look before going into the triplets' room, and Terry knew his friend had meant it.

John was like that.

Maddie put her lips to Terry's ear. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For not telling him the couches were temporary."

"Why not?"

Maddie looked flustered. Her eyes darted down the hall, then back to Terry. "Because," she cupped her hand to Terry's ear and whispered so faintly he strained to hear her, "if he knows about the bed, then he'll know we're going to have sex."

"I won't tell him," Terry promised, and kissed Maddie on the forehead. If it made her feel better not to say anything, then Terry wouldn't-- not that John and Izzy wouldn't be able to guess for themselves when the couches were moved out that progress was being made.

Terry gave his wife a hug, and while she went to the office bathroom, he went to the living room to dig his pajamas out from the duffel. He saw the picture frame, and set it on the end table. They would move the photo later, but for now, he wanted it where Maddie could see it before she went to sleep.

His heart full, Terry headed to his old room to change. Abby had left things clean and organized in there, a trait she'd likely picked up from Jake, for she hadn't been that way as a child.

By the time Terry had changed and brushed his teeth, he found Maddie already dressed, and tucked in on the couch. She must've been racing like the wind to beat him to the living room, for even his sleeping bag was rolled out and waiting for him beside the couch. She'd laid out a layer of blankets, then his sleeping bag and a pillow, and then another blanket, and he had to admit it looked comfortable despite the fact it was still the floor.

He grinned, went over and turned off the lamp and noticed Maddie had already clicked on the night-light.
She was wide-awake, and tracking him-- or pretending not to, and he tried not to notice. It was hard not to be aware of it though, especially when she turned onto her side and watched as he climbed into his sleeping bag.

Then he felt it. Or rather his feet felt it.

He heard her smother a laugh.

"Okay, what'd you put in here?" Terry reached into the sleeping bag, felt something slick and pulled it out. In the dim light, he recognized the wrapping paper.

He checked the couch.

Maddie had pulled the blanket over her head, and he grinned when she peeked out. Just for that, he took his time untying the ribbon holding both ends of the gift closed. What a huggable woman she was. He pulled off the card, read the handwriting, "You are loved," and knew she had to have had these things wrapped ahead of time to be ready so quickly.

"You are loved right back," he told her, and pulled off the rest of the wrapping paper.

An electric stapler. Not a large one, but still, very nice.

"Wow, thanks."

"Do you like it?"

"Yes, I do."

"Can you use it?"

He smiled, feeling they'd had this conversation before. "Absolutely. It's nicer than the one John and I have right now."

"Am I helping?" Maddie asked.

"Pardon?" Terry put aside the stapler, and started to climb into the sleeping bag.

"Am I helping you in your job?"
"This is definitely a help-- Whoa, what's this?" Terry pulled something out from under his bedding, and Maddie buried under a pillow with a smothered giggle that had him laughing. "Maddie, how are we supposed to sleep if you keep pulling stunts like this?"

The gift was round and heavy, and he half wondered if it might be the staples that went with his brand new stapler. But they wouldn't be round, and this heavy. He tore off the paper, and found a plain, ordinary looking white mug. He smiled, was ready to thank her for the gift, when he turned it over and saw bold words on a banner proclaiming, "World's Greatest Sweetheart" on the side.

Terry felt his face grow warm.

"It's meant to be a holder-- to put pencils and pens and things in," Maddie came up from her pillow and smiled at him eagerly. "I know you already have one on your desk, but I thought maybe you might need another."

He looked at her in all her sweetness, and he couldn't speak. He sucked in a breath, unable to say everything in his heart. There simply weren't enough words in the English language to say what he felt. Maddie reached a hand over the edge of the couch, and he grasped her fingers and gave them a "thank you" squeeze.

He held up the mug, nodded his thanks to her, and she smiled.

It'd take some guts to put that mug on his desk, but he would. For Maddie, he would.

"What about our good night kiss?" she asked.

He smiled, moved closer to the couch and gently kissed his wife.

"See you in the morning," he whispered hoarsely.

She kissed his nose, and he pushed away with a huge smile as he went back to the sleeping bag.

"Are there anymore surprises in here?" he asked, his voice breaking a little as he climbed inside.

"No, but there's more in the office bathroom."

He paused, then kept going, not wanting to even consider what else might be waiting for him. She'd evidently been trying to help him out in his work, and he thought it incredibly sweet of her. And helpful. Honey sweet, milk chocolate sweet, and just plain Maddie sweet.
"I love you," he breathed, and she whispered the words back to him.

In the quiet, Terry prayed with Maddie for a peaceful night, for blessings for their family, and for each other. Then with Maddie fighting back sleep, he got comfortable in his bag and let himself drift off.

* * * *

It had been a hard day, one of those days that made Connor lose faith that mankind had any hope at all of getting its act together. Sitting in a parked car to document the comings and goings of an unfaithful husband could do that to you. The man's wife had suspected the affair, and had hired Connor to prove it.

He had. The video of her husband leaving a place he had no moral right to be, would confirm her suspicions and most likely end a twenty-seven year marriage.

Sometimes Connor hated this job.

Leaning back in the worn vinyl chair, Connor rubbed his eyes and glanced at the office clock. It was nearly midnight on a Saturday night, and here he was, putting the finishing touches on a report that would break the heart of his client.

Some men just didn't know when they had it good.

The phone rang and Connor blinked to stay awake. He hoped it wasn't his client, for the report wasn't ready to turn in yet.

He checked caller ID, and groaned.

Biting back any number of things he could say, Connor picked up the phone and answered with a smile.

"Hey, Tim. What's up?"

"I'd like to try again."

Connor squeezed his eyes shut. Not again. Please, not again.

"I thought we agreed, Tim. It's a wild goose chase. We simply don't have enough information."
"I'll pay you--"

"It's not about the money. We've been over this ground until I swear I've been making a career of this one case, and there's nothing. Nada. Zip."

"One more time. Just once more, and then I give my word I'll go away."

Knowing Tim, he could believe that. He could also imagine Tim going to another private investigator with his problem, for he knew Tim wasn't the kind to leave it alone. He might leave Connor alone, but that was about as much as Connor could expect.

"One more time. Email me as much as you've got-- any leads you've collected since the last go around, and I'll get on it as soon as I can."

"Thank you. Find her, and I'll name my baby after you."

"Yeah, yeah." Connor sucked in air, wished Tim good night, and quietly hoped he could settle this case once and for all.

He hoped tracking down this one person wouldn't define his entire career, that by the time he was old and dottering about with a cane, he wouldn't still be searching for Madison Olivia Jones.

Connor had to hand it to him.

For someone who'd never met his older half sister, Tim was one dedicated brother.

"Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened."

~ Luke 11:9-10 ~
"Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it..."
~ Ephesians 5:25 ~

When Terry woke the next morning, he rolled onto his back and blinked up at the couch. The pushed away blankets told him that Maddie had already left, the sad fact registering in Terry's heart with a slight twinge of disappointment.

He'd missed seeing her wake up.

Terry blinked the sleep from his eyes, pushed onto his elbow in the sleeping bag and looked about.

From the light coming through the curtains, it was late enough to warrant being awake, even though he fought the urge to sink back into that warm bag and get more sleep.

Resisting the irresistible, Terry wrestled out of bed, pushed onto his feet and groaned as he rubbed his arms in the cooler air. Maddie had done a good job of making his sleeping bag comfortable-- maybe a little too good. He needed to get up though, go looking for some coffee to get his brain working so he could get ready for the day. This was Sunday, and he knew everyone at church would be talking about him and Maddie when they got there.

Yawning, Terry moved into the kitchen and smiled when he found Maddie alone, and staring intently at the coffee maker.

"Hey, Mrs. Davis."

She looked up, gave a pretty smile, then looked back at the coffee maker as though she couldn't afford to lose her concentration. He noticed the pensive stance, the way she hugged herself and knew she had a lot on her mind. She'd changed into her jeans and his sweater, and a thought ambled through Terry that his sweater was probably now hers.

It made him smile.

He kissed her cheek, and when she leaned into him, he tried not to pull her into a tight hug.
She liked his morning beard. He hadn't been sure of it before, but now, as her face lightly scraped across his, he no longer needed to guess. He was beginning to really like those beard caresses. They made him feel strong, like he was a real man, and not just a guy who sat at computers for a living.

"I like having you sleep nearby," she whispered.

"I'm glad to hear that." He rubbed the small of her back, but when Maddie tucked into herself, he stopped, and contented himself with the weight of her against his chest. "Are you happy?" He edged to get a better look at her lowered lashes, those lips parting in a shy girlish smile.

She nodded, briefly meeting his gaze before burrowing her face into his pajama top.

He reached for her, paused, then lightly touched her shoulder. When she showed no signs of distress, he massaged her arm and relished the warmth of her breath.

"I'm making you coffee." She looked up at him with wide gray eyes that showed the depth of just how much she loved him. She hated coffee, and before she could say a word more, Terry claimed her mouth. Her kiss was eager and sweet, and it took restraint not to caress.

When the alarms in his brain went off, he pushed away, but not so much she still couldn't have the refuge of his arms if she needed them.

Maddie kissed his neck, hugged his shoulder and stayed where she was.

"We forgot to set up the coffee maker last night, so I'm trying my very first pot." Maddie spoke cuddled against him, and Terry let his hand drift to her shoulder to keep her there. "Izzy showed me how, but it's the first time I've ever done it on my own. I don't know if I'm getting it right, though." Maddie looked up at him, and he lost himself in that soft gray-eyed gaze.

She loved him. The truth of that never failed to quietly stun him.

"Thank you," he breathed.

"I'm going to take care of you, Terry. I am-- you'll see." She was so serious, so sober, like the fate of the world depended on whether or not she got the coffee right, that he gave her shoulder a slight squeeze.

"You already are. You made my bed so comfortable, I had a hard time getting out of that sleeping bag."
She smiled, just as he'd hoped she would, and when her cheeks flushed with pink, every fiber in his being vibrated with life. He could've stood there all day and took her in just as she was, but a tug on his pajama top pulled him closer to her and his senses drowned for one blissful moment in her kiss.

"I have to stop." He breathed in the scent of her, and moved away before the sweet moment got the better of him.

She nodded, looked at him before letting go, and he touched her chin to let her know how much she was loved.

If he loved her any less, they'd still be kissing.

He watched as Maddie poured his coffee, stirred in a little sweetener but didn't add any cream.

"Izzy must've told you how I take my java." He kissed Maddie's cheek as Maddie handed him the smiley mug. "Thank you for taking such good care of me."

"You haven't tasted it yet."

"I don't have to-- it's the thought that counts." Terry took a sip from the piping hot mug as he went into the living room.

"Well?" Maddie followed close behind, her toes nipping slightly at the heels of his socks.

"It's good." He put the mug down and started in on his bed.

"You're being kind."

"No, I'm not. For someone who's just learning, it's good." He gave her a smile, but she sank onto the couch with a groan. "Go easy on yourself. You don't even like coffee."

"I'm not making it for me." Maddie tugged at her blanket, then got up from the couch and began to work on her own bedding.

"It's all right, you won't have to be an expert at this." Terry set aside the rolled up sleeping bag. "Someone else will usually start it the night before, so you won't have to worry about getting this right."
"But I want to help."

"You are. More than you know."

She looked at him with a question in her eyes, and Terry gestured to his heart.

"It's beating very nicely, thanks to you."

She was smiling now, and that's all that mattered. He smiled back, put their bedding away and started down the hall to his room to get changed.

John and Izzy were late getting up, but then this was Sunday morning and the house usually slept in.

Of course... Terry hesitated as he stepped into his room. He could also see Izzy trying to hold things up a little, just so it gave him and Maddie some private time before the house woke up. This happened to be the first morning back from their trip, and Terry wouldn't put it past Izzy to do something thoughtful like that.

Ah, he had good friends.

He pushed into his room, changed into a sweater and slacks to blend with what Maddie was wearing to church, then headed to the triplets' room to wake the girls. If he made enough noise, maybe Izzy would hear and understand it was an all clear signal.

"It's Sunday morning, everybody up." Terry let in the morning light as Debbie groaned. "Time for little ones to get out of bed."

"I'm not done sleeping," Debbie said, while the girl in the next bed began to stir.

As Terry picked up some toys in the corner of the room, a pillow gently knocked into his back. Laughter spilled from a small bed, followed by a second tossed pillow; Terry ducked, only to take a hit in the shoulder.

A third pillow came hurling at him, but he had the first pillow in hand and was taking aim at a laughing munchkin, doubled over on her side at having gotten her Uncle Terry by surprise. He launched the pillow, and it softly landed on Munchkin Debbie's bottom, prompting Munchkins Lizzie and Ruthie to climb out of their beds and pummel him with the returned pillow.
Terry laughed and fell to his knees as the girls surrounded him with squeals of, "He gave up! He gave up!"

"Oh, you think I give up that easily, do you?" Terry started to tickle any munchkin within range, and of course they all darted in and out laughing, and shouting, until Maddie bravely peeked inside to see what all the noise was about. "I'm surrounded," Terry laughed, and grabbed Lizzie as she darted around his back.

Maddie ducked back into the hall, and Terry climbed to his feet to go check on his wife. He'd never really seen her look into a bedroom before-- not one with any beds in it, and wanted to make sure she was all right.

While the girls shouted who had "got Uncle Terry to give up first," Terry rounded into the hall.

He found Maddie hiding beside the door, hugging herself like someone who desperately wanted to go in and join the fun, but couldn't.

She smiled, but he tugged a hand from around her middle and she came to him as lightly as a butterfly landing on his shoulder. He breathed deep as she snuggled into him, tucked her head against his neck and filled him with an aching softness that made him profoundly grateful for his life.

"Aunt Madison," Lizzie came into the hallway, "I got him to give up before Debbie did."

"Nu-uh!" Debbie came and crossed her small arms. "I got him to give up first, didn't I, Uncle Terry?"

Before Terry could respond, the master bedroom door opened and John came out looking like a blonde-headed, half awake, groggy-eyed bear who'd just come out from winter hibernation.

"Okay, knock it off you two." John yawned, scratched his nose and nodded to the girls. "I meant you two, not Uncle Terry and Aunt Madison."

"But Daddy, I got Uncle Terry first."

John looked confused.

"Our game-- I got him before Debbie did."

"Got him?" John stretched as Izzy came and looked around her husband.
As Terry suspected, Izzy looked wide-awake.

"I hit him with the pillow before Debbie did, and that's when Uncle Terry gave up."

John slanted a look at Terry, and Terry tried for peace.

"Five minutes, and I'll have this settled."

John stepped aside, and Terry turned to the munchkins with one brow raised. The triplets looked at each other and grinned, the ripple of tension already easing.

"Okay, before you munchkins get me into anymore trouble with the Big Guy--" Terry looked about and the girls laughed at Terry's name for their daddy-- "Debbie got me first. I think. Which means she gets the honor and privilege of leading the way back to the bedroom to make your beds and direct the cleanup of the toys that the pillows knocked off the toy chest."

"But Uncle Terry, I was first."

"Lizzie, when we play, we play in love. Were you honestly first?"

Lizzie nodded that she was.

As far as Terry could remember, Debbie had been first, but he hadn't actually seen the first pillow being tossed.

"To be fair, we'll call it a tie, and please don't fight the ruling. Throwing pillows are allowed so long as we do it in love-- them's the rules-- but the Big Guy is watching." Terry gestured to John. "He's watching. Really. Do you want me to get in trouble?"

Though the girls were smiling, they shook their heads in a united, "no."

"Then for my sake, will the tied winners please lead the way and start cleaning their bedroom?"

The girls sighed a little but went into their room.

Terry waited a beat, glanced at John, then looked into the room to find the girls doing as they'd been told. "How long did that take?" Terry asked. He looked back at John and John shook his head.
"The Big Guy?"

"You're big."

"No bigger than you are, Buddy."

"You're their father-- it was a figure of speech."

"Yeah, I got that." John smiled and moved past Terry into the living room. "I'd like to thank whoever was responsible for making the coffee. I can smell it, and I want some."

"I made it," Maddie said with a bright smile, and hurried off to the kitchen to get John a cup.

"She made it?" John paused, looking a bit concerned, and Izzy nudged her husband in the side. "I wasn't going to say anything, even if it didn't turn out. I was only surprised, that's all."

"I've been teaching her how to run a kitchen," Izzy said in a hushed voice, "and I don't want to discourage her."

"I won't," John nodded, and smiled as Maddie came in with a mug brimming with java. "Thank you." John held the mug a little while, as though working up the courage to try it, and while John warmed his hands, Terry noticed Maddie nervously chewing her bottom lip.

Terry gave John a look, and John got the message. He took a sip.

"Not bad." John took another.

"What's wrong with it?" Maddie asked. "Terry won't tell me because he's so kind."

"I can be kind," John smiled.

"You can tell me-- really, you can. What's wrong with the coffee?"

"Who said anything's wrong?"

"I made it, didn't I? There has to be something wrong."

"Madison, you're selling yourself short." John went to the recliner, sat down and cradled the mug. "For someone who's just starting out, this is a decent cup of Joe."
"That's what Terry said."

"Then Terry was right."

Terry smiled, and Maddie looked at her husband with a touch more respect that he hadn't just been kind.

Kind, yes, but also telling the truth.

Picking up his own mug, Terry took a seat on the couch to enjoy his own coffee while the women went into the kitchen to make breakfast. Terry was feeling good when he noticed John staring at something on the floor beside the couch. John smiled, took a sip from his mug and said nothing, but from the expression on John's face, Terry knew John was holding back.

Terry knew that face. It meant a potential ribbing that was being held back, for John didn't look that way and keep quiet for nothing.

Curious, Terry leaned forward.

The mug.

The one with the "World's Greatest Sweetheart" on the side? That mug.

John nodded, took another drink and looked philosophical. "I wonder if Izumi would ever get me one of those?"

Terry choked on his coffee and tried not to smile while John crossed his ankles and looked perfectly serious. So much so, Terry prayed his friend would cut it out. The mug hadn't been his idea, and John knew it. Which was why he was getting that look.

John finally broke into a grin, and Terry tried not to respond with one of his own. He failed miserably, but still. He tried.

"Is it all right if we have scrambled eggs this morning, instead of cereal?" someone asked from the kitchen.

Leaning down, Terry placed the sweetheart mug and his new stapler on the end table, beneath the now aging but still beautiful roses, so no one would trip over Maddie's thoughtfulness. He'd put them on his desk later, though the sweetness of the mug would take some getting used to.
"Terry?"

He looked up and saw Maddie staring at him from the kitchen doorway, her eyes happy and eager.

"Do you mind?" she asked.

"Mind what?"

"If I try scrambled eggs?"

"Sure. If that's what you want." He smiled as she went back into the kitchen. Maddie, it seemed, was bent on taking care of him-- coffee, scrambled eggs, or whatever else she thought he needed.

Settling back with his java, Terry took in the unusual feeling of not being alone anymore. Not that he'd been alone all this time, for he had John and the family, but that his personal space was no longer just his. It was also Maddie's. She owned a large piece of his space now, and Terry found comfort in that knowledge.

* * * *

Sundays weren't a big deal for Connor, just another day to get work done. He sent off the cheating husband report to his client, grabbed a hot coffee, a donut, then sat down to his laptop to sift through the leads Tim had sent.

There wasn't much to go on. Not much at all. Certainly nothing new since the last time he'd touched this case.

Blowing out a breath, Connor geared himself mentally for the task ahead. Everything was against him, including the family's former matriarch-- Tim and Madison's grandma. Grandma Billingsly had passed away years ago, but her presence was still strongly felt in Tim's life. The way Connor saw it, it was because of her that Tim couldn't find his half sister. Grandma had refused to tell Tim anything she knew of Madison's adopted family, she'd destroyed any remaining documents of Madison's former identity, and had withheld all information she could to the point of madness.

Tim didn't even have Madison's date of birth.
Some grandma. By all accounts, she'd been a nightmare of a woman, right up until the miserable day she'd died.

Tim had struck out with every adoption organization he'd contacted to help locate or find out something about his sister, and frankly, Connor didn't hold out much hope that he could do any better.

Setting aside his coffee, Connor pulled up a dated scan and stared at the child with the long blonde hair and haunting gray eyes.

"Where are you?" He looked at the small girl and wished he could somehow get her to talk to him. "Do something to show me where you are. Send up fireworks, put an ad in the paper. Something. He's looking for you."

Connor scrubbed his neck. That girl's thin, pallid face, and Tim's stubborn persistence wouldn't let him go. He would try again. Since all they had to go on was a name that hadn't been used for twenty-six years, that's what he would do. Search for Madison Jones, one more time.

One thing was for certain, she wasn't listed in any phone book. No such luck. To top it all off, Tim's sister would have a run-of-the-mill name like Jones, a name that wouldn't stand out from the other one and a half million Joneses in the US without a sign in flashing neon that shouted, "It's me!"

Oh, this case.

Propping his feet on the desk, Connor bit into the jelly donut. Instead of global searches, he'd break it down state by state, try it that way instead. More time consuming, yes, but he needed a fresh approach. Pick the states with the highest crime rates, be as thorough as possible, comb his databases and see what he could find.

He wouldn't find anything, but getting paid to ram his head against the wall was sometimes part of the job description. Besides, he didn't like giving up. Not trying.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, D.C. would be high on his list, also Delaware, Louisiana. Nevada. He'd go through his proprietary databases of public and nonpublic information until every lead was exhausted and he was back where he started.

Then he'd call up Madison's still-living relatives, get in their ear until they hung up and refused to accept his calls, knock on doors, interview old neighbors, and go over already turned ground.
until his prematurely graying hair was that much whiter. That was always the hardest part of this case, for there weren't many family members, neighbors, people who might've remembered Madison to begin with; they passed away, got older, couldn't remember, or simply didn't wish to remember someone so long gone as Madison.

She'd been adopted, so let it rest.

But Tim couldn't let it rest, and Connor would do it all one more time.

This was a wild goose chase if there ever was one, but Connor would run it one last time.

* * * *

Madison had been to church before, but it was the first time she'd been there as Mrs. Davis. The warning from last night that people would want to congratulate her, couldn't help but make her nervous. Terry was well-known in the area, even popular, so the congratulations made sense, but as Madison watched the trees speed by the van's middle passenger window on their drive to Sunday services, everything inside her felt like one tight worry-knot.

What if they didn't think she was good enough for Terry? She wasn't, but what if they saw how obviously she wasn't? Would they feel sorry for Terry?

Clutching the new Bible in her lap, she glanced to the seat beside her to soak in some courage from her husband. Terry was talking while John drove and Izzy added her comments from the passenger seat up front-- the three of them talking and finding an easy rhythm of discussion.

They were all such good friends, it was clear they got along well. Terry laughed as John turned into the church's parking lot.

What if everyone in that building didn't think they got along well with her? What if they thought she didn't belong with the family?

Nerves made her jump when Ruthie spoke up. Madison didn't hear what was said, but John answered, and Madison began to wish she'd made something else beside scrambled eggs for breakfast. Though Terry had eaten a great big helping of her cooking, it wasn't sitting well in her own stomach. It made Madison wonder if Izzy had another of those not-feeling well bags in her purse.
If they didn't think she was the right one for Terry, would they make trouble for Terry? If they didn't think she fit well with John and Izzy, would they say so? It wasn't as if Terry could easily undo this marriage.

Or maybe he could, but it wasn't something Madison wanted to even think about.

This had to work.

As Terry opened the van's side door, exhaust from the parking lot wafted in and mixed with Madison's woozy stomach. Oh, those crazy scrambled eggs.

"You okay?" Terry looked at her and she nodded. "Relax, okay? These are friends, they won't hurt you. If you can't handle all their kindness, just smile and keep looking like you do right now. I'll handle the rest."

"How do I look right now?"

"Like you're about to lose breakfast." Terry helped her outside, squeezed her hand as John came around and started to unbuckle the girls from their boosters in the back. "I know you were abandoned in the past, so if it'll help you relax, I give my word that I won't leave here without you."

"Thanks, I know you won't." She hugged his arm and he smiled. "Could I have your phone?"

"Don't tell me the promise wasn't enough?" He took out his phone, then nodded in understanding when she turned on the notes app and started to read over their verses as AJ's truck pulled up with Ricky. "You're doing good, Maddie. Keep going."

"If she feels sick..." Izzy passed Terry a sick-bag, and Terry pushed it into Madison's purse. Just in case.

Madison grabbed Terry's hand as AJ got out of their truck. They waited for Jake to get Ricky out of his booster, then Madison teetered as they all started toward the church's entrance.

Her stomach went a little crazy as someone approached.

"Good morning, Doc." Terry exchanged smiles with the man while Madison fought to keep from staring at the carpet.
"I've been hearing things." The man looked at Madison, at their ring fingers, then shook his head with an even bigger grin. "Then it's true."

"We got married," Terry nodded.

Madison wondered if Terry had ever mentioned who this man was. She'd been to church before, but there had been so many faces, and this man was obviously a good friend. So Terry must have. Then the man extended a hand, and Madison found herself shaking it with a wobbly smile.

"I'm Dr. Gregory, and I'd like to be among the first to congratulate the bride."

"Thank you."

"God has blessed you greatly. Your husband is a good man."

"Oh, isn't he? Terry's just wonderful."

Dr. Gregory smiled, and Terry studied the floor and said nothing until the pastor came and shook Terry's hand.

As Dr. Gregory left, Pastor Bill moved closer and settled in.

"They got married," John smiled.

Pastor Bill nodded to Izzy as Izzy went off somewhere to take the munchkins to where the other kids were. "So I heard-- I can't remember who called first with the news, but it's all over Three Mile Bay. Congratulations, and God's blessings to you both!" Pastor Bill looked like he thought he should give Madison a hug, but when he didn't, Madison felt nothing but relief. "When I presided over Brian and Emily's wedding last Friday, Brian told me all about the legal necessity for you to go out of state. I'm just grateful the Lord provided a way. 'I being in the way, the Lord led me.'"

"Amen," Jake nodded, as someone moved past their family and paused to hug Terry.

Before she knew it, Madison was caught up in a two-armed, backslapping hug, congratulated, then hugged again. She didn't know the stranger, but the stranger sure knew Terry.

Terry put an arm around her shoulder, and she hoped it would be enough to keep it from easily happening again.
"What day was the wedding? Friday, right?" Pastor Bill nodded. "Do you realize that both you and Madison, and Brian and Emily were married on the same day? From now on, you'll share the same wedding anniversaries."

"I never thought of that, but you're right." Terry smiled as a couple approached them, and Madison stepped closer into Terry to get out of the hug that came her way.

Putting her hand out there so they would shake it, didn't always work. They were so fast, she often got hugs instead. It wasn't easy to cope with being handled so much, though they meant well.

When the flow of traffic had died down some, and Izzy had come back, Pastor Bill looked at the time and started to walk away.

"I don't suppose you need any furniture to set up housekeeping?" Pastor Bill paused, smiled at her and Terry. "I know you'll be living with John and Izumi, so you probably don't need anything. I only ask because one of our congregation moved away last week, and I was left in charge of finding homes for all the things she couldn't take. I still have several pieces of furniture sitting in my garage."

Clamping down on her bottom lip, Madison tugged on Terry's arm.

"Any couches?" Terry asked.

"There is-- a sofa that's seen better days, so I wouldn't necessarily recommend anyone taking it unless you plan on maybe doing some reupholstering. But I'm told the cushions were recently re-stuffed, or whatever they call it when you put in new foam." Pastor Bill smiled. "Are you really interested?"

Madison squeezed Terry's arm, and Terry nodded.

"Okay, I'll make sure no one else hauls it off." Pastor Bill checked his congregation. "I'd better go, but come by tomorrow and you and Madison can see it for yourself. If you still want it, it's yours."

"Thank you," Madison said quietly.

Maybe she should have kept silent, for Pastor Bill looked at her a moment, as if wondering why a couch should mean so much to her.
"The Lord will provide for our needs," the pastor smiled, and left Madison to breathe a sigh of relief that he didn't ask any questions about why they should have that particular need.

It probably did seem a little odd that Terry, who had a fully furnished apartment, should need another couch. But they did. In fact, the one from Pastor Bill wouldn't be enough. They would need another.

"One down," Terry whispered in Madison's ear.

She nodded, and stared at the carpet as they moved to their pew. Eyes could touch, for she could feel the polite sensation on her skin as she sat down, then crammed against Terry's side. Please, she didn't want anyone else to hug her. Her mouth felt sore from smiling so much, her nerves strained from keeping herself from bolting from the church like the crazy lunatic she didn't want to be.

She was Terry's wife now, and if she did that, it would hurt Terry in front of all his friends.

Running wasn't an option.

All through the service she imagined people staring at her, and whenever she chanced to look up, someone would catch her eye, and smile at her, and down she'd go—staring at her Bible again. It was a good service, she enjoyed the message, if only her shyness didn't get in the way.

She silently prayed for help, and when she needed even more courage, she sought Terry's hand.

He gave her an encouraging smile, and as she was just getting the hang of breathing and looking up at the pastor, the service ended, and then it was time to brave the people again. The well-wishers who had missed them before, now had their chance, and it seemed no one wanted to be left out.

Terry had said if she couldn't handle it, to smile and look as she had in the parking lot. Problem was, she didn't have a mirror, so how could she look that way again? Was she smiling? Her face felt so numb, she couldn't be sure anymore.

Terry's arm slipped back around her shoulder, and it kindly got in the way of letting people hug her. Abby came to her other side, Izzy and John kept close, and with family on either side, Madison was able to breathe again. Jake remained close to Abby, people talked, and as the conversation flowed around them, Madison picked up their curiosity over one point in particular.
Why had they needed to go to Las Vegas, when they could have more easily married here? Yes, they knew about the church wedding, but why not just have one wedding instead of two?

Because Madison didn't have enough ID.

The answer was met with mostly kind looks, but one man asked why. His wife bumped him in the arm and the man quickly changed subjects.

By the time John had gotten the kids and everyone was filing into the parking lot, Madison felt drained of energy. She wanted to lay down on the pavement and close her eyes, never mind the exhaust from all the cars and the fact it made her stomach roll.

"You did good, Maddie." Terry helped her into the minivan. "The initial wave of surprise is over, so I'm guessing it'll get easier after this."

"Terry--" Madison watched as he and John loaded the girls into the back--"you never told them why I didn't have enough ID."

"Unless you want them to, they don't need to know." Terry buckled in the triplets and kept talking. "I'm not ashamed of you, Maddie--if you want me to tell them, then I will. Otherwise, they don't need to know any more than what they've already guessed."

"Pastor Bill knows about me?"

"He does." Terry waited as John stepped away from the side door, then Terry slid the door shut. "He doesn't know about the couches, but he knows of your past. I told you I talked to him, remember?"

She nodded.

"With the kind of volunteer work I've done at the crisis hotline, everyone can guess you're a survivor. That's why no one really asked more than they did. They've already guessed." Terry clicked on his seat belt as John climbed behind the wheel. "They hadn't expected Las Vegas, so it's only natural they were surprised."

"Are you sorry--""

"Don't even think it." Terry claimed her hand, pressed a kiss to her fingers and she couldn't help smiling. "I'm not sorry I married you."
"I was going to ask if you were sorry we asked Pastor Bill about the couch. He might ask why we want it."

"Then I’ll tell him." Terry shrugged. "He’s the soul of discretion, so I’m not concerned."

"Why do we want a couch?" a small voice asked from the back. "Are we getting rid of ours?"

Terry shook his head and smiled. "Small ears," he sighed.

"Who wants ice cream after lunch?" Izzy asked from up front, and the munchkins all shouted at the same time,

"Me!"

That ended the couch question.

Resting her head on Terry's shoulder, Madison felt the gentle strength of Terry's fingers, the warmth of his hand, and bit by bit, the strain of the morning began to melt away.

"One day at a time," he breathed.

She moved her head, looked up into those deep brown eyes, and he smiled.

Not trusting to kiss him in the rear view mirror where John could see, Madison buried her face in Terry's shirt and held Terry's hand.

"Dr. Gregory was right--" Madison closed her eyes, and heard Terry sigh as she caressed Terry's fingers-- "I am blessed. My husband is good, and kind, and I love him so much."

A kiss touched her forehead.

"Doc didn’t say all that, but thank you."

Madison smiled. She didn’t have to open her eyes to know Terry was wincing with embarrassment, or read his mind to know he wanted to steer the conversation away from himself. If she wasn’t so worn out, she would tease him a bit, (maybe), but instead she squeezed his hand and enjoyed the girls' chatter in the back seat.

* * * *
No matter how Maddie might’ve felt she’d done at church, Terry thought it had gone over fairly well. She’d looked a little queasy—sure—but she hadn’t stopped shaking hands and her smile hadn’t slipped by much. That counted for a lot, and it had counted with the people at church.

Her courage hadn’t gone unnoticed.

The minivan pulled off the main road, the familiar sound of gravel crunching beneath tires welcoming them home. Not quite as welcome was the car waiting out front. Terry’s heart sank a few inches when he recognized Lauren getting out of the driver’s side.

John shut off the engine. "I don't remember seeing her in church, do you?"

"No, but with our news all over Three Mile Bay, I guess it’s no wonder she's turning up at our place."

"Hush, you two." Izzy looked at John, then Terry.

"We’re in the van," John reasoned. "She can't hear us with the windows rolled up and the doors closed."

"The girls," Izzy whispered, and Terry groaned.

After the busy morning he and Maddie had just had, Terry wasn’t in the mood for his building superintendent. Not Lauren and her nosing around into his life. Not too long ago, Lauren had infamously told Emily that Emily shouldn’t worry about all the gossip about Terry, that Emily had no reason to doubt Terry’s heart. Lauren had said it in the presence of everyone at church, and Terry could only guess that his marrying Madison, and Brian’s marrying Emily, had probably not gone over too well with Lauren.

Getting out of her car, Lauren waved to them with a bright congratulatory smile, and Terry sucked in a breath.

"Try to stay with Izzy," he told Maddie.

When Maddie nodded that she would, Terry slid open the door. He zipped up his coat, got out and put on a smile as he went to the car to greet Lauren.

"Why didn't you call me with the news?" Lauren opened her arms wide for a hug. "I had to hear it from Lydia—she called from church—and then of course she couldn't stop talking because she'd heard it before I did. Really, Terry, I shouldn't forgive you." Lauren sounded severe, but
when Terry stepped back from their hug, his super was smiling and pushing the hair from her eyes.

"Sorry about that. The trip was short notice, so I think we surprised just about everyone." Terry smiled. "Thanks for dropping by." He followed Lauren's gaze to the minivan as Maddie got out.

"Terry, I can see her diamond all the way from here."

"I'll let you in on a secret--" Terry lowered his voice as though he were about to divulge some great thing, and Lauren's eyes lit up with delight-- "Maddie would have settled for much less, but I was the hold out."

Lauren blew out a laugh and swatted him away. "That sounds like you."

AJ's truck pulled past them, heading toward the yellow house, and Jake and Ricky returned Lauren's wave.

"Did you take Pastor Bill's couch?" Lauren turned to Terry. "Lydia didn't hear all the conversation, but she said she thought you were going to take it. I can't imagine why though. I'd think you have enough couches, already."

Terry sighed. Lauren wasn't even in church today, and yet she still knew what went on.

"The reason I ask is because Mr. Davidson in apartment nine is trying to sell off some second-hand things, including a couch. When he came by to pay his rent, he mentioned it. If you need one, you might try him before taking Pastor Bill's free trash. Mr. Davidson's furniture is relatively new, and I dare say in better condition." Lauren folded her arms. "So are you interested?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I am."

"Then I'll tell him you'll come by in a few days."

"Tomorrow," Terry nodded. "Thanks, Lauren."

"I can't believe you didn't tell me."

"I'll make it up to you by making sure our wedding here in the area, is a nice one." Terry smiled, and Lauren looked at him askance. "You and Ralph are most definitely invited."
"Who's planning it?" Lauren asked, and nodded when she heard Izzy's name. "Tell her to call me if she needs help."

"Thank you, I will."

The conversation winding down, Lauren climbed back in her car. She rolled down her window, and Terry stepped close.

"Ralph found the sealant you bought and had stored in the shed, so I had him seal the power washed bricks on your apartment. I hope you don't mind. It should be dry and ready in time for the rain forecasted for this afternoon."

"The bricks." Terry looked up at the gathering clouds. "I admit there's been a lot on my mind. I'd forgotten all about that."

"That's what I thought." Lauren laughed and started up her car.

"Please thank Ralph for me." Terry looked back at his super. "And thank you for thinking of it. That could have damaged the building."

Lauren smiled, and Terry promised to make sure she got that invitation to the wedding. As she pulled onto the main road, he thanked God for the measure of peace he had with his building superintendent. Though Lauren worked for him, he didn't want to be her enemy, and it went without saying that she was good at what she did. When she wanted to, Lauren could be thoughtful as well, as she'd just proven. As long as they were both willing, they could get along well enough.

Terry headed into the house, and smiled when he stepped into the living room only to smell lunch cooking.

From the recliner, John muted the TV and looked to Terry.

"She and Ralph sealed the power washed bricks for me." Terry took off his coat, stepped around Lizzie and took a seat on the couch. "That was nice of them, wasn't it? Did Jake call the Doyles like he said he would? Do they know about Maddie and I going to Vegas?"

"Yeah, that was nice of them, and yes. Jake called. Why do you ask?"

"Lauren was miffed I didn't call her, and I just wanted to make certain Dick and Sara had been told." Terry sighed, rubbed his face and then smiled. "Before I forget-- it looks like God is
providing a second couch. Lauren told me about one of my tenants who's selling some of his furniture. She didn't say why, though I hope it's not because he's planning on moving out."

"You found a second couch?" Maddie came from the kitchen in one of Izzy's aprons. "When can we move the bed out of your room?"

"Not today." Terry held up his hands. "It's Sunday, but tomorrow, before John and I go to pick up the couches, we'll take out the bed." Terry pointed to the little girl seated on the carpet. "Please keep all this to yourself. This is a family matter, okay?"

"Lizzie," John backed up the request, "your uncle means that. Remember the talk I had with you about discretion? Well, this goes with that."

Discretion was a big word for such small munchkins, but Lizzie nodded that she understood and went back to her play. Whether she understood the word or not, Terry was pretty sure she knew she wasn't supposed to repeat what she had heard.

"When tomorrow?" Maddie pressed.

"Early enough to get a good start on the day."

"Izzy said it's going to rain this afternoon through most of next week."

"We'll manage." Terry saw Maddie wring the apron in nervous excitement. "Take it easy, it'll get done."

"Promise?"

"Maddie, I want this too."

"This isn't for--" Maddie looked at the girl on the floor--"for what I'm not ready for yet."

"I know that, but we can't do much K-I-S-S-I-N-G until we have our own room. I understand what's at stake. I'll have two in there tomorrow if I have to handcraft and upholster them, myself."

Maddie hugged her middle, gave him a heart-pulling smile, and went back to the kitchen.
By now, John was watching his program with the volume turned low so it wouldn't interfere with their conversation. When Maddie left, John turned it up, and the men fell into silence while Terry's heart swayed in Maddie's absence.

That woman had him in the palm of her hand, and Terry had a hunch she knew it.

Sucking in some air, Terry watched TV while hungry smells came from the kitchen. They would enjoy the rest of their Sunday and give Three Mile Bay a chance to adjust to the news of their marriage. Then tomorrow, they would work.

Their own room, a private space for just them. Terry could hardly wait.

* * * *

He wasn't surprised. Why should he be? He'd been through this before, and she'd been a no-show before, so why should now be any different?

Connor hurled a notepad across the room and got no satisfaction when it bounced off the wall.

He didn't lose his patience often, but his nerves were wearing thin and after a full Sunday's work he had nothing to show for it but heartburn and a bad case of eye strain. He'd gone over Delaware and found what he had expected-- a whole lot of nothing. Same with D.C. Knee deep in Louisiana and fast losing momentum, Connor pushed away from the desk to take some much needed time out.

He should be turning in, but he couldn't sleep. Not with six cups of coffee and a few candy bars banging away in his system.

Forget that break, he had to work.

Grabbing the cold remnants of coffee number six, Connor moved to the desk to finish Louisiana. His gut told him she wasn't there, but at five in the morning his gut would say just about anything.

He drained the mug, kept working until his eyes blurred and felt like sandpaper.

Scratch off Louisiana.

Again.
She could be there of course, but he couldn't find her in any database.

It was like chasing a ghost. A dead woman. This from his gut, and since neither of them had gotten any sleep in the past twenty-four hours, Connor got up for coffee number seven.

He checked the clock. Man, he was losing track of the time.

Seven thirty on a Monday morning and he was getting his seventh cup. There had to be some sort of significance there, or maybe it was just a sign of how much his brain had fried over all that caffeine and those long hours. He wasn't thirty anymore, he couldn't pull the all-nighters like he used to. His body felt every bit his forty years, and Connor was beginning to regret the lack of sleep.

Dumping in some cream, he passed on the sugar and went back to the desk.

On to the next no-show. Nevada. He researched the databases, then switched over to the Clark County's website to finish up in the city of Las Vegas. With all the chronic I-do's going on in Vegas, their marriage records were updated at the furious rate of instantly. His proprietary databases couldn't keep up with instant, and there was no way he could afford to ignore such an information hotspot as that. When it came to Las Vegas, he always did a special search.

He typed in her name, sat back with number seven.

And gagged on his coffee.

That couldn't be right.

He read the screen again and wondered whether sleep deprivation or plain wishful thinking were getting the better of him. Maybe his eyes weren't working.

It had to be his eyes.

That couldn't be what it said. He read it carefully, letter for letter and word for word. Then he sat there like he'd been turned to a dumb block of wood. It couldn't be her. Chances were high it wasn't. Coming to life, he shoved aside the mug and opened the file where he kept a list of the previous dead ends, the names that had come up as matches but hadn't been her.

This one was new.

Connor's heart pumped up a notch.
He studied the record from the Clark County's website, leaned close to the laptop screen and realized it had been entered that very morning. In fact, its time and date were only a few hours old. Connor brought up the record and felt his gut start to talk when he saw a marriage date of October seventh.

Seven again.

Sleep or no sleep, he had a hard time discounting his gut.

Before he called Tim with this new lead, Connor wanted to check out the groom's name and see what he could find. Las Vegas was a destination, people came there from all over the country to get married, so chances were they didn't live there. Whoever the bride might be, Connor now had a second name-- Terry Edward Davis-- to work with.

A more solid lead.

The bride might be near impossible to find, but Connor had a hunch the groom wouldn't be as difficult.

Most people left a trail.

No longer needing coffee to keep him wide-awake, Connor went to work.

* * * *

"Can I look now?" Madison was dying to look but Terry wouldn't let her.

"Not yet," came the strained reply, along with shuffled feet noises and the sounds of children as they moved about and called to Terry and John.

"Girls, stay out of the way," John ordered. "Izumi, get them out of the hall-- we're almost through the doorway."

Madison stayed in the office even though she wanted like crazy to see. The men were carrying Terry's old mattress from his room, and it was so exciting. When it was gone, she could go in there. His room. Terry's room. It would soon be hers, just as soon as the dreaded bed was gone.

"Izumi--"
"They're out of the way, John."

"This thing is only a twin, but I hafta say-- it's heavy." John grunted, and Madison resisted looking around the office door and into the hallway. "Either they're making them heavier, or I'm getting older. I hate to say which."

She could hear the men passing, and moved back as the office door bumped a little.

"Izumi, the plastic cover?"

Izzy hurried by, and Madison wished she could be useful.

She strained to listen, smiled at the girls as they came to the office door and looked in. They waited together until the back door sounded, then Ruthie ran off to see what was going on.

A moment later she came back.

"They're gone!"

Madison ventured into the hall, her heart beating so fast she had a hard time keeping it in her chest. She hadn't gotten much sleep last night for all the excitement of the move, and sitting still for breakfast had been impossible. Biting her lip, she looked to the girls, who seemed a bit confused that she should be so excited about moving out a bed.

Taking a step toward Terry's room, Madison stopped. The box springs and bedstead were still in there, but oh, how she wanted to go inside.

The hotel suite had taught her how wonderful it could be to have a small space with Terry, and she wanted another taste of that as soon as possible. If Terry had known how badly, he would've skipped breakfast.

"Coming through." Terry smiled when he saw Madison, and nodded as she backed into the office. "It's starting to rain again."

She groaned when she noticed the splat marks on his coat. "Oh, Terry."

"We'll just use plastic covers," he grinned, and shooed the munchkins out of his way. "John, the box springs won't be as hard to manage through the hall, but I'm thinking those couches are going to be tricky."
Madison ducked back into the office, and Ruthie came to hide with her.

"You're fun," Ruthie smiled up at Madison.

"I'm glad you think so."

"Izumi, where's the plastic?" John called.

It didn't take long for Izzy to come down the hall with something that rustled.

Some banging made Ruthie jump, and she looked at Madison. Though the child could go see what was going on, Madison sensed it was more exciting for Ruthie to hide and guess.

"We'll need to take the door off its hinges later on," John grunted as his voice moved into the hall. "It's going to get in the way."

Madison heard footsteps, then Ruthie peeked around the office door. The girl left after a few moments, then came back with her sister Debbie.

"They're gone again."

"I have to wait here a little longer," Madison smiled, and Ruthie returned to her spot like they were playing a game that wasn't over.

"They're coming back, and Uncle Terry's carrying a tool chest," Debbie said from the office door.

"Don't tell them we're in here," Ruthie whispered.

"They already know."

"Then why are we hiding?"

Debbie shrugged, kept her watch at the door, and when the men passed, she left the office to Ruthie and Madison.

Ruthie sighed, the hiding game having lost some of its appeal.

"You can go," Madison told the girl.

"What about you?"
"I'll leave when they're done taking the bed apart."

"Do you want me to tell you?"

"Thanks, that would be nice."

Ruthie ran from the office while Madison waited. She knew Terry would tell her when it was safe to go in the bedroom, but it was very sweet of Ruthie to offer. She longed for the day when she would be normal, or at least when she wouldn't have to be wary of triggering flashbacks because of beds and mattresses. That would happen, wouldn't it? She would one day be normal enough to look at a bed and be fine?

Madison prayed it would be true.

She listened hard, heard pounding, the clanking of metal, then footsteps as John's voice moved down the hall.

"It's gone!" Ruthie called, and Madison couldn't leave the office fast enough.

She pushed into the hall, hugged herself as she went to Terry's doorway, sucked in a deep breath and peeked inside.

Terry was kneeling on the carpet, picking up things that had been under his bed while the munchkins collected large dust bunnies. Izzy wheeled in a vacuum cleaner, saw Madison, and smiled.

"It looks bigger in here without a mattress."

"Please, can I do that? It's the least I can do to help." Madison moved to the vacuum and Izzy let her take over. "So this is Terry's bedroom?"

Terry looked up and grinned.

"You were expecting more?"

Fumbling with the vacuum cleaner cord, Madison felt a little embarrassed.

"Maddie, go ahead and talk. You were expecting something different?"
She nodded quickly. "There's nothing on the walls, and except for the dresser, the room's empty. It's almost like you're not really here."

"Well, this is the guest room, so I've tried not to move in too completely."

"Was the guest room," Izzy put in. "A long time ago. It's yours, Terry, and now it's Madison's. Move in-- please, move in." Izzy gave Terry a look, and Terry nodded in agreement. "Paint the walls, change the carpet, do whatever you want. You've been a fixture in this family for far too long, to be standing on so much ceremony."

"Thanks," Terry smiled. "I always figured I'd settled down, or at least I had in temperament, but now with Maddie in my life, I can see I was wrong. I'm cozying in for the long haul."

Madison couldn't look at Terry, but bit her lip to keep from rushing him with a kiss.

"Mommy, look-- we're building a bunny." Lizzie packed the dust with her hands to make ears, while Debbie worked on its body.

"Okay, let's go, so Aunt Madison can vacuum." Izzy coaxed her brood off the floor as John rounded into the bedroom. "John, your coat's wet through."

"That's because the rain's picking up." John shook off his wife's concern. "Until we find someone to take that bed off our hands, we've got it stored in the back of the garage where it's out of the way. Maybe we could donate it to charity. It's certainly in good enough condition."

"Please, put on something that will turn water better than that." Izzy went with her husband into the hall and their children followed. "I want you to change your coat."

"I'll change, but only if Terry does too." John laughed, and Terry called out that he would.

That was good, for Madison didn't want them to catch cold.

She turned on the vacuum, the loud sound echoing off the walls and filling the empty room so much it nearly hurt her ears. She pushed and tugged it across the carpet, very much aware that this was going to be her home now. It made her so happy to know that. It was like all the nicest feelings in the world, all rolled up into one wonderfully ordinary gift. This was just a very rainy day, and she was vacuuming a nothing special carpet, but this was her life. She was alive, she got to belong to Terry, they were a part of this family, and now she got to hide with him in this room. One blessing rolled after another, and they all came from above.
As the others moved further down the hall, Terry got up from the floor, stored some things in the closet, then went to the bedroom door. Madison saw him pause and look at her, as if asking for permission to close it. "May I?" was in his eyes, and she nodded what she hoped was an emphatic "Yes!"

She turned off the vacuum.

The moment the door clicked shut and they were alone, she went to Terry.

"Maddie--" he breathed her name, but she stopped him from speaking and kissed his mouth.

It was too much, she was going too fast.

She knew it, and somehow so did Terry, for his hands eased around her shoulders and gently pulled her away. He kissed her lips, a small nibble that stopped her tears before they even started, and she leaned into his chest and hid herself in his damp coat.

"I love you, Terry."

"I never get tired of hearing that." He rubbed her arm. "Do whatever you want with our room, but make it ours."

She looked up at him, and kissed his handsome mouth-- this time much slower and more controlled than before. It seemed worse for Terry, for he pulled away and steadied himself before looking at her.

"Too slow?" she asked, and Terry nodded.

"We'll get this right," he breathed, "but not this morning. John's probably waiting for me right now. We're going to rent a moving truck, then buy Mr. Davidson's couch."

"What if it won't fit in here? What'll we do?"

"Don't worry, I'll know beforehand if it'll fit or not. I have the measurements with me, and if it won't work, then John and I will go to a furniture store."

Content, she hugged Terry's shoulder.
"I need to put on my raincoat." He kissed her nose, and she leaned in and kissed his. Terry broke into a lopsided grin, thumped a hand over his heart and sighed. "I love you right back, Maddie. I love you right back."

It was the simplicity of his love that got to her. It wasn't fancy, just straightforward and honest, like him. This was Terry, and it made Madison love him all the more.

She watched as he went to the closet.

"Half the space in here is yours-- more than half if you need it." Terry pulled out a long coat, then went to the dresser and grabbed a sweatshirt. "Feel free to go through things, and push stuff aside to make room for yourself."

"The Dragon would never say that to me, never in a million years." Madison hugged herself as he took off his damp coat, then pulled the sweatshirt over his head. "You're so different from him, Terry."

"Thanks," Terry grinned. "That's a big compliment." He got into his raincoat, put on some rubber boots, then hung his coat in the bathroom to dry. "I'll let you know if we run into any problems. You have your phone? Call if you need me, and don't forget we have an appointment with Carol this evening."

"I won't forget." Madison hugged Terry's arm as they moved to the bedroom door. "Thank you for being you, Terry."

"If I wasn't me, who else would I be?"

"You could be someone else, and then none of this would be happening." Madison squeezed Terry's arm to be sure he understood. "I wouldn't be moving into this room with just anyone, and I wouldn't have married you if you weren't you."

"Maddie, I feel the same way about you." He gave her a kiss, then opened the door, and it only made her hold onto him harder. "If I don't leave now, I never will," he whispered.

She let him go and was rewarded with a touch on the cheek. Her hand went to his, and Terry sighed.

He had the nicest chocolate brown eyes.

"Hey, Buddy." John came down the hall in his raincoat and squeaking boots. "You ready?"
"Yeah," Terry moved away, and Madison followed after him as he and John went into the living room. Terry looked at her, gave her a smile just between them, then went out the door as John called out to Izzy that they were taking the car.

Madison moved to the nearest window to watch Terry until their car disappeared onto the road behind the trees and the rain. The girls were busy with each other and with their momma, but Madison wasn't ready to leave the window just yet.

The phone in Madison’s pocket rang.

She pulled it out and her heart tumbled for joy when she saw Terry’s name on the screen.

"Terry?"

"Maddie, are you still at the window?"

"I--" She carefully stepped away. "Not anymore."

"Good. Then I can stop picturing you there, and get my mind back on the move. I’ll see you later." He hung up, the smile in his voice having left a warm hug around her heart.

Her insides danced with joy as she put the phone back in her pocket. He’d made her feel special, even though she wasn't special at all.

She would do her best for Terry, she would vacuum that room so clean he would think someone had put down new carpet. Her heart full to brimming over, Madison went back to their room, turned on the vacuum and attacked those dust bunnies with a vengeance.

Terry would be so proud of her.

When she'd vacuumed the carpet so many times she was afraid of hurting it, she turned off the machine and turned her attention to the dresser. Taking Izzy's feather duster, Madison went over Terry's things, trying not to disturb anything but the fine layer of dust.

There were cuff links—gold ones. They had his initials in fancy letters. The duster moved over a photo frame of John, Izzy, and Abby as a little girl. Smaller, Abby had more of John's face, though her eyes had always been her mother’s. Another family photo, this one with everyone and the triplets, and yet another of when the triplets were tiny babies. Cute tiny girls with big
smiles. A comb, a folded piece of paper-- the duster went over those, too, and Madison lingered, curious what the paper said.

T erry had told her it was all right to go through things. Would it be all right to just see what the paper was?

She looked about, saw no one, and edged up the corner.

It was a receipt, nothing more. Still, she was glad to be this close to him. Curious about the dresser, she opened the top drawer. Underthings. She slapped the drawer shut.

Maybe being this close wasn't so good.

She tried the second drawer and found socks and handkerchiefs, and here, she felt safe. Here, she could move in.

Excited, Madison rounded into the living room and collected her sweet picture frame with her and T erry. She went back to the dresser, arranged the frame among the others and was delighted when it fit. Like she belonged. Like God had made a place for her and she was in it. Like she was home.

Heart pounding, Madison limp-raced to the office bathroom. She picked out the grocery bags with her clothes, then carried them into the hall as Izzy came out of the girls' room.

"Doing all right?" Izzy asked, and Madison nodded.

Izzy smiled and went about whatever she was doing, and Madison returned to her new room and to the open dresser drawer. She pulled out her underthings, knew T erry would be as sensitive about them as she had been about the top drawer and decided his socks and handkerchiefs had to go.

They couldn't share that second drawer.

The socks went into the third drawer with his jeans and some other clothes, and the handkerchiefs she carefully stuffed into the fourth, with his sweaters.

That gave her the second for herself, and it fit all the clothes she had, with room to spare. So much room, she spread out her things a little so it filled the drawer and made it seem like she had more than she did. Just in case T erry should look and feel bad that it was so empty. She didn't mind though. She was the richest woman in the world, in her heart.
With a flourish, she set her hairbrush on the dresser. Looked it over, then scooted it beside Terry's comb.

They belonged together. Just like her and Terry.

She had clothes in the laundry from their trip, but she could hang up her coat in Terry's closet. And she could pull out some things from the drawer and put them on hangers even though it would make the drawer emptier.

Then Madison remembered her gifts— the Terri doll, her teddy bear, the jar candle, and bath things, and hurried back to the bathroom to add them to the drawer. She put in her spiral notebook and her Jane Austen and made the second drawer her treasure drawer as well, and then it was no longer empty.

The only thing she couldn't put in were her poor roses.

She went to the closet, peeked inside as rain sounded on the roof. Shoes were tucked into a neat organizer at her feet, and off to the side sat a box with fishing things, along with a tall stack of books. They were mostly about fishing, but she saw several titles that looked like they had to do with science fiction and technology. Boxes sat on a shelf high above her head, many of them labeled "Terry's."

Along with the smell of clean laundry, she could just make out a trace of Terry's scent in that closet. She moved close to a jacket and smiled. Did love do this to you, or was this normal?

It was then she noticed that the clothes were organized by type, and that they all hung in the same direction. She ran her hand over the fabric and wished their owner were here. All this organization meant Terry liked things a certain way, and she hoped he wouldn't mind that his handkerchiefs were now in with his sweaters.

Some cloth bags hung at one end of the closet, and curious, she opened one. It was a pressed suit, and the next bag held a dark one— maybe a tuxedo. There were at least three or four suits and a tuxedo neatly organized with "Gone Fishin" T-shirts that made her smile and remember that even though Terry was in business, he was still approachable. He was still hers.

Getting her coat, Madison tucked it into the closet. Maybe when it came out, it would come out smelling like him. Then she could imagine it was him keeping her warm, and not the coat.
Taking what she could from her drawer and putting them on hangers, Madison daydreamed of Terry.

* * * *

Connor’s head jerked back as he read the home address from his laptop. Finding the groom on the Las Vegas marriage record had meant taking the next step of going into other databases, and that had been easy. Terry Davis wasn’t a ghost—he’d been a cinch to find, but what Connor hadn’t counted on was this home address.

New York State. What were the chances of finding a lead in Nevada, and then of it bringing him back here? Of all places?

Adrenaline made his heart race.

It had to be a coincidence. A random lightning strike. It couldn’t be her.

She’d been adopted, her name had likely been changed twenty-six years ago, so it wasn’t her.

No way was it her. No way.

Connor picked up the phone. He needed to call his client, though he knew enough of Tim to know this wouldn’t help things. Connor already had trouble getting Tim to keep things in perspective, and this—this wouldn’t help.

He glanced at the time, winced, but punched Tim’s number anyway. If he got voicemail, then so be it, he’d at least be on record that he’d tried to call.

In typical Tim fashion, the number answered on the first ring.

"What’d you find?"

"How do you know I found anything?"

"You’re calling me at work."

"Sorry about that--"

"Forget it, what did you find?"
Connor blew out a breath and wondered if he should've stalled for more time before he made this call. Tim was so excitable. His client had wanted to be kept in the loop though...

"Tim, you'd better sit down."

A loud thud sounded, something slammed into the phone.

"Tim? Tim, are you there?" Connor heard footsteps, a voice shouted something, then the groggy moan of pain. "Hey, Tim? Are you all right?" Connor waited, wondering what in the world was going on until he heard the phone scraping against something, then someone's labored breath.

A voice in the distance said Tim's name.

"I'm okay."

"Tim?" Connor waited, realizing Tim was speaking to someone else.

"It's nothing-- no, I don't need the emergency room. It'll stop bleeding in a moment. Connor, are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm still here. What happened?"

"I-- I guess I blacked out."


"What were you about to tell me? You found her, didn't you? That's why you wanted me to sit down."

"Now Tim, I want you to keep things in perspective. It's probably not her. I can't stress that enough. The chances of it being her are so low, I can't even believe I'm bothering to call you." That wasn't true, but with Tim, Connor wanted to play it safe before the guy passed out again.

"Then why are you calling me at work? You've never done that before. It's her, isn't it? Tell me what you have."

"A Las Vegas marriage record for Madison Olivia Jones."

"It said Olivia?"
"It did. That’s what got my attention, too. Finding a Madison Jones is much more common than getting all three. But we’ve had that before. That’s not all I found out--"

"I’m all right--" Tim sounded agitated and distracted, and Connor waited until they could talk again. "I don't have any concussion, thanks. *Please, this is an important call.*" A heavy breath blew across the phone, then Tim's voice wavered back. "She was adopted."

"I know. It’s probably not her, but I ran down the groom's name anyway. Tim, they live in New York State."

"Oh, man. Oh, man. Oh, man." Tim was hyperventilating, and Connor kicked himself for not better preparing Tim for that news.

"It doesn't mean it’s her. I will admit though," Connor winced as he heard the words come from his own mouth, "it is interesting."

"What’s his name? What’s her husband's name?"

"Before I tell you-- I'd like to remind you of our plan. Remember what we agreed to the first time you hired me five years ago?"

"Six years. Yeah, I remember. You make contact first so I don't scare her. I wouldn't scare her, though. She's my *sister.*" Frustration sounded in Tim's voice. "Tell me the husband's name."

"Are you going to call him?"

"No. I'll let you make first contact."

Connor hesitated. "The marriage record gives the groom's name as Terry Edward Davis. I ran him through my databases and he's living in Upstate New York."

"You're kidding."

"I wouldn't joke with you-- not over this." Connor sensed the tension, the coiled up, tensed up hope of his client, and tried not to let it affect his own judgment. "It's up near the Canadian border, someplace called Three Mile Bay."

"I'm not familiar with that area."
"It's a small place. I looked it up, and it happens to be an hour and a half north of where you live."

Absolute stunned silence.

"Don't go there, Tim. Let me make first contact. Let's stick with the plan and not go off half-cocked."

"I can't believe she's here."

"She might not be. It might not be her."

"It is. I can feel it."

Connor was silent.

"I need to get back to work, but please-- PLEASE, call me the second you talk to them. I want to know every word they said, especially her."

"I will."

"Will you call them today?"

"Just as soon as we get off the phone."

"Then I'm hanging up." Tim sounded wired, a nervous kind of excitement that Connor tried hard to fend off. "I'm telling Karen the good news."

Before Connor could warn Tim that the good news might turn out to be another dead end, Tim hung up. Man, Connor wished Tim would learn to calm down. At least Connor had tried to warn him.

Not wanting to put it off a moment longer for Tim's sake, Connor collected his thoughts, punched in Terry Davis' number, sat back in his chair and breathed deep.

When voicemail picked up, Connor groaned softly.

"Hi, this is Terry Davis. If you'll leave a message, I'll get back to you as soon as I can. Thanks."
Connor smiled, knowing it would make a difference in his tone and inflection and tried to speak fast before he ran out of recording time--

"Hello, this is Ben Connor, I'm a private investigator calling on behalf of my client, Timothy O'Brien. I'm trying to locate the whereabouts of Tim's half sister, Madison Olivia Jones, daughter of Candace and Harold Jones. Tim would love to meet his sister, so if you think I might have the right Madison, please get back to me at..." Connor gave his number, then thanked them for listening before he ran out of message time.

Okay. He'd made contact, though it wasn't exactly the first contact he'd hoped for. A conversation would have been better, but at least he'd left a message.

He called Tim.

"I got voicemail," Connor explained, then related what he'd said. "There's nothing more we can do but wait and see if we get a call back."

"It was an active number? Is there another you could try?"

"Tim, let's wait and see what happens. I can always follow up on the call, but let's not panic. Let's give them time."

"Okay." Tim sounded like he was five seconds away from tears, but he was holding it together. "Do you think she'll call?"

"If she agrees to meet you, then yes, she'll have to call. If it's her."

Tim sighed longingly. "Thanks for getting back. Tell me the moment you hear from them."

"I will. Hang in there."

They punched off, and Connor pulled away from his desk with a groan. He was drained. He needed a quick catnap before the call came. If the call came. He had no idea if they had found Madison, but for the first time in a long while, hope was finding its way into Connor's mind. Not an easy place for hope to survive when reason kept saying it was impossible.

Still.

Something about this case was making Connor hope.
What if after all this time, they had actually found her?

* * * *

The plastic covered couch hefted over to one side, nearly crushing Terry's foot when his cell phone rang. He ignored the phone in his pocket, prayed it wasn't Maddie trying to reach him, and worked with John to angle the couch through Mr. Davidson's door.

Though Mr. Davidson offered to help, it was a two man job and Terry and John managed to get it up the ramp and into the back of the enclosed cargo area of the moving truck without losing their footing. It was a wet day, but Terry felt nothing but gratitude that the Lord was providing. Despite the price Mr. Davidson had wanted for the couch, it was still a very good buy.

While John talked with Terry's tenant, Terry measured the remaining space in the cargo area. To his relief, he was glad to find they hadn't been wrong about having enough room to haul a second couch. It came as welcome news, for Terry wanted to get home, get back to Maddie, and get out of this pouring rain.

Terry hurried into the truck's cab as thunder boomed across the skies.

The phone rang again, and this time, Terry's hands were free so he dug it out from under the raincoat while John climbed behind the wheel. Terry smiled when he saw Maddie's name on the screen. He answered as rain dripped off his hood and spilled onto the phone's waterproof case. The case he kept his iPhone in for days such as these.

"The rain's coming down even worse, Terry. Are you and John all right?"

"We're fine-- in fact, we're better than fine. We've got the first couch, and we're on our way to Pastor Bill's house to pick up the second. We didn't want Lauren or anyone at the apartment complex to see two couches in the moving truck."

"You have it? You have a couch?"

"We do, and it's going to fit in the bedroom. Pray the second one is the right size, as well." Terry palmed the rain from his eyes. "Did you try to call me a few minutes ago?"

"No, I didn't. Are you and John going to eat out, or do you want us to have lunch ready when you get home?"
"Have it fixed, please. We're not going to slow down for anything until we get these couches back to the house." He saw John nod in agreement. "We'll be back as soon as we can. I'll see you then."

Terry hung up, quickly checked the missed calls screen and saw an unfamiliar number from Syracuse, New York.

It wasn't odd, just an ordinary missed calls entry.

He didn't have time to listen to the voicemail, and pocketed the phone.

Rain poured from the heavens faster than the windshield wipers could carry it away, and a thought went through Terry that he wanted to return the call later, when he got home. The thought came as a still, small voice, and passed almost before he had a chance to question why.

As the moving truck pulled in front of Pastor Bill's house, there was no time for anything but to grab his tape measure and to make sure he had the numbers for their bedroom handy.

He had a couch to see about.

"It is God which worketh in you [Terry] both to will and to do of His good pleasure."
~ Philippians 2:13 ~
Chapter Thirty-four
Falling Skies with a Chance of Hail

"O continue Thy lovingkindness unto them that know Thee; and Thy righteousness to the upright in heart."
~ Psalm 36:10 ~

Rain slammed the garage roof as Terry measured the couch. Pastor Bill showed John some of the other furniture, but Terry did his best to block out their talk. He didn't want anything else here, and if these numbers were right, he couldn't even use this couch.

"It's too long." Terry let the tape measure scroll back, and all conversation stopped. "It'll jut into the bathroom doorway by a full six inches."

"What if you switch this one to the other side of the room?" John suggested.

Hands in his pockets, Pastor Bill made no comment. They had told him nothing about the first couch, or its use, but despite that, their pastor hadn't said a word when he'd glimpsed it in the moving truck. Terry had been right about him-- Bill was the soul of discretion.

The men were waiting on Terry to make a decision. The rain had gotten worse, and Terry dearly wanted to get this over before Three Mile Bay found out how he and Maddie would be sleeping.

Pressure aside, Terry needed to think clearly.

"Would you like to stay for lunch?" Pastor Bill asked. "If you need time--"

"It's kind of you, but Maddie's expecting us." Terry switched the couches in his mind and knew it wouldn't work. He'd needed one as short as the other, so it would clear the bedroom door.

In a perfect world, everything would fit perfectly, and there would be no need for adjustments. He decided to try the couch. Terry sat down, slanted a nervous glance at his pastor, then stretched out on the cushions.

"Comfortable?" Pastor Bill smiled.

"Not bad." Terry sat up while his mind kicked into overdrive. "Could we bring it back if it doesn't work out?"
"Sure." Bill nodded. "Marriages don't work that way, but this couch will."

"Why do I have a feeling you know what's going on?"

"I don't, but I can guess."

"It's for Maddie."

Pastor Bill nodded as though it confirmed his thoughts, and he stepped aside as John took the tape measure to make a few calculations, himself.

"I think it could make it." John looked it over and gave the armrest an encouraging slap. "The decision's up to you though."

"I'd like to take the couch."

"Then let's get this thing into the moving truck." John tossed the tape measure to Terry as thunder sounded in the distance. "What did Dad always say? Thunder is just God bowling with the angels."

"I remember that." Terry grinned as he pocketed the tape.

The garage door groaned as Pastor Bill opened it, but even he was chuckling. Overcast light spilled inside with the rain, and Terry and Bill hurried to cover the items nearest the door with plastic while John wrapped the couch to keep it from getting soaked. Then Terry lifted one side of the couch as John lifted the other, and while the two men negotiated the couch outside, Bill moved out of their way.

"Are you sure I can't help?"

"That's okay, we've got it." Terry blinked the rain from his eyes as they turned onto the loading ramp. Terry went first, moving backward with his arms full of couch while John steered. Rain got in Terry's eyes, Terry turned to look behind him-- just a quick look-- when his foot caught the edge of the ramp. Pain shot into his ankle, he opened his mouth to call out, but John was blinking too, and the couch kept coming. Terry clamped his mouth shut and pushed up the ramp.

The sound of rain on metal as it hit the roof of the truck's cargo area, made all talk impossible. Terry angled Pastor Bill's couch toward the empty space beside the first one, and John followed.
The noise was deafening. Terry couldn't wait to block his ears, and he only pulled his hands away once they were back down the ramp and in the relative silence of the downpour.

It was then Terry noticed the hail bouncing off the ground.

"You all right?" John called.

"I'm fine." Terry didn't think about his words, but as he jogged to the truck's passenger side, his ankle forced him to slow down.

"It's getting serious out here," John huffed as he got behind the wheel.

Terry climbed in, slammed the door shut, and breathed in relief to be out of the storm. He glanced at the garage and saw Bill closing up. Terry waved to Bill, and Bill waved back.

John started the engine as hail struck their windshield. "Did the forecast mention all this white stuff?"

"Nope." Terry shook his raincoat. "Thanks for letting me haul you out here in all this weather."

"Hey, this is what family is for," John smiled. "This, and a hundred other natural disasters."

The moving truck pulled onto the road, the dull thump of the windshield wipers sounding more friendly than the hail pounding their roof. They could see the road, but Terry kept quiet as that visibility lessened and John cut his speed.

"You'd better pull off to the side," Terry advised.

John eased to the shoulder as a delivery van behind them did the same.

"If this doesn't let up in a few minutes, I'm calling home." Terry prayed the hail would soon pass, and that Maddie wasn't worrying about them. He tried moving his ankle and decided he could live with the pain. He had too many things to do, to slow down now.

"I think it's easing off. Let's see if we can't get home." John got back onto the road and kept his speed down, and the delivery van followed their example.

They had a short drive to get home, and it didn't take long before John was pulling up in front of the house. The delivery van passed them and went on with its business, the hail still coming, though not as heavy as before.
Opening his door, Terry got out as Jake met them in a raincoat and fishing boots. When Terry looked to the house, he saw Maddie waving from the window.

Terry waved back.

"Abby thought you might need some help," Jake called, as John went around to the back of the truck. "Uncle Terry, you're limping."

"I'm fine." Terry wiped his eyes as he went to help John open the cargo area. The hail had stopped, but the rain was picking up again. It was an improvement only by degrees.

Jake beat Terry to the back of the truck, and before Terry could insist this was a two man job, Jake was in position to help John lift the first couch.

"Would you take the bedroom door off its hinges?" John asked. "I think Jake and I can handle all the heavy lifting."

Even though John was overreacting about his ankle, Terry didn't fight it-- he would take care of the door. Anything to get these couches moved in and the job done.

Well before he reached the house, Terry saw Maddie waiting for him in the doorway. When he stepped inside, she rushed him with a hug. She didn't seem to care about his dripping wet raincoat, or the fact her clothes were getting soaked, and he was too happy to be home to pull her away. His foot throbbed, he was cold, and the rain had found its way down his neck.

Hugging Maddie, though. He could do that forever.

"You're hurt-- what's wrong with your foot?"

"It's nothing," Terry started to come back to his senses, and tore himself from Maddie. "They'll be through here with a couch, so keep the kids out of the way."

"How much pain are you in?"

"I'll be fine-- just keep the munchkins out."

Maddie nodded as Izzy and Abby came from the kitchen.

"He's hurt," Maddie told them.
Terry sighed, but made no comment as he headed down the hall.

Maddie followed. "Terry--"

"I pulled a muscle, but I'll live." Terry pushed into the bedroom, located the toolbox and began taking the door off its hinges as sounds from the living room announced John and Jake's arrival. Terry could hear the excited chatter of kids in the hall and was grateful when Maddie called that they should stay in their room while the men were carrying the couches through.

Terry lifted the door off to one side, set it against the wall as John came down the hall with the longer of the two couches wrapped in plastic.

"This isn't going to be easy." John and Terry exchanged glances, then John shouted to Jake to slant the couch as far back as he could in the hall to get it through the bedroom door. They angled and pushed, and to Maddie's credit, she kept out of the way. After several minutes of shoving, the couch made it through with only minor scuff marks on the doorjamb.

"We need to put this one against the wall," Terry directed, and Jake and John set the large couch as far back against the wall as they could.

After a breather, John and Jake went for the second couch while Maddie set about taking the plastic off the first one.

"We made lunch," Maddie said over her shoulder.

"Thanks, we'll eat as soon as we take the rental back."

Maddie was concerned-- Terry could see it in her eyes, but Terry didn't have time for that now. The second couch was coming, and she was struggling with the plastic. Terry went to help her, and he lifted one end of the couch so she could slip the plastic out from under its feet.

"Coming through," John called, and the second, shorter couch made its appearance in the doorway.

"Maddie, get in the bathroom." Terry gave her the wet plastic and watched as she went into the bathroom to keep out of the way.

The men angled as before, and it got through the door, but with less space in the bedroom, it was a tight fit. They moved the couch away from the closet and bathroom to preserve a walkway,
but kept the couches from touching by about a foot and a half. Terry moved between the couches and was pleased when he didn't have to walk sideways. He had to turn sideways though to move around the shorter couch, and get past the dresser to reach the bathroom and closet.

To get to the closet, he had to reach over the couch or go around it, and he could no longer simply walk into the bathroom. It was an inconvenience, yes, but he was getting Maddie. As long as she could be happy here, then so would he.

As Abby and Izzy watched from the hall, and Maddie from the bathroom, John and Jake put the bedroom door on its hinges. John tested it, opened the door, and it bumped against the couch.

Okay, so it couldn't open all the way. They could live with that.

Terry looked at Maddie, and saw her smiling.

"Let's get the plastic off this second couch," Terry planned out loud, "then we need to get the truck back to the rental place."

"Dad and I will take care of the truck," Abby nodded. "You rest that foot."

"My foot is fine."

Abby gave Terry a disbelieving look.

"Thank you, Abby," Maddie called from the bathroom.

"I appreciate the help-- I do-- but I think I can manage a simple drive." Terry went to the second couch, glad he at least hadn't been denied this task.

"Do you think he needs urgent care?" Maddie asked.

Terry gave her a look, but she was serious.

"I'd like to at least see him off his feet and resting," Izzy said from the hall. "Terry, everyone can see you're limping, so let's take care of this, and if it persists, then we'll have someone look at it. What do you say?"

Terry groaned, and tugged off the last of the plastic. "I say 'thank you.'"
"He's mine." Maddie moved around the dresser with her armload of wet couch plastic. "I get to take care of him. No one help him-- he's mine." She took the plastic from Terry, and gathered it with her first armload. "Take off your coat and boots, and I'll get lunch."

"Since you've got things under control here, we'll take care of the rental." John smiled, and accepted the plastic from Maddie. "My lunch?"

"In the kitchen," Maddie said as she left the room.

Izzy smiled, and shooed the curious munchkins from the doorway while John and Abby left to return the truck.

Thunder boomed across the roof as Terry unzipped his raincoat. He saw Jake take the toolbox, and nodded his thanks, even though he could've put it away himself. He'd probably just pulled a muscle, not even sprained anything. Terry didn't know if he believed that, but it was a nice try. He took off his coat, dropped it on the floor since there was nowhere else to put it, and claimed the longer of the two couches-- the one against the wall. If Maddie wanted it, they could always trade, but for now, his foot needed a rest.

Terry moaned as he sat down. By the beating the window was taking, the rain had yet to let up.

He hoped the electricity didn't go out.

Doing his best to ignore the discomfort, Terry pulled off his boot. He took off the other one, set them aside, then leaned back and listened to the rain as Maddie came in with a plate of sandwiches and his smiley mug.

"Izzy said to ask if your ankle was swollen."

"It's a pulled muscle, not a sprain."

"So you haven't checked?" Maddie passed him the food, got down on the floor and started to pull off his socks.

"It was one foot, not both, and that's really not necessary." Terry took a sip from his mug before it spilled onto the new, old couch. "Maddie-- please don't tickle." He gasped, tried to keep a straight face as Maddie touched his foot.

"Does this hurt?"
"What do you think?" He tried not to smile, looked about for a place to set down his mug of apple cider and decided to just hold it and eat his sandwiches with one hand. He was starving. "Maddie." He coughed out a laugh as she tickled the bottom of his foot and she stopped. "It's not swollen, is it?"

She shook her head, bent and planted a warm kiss on his sore ankle. "Does it feel better now?"

"Much better," he grinned, and picked up a sandwich. He prayed over his meal, then started in on lunch as Maddie left the room. He noticed their wedding photo on the dresser, and his thoughts turned to Vegas. A few moments later, she came back with a cold compress and a towel.

He wanted to remind her that she'd just admitted his ankle wasn't swollen, but kept his mouth shut.

The compress was icy cold. Which was probably the point, but for something he didn't figure was necessary to begin with, it was hard to sit still and endure. Terry tried to distract himself with his sandwich, and smiled when Maddie curled beside him on the couch. She watched his every bite, and since she looked so eager to help, he handed her the smily mug, leaned back and decided to enjoy the rain for all it was worth. She edged closer to his side as he started in on his second peanut butter and jam sandwich. Strawberry jam on homemade bread. On a stormy day like this, it hit the spot.

Maddie snugged against him and Terry smiled.

"Have you eaten?" he asked.

She looked at his mouth, then leaned in and kissed him soundly. He had to pull back, but when he did it was a tossup as to what was booming louder-- the thunder, or his own heartbeat.

Terry fought to catch his breath, looked at Maddie and saw she was doing the same.

"Did you eat?" he asked again.

She shook her head, "no."

"It's sweet of you, but I wish you hadn't waited." He traded the mug for a sandwich as light blinked in the window. Thunder followed, and Maddie scooted closer to Terry. "Scared?" he asked, and she smiled and shook her head.
"Does it still hurt?"

"Not since your kiss." He sipped from his mug and noticed Ruthie looking into the bedroom. "Don't tell me you didn't eat, either."

"Mommy fed us." Ruthie smiled, seeming to take his notice of her as an okay to come inside. "Why do you have so many couches in here? Don't you want your bed back?"

"Your aunt and I prefer to sleep on these."

"Why?"

"Because we're helping to support the sofa industry," Terry deadpanned.

"What's the sofa industry?"

"Never mind." Terry took another sandwich and decided not to explain.

"Ruthie, where are you?" Izzy moved past the doorway, paused and came back. "I told you to leave them alone."

"But Uncle Terry talked to me."

"She's not bothering us," Terry grinned.

"Whenever you want privacy, close the door and they'll stay out." Izzy patted her daughter, and gave her an I'm-watching-you-Sweetheart look before leaving.

Ruthie gazed at the towel on Terry's foot. "Do you want me to make you a card so you'll feel better?"

He resisted the urge to point out that all this concern wasn't needed. Those blue eyes were genuine in their offer though, for he could tell Ruthie really wanted to make the card.

Terry knew when he was beaten.

"Thank you, that would be great."

It was all the encouragement Ruthie needed, and she ran from the bedroom in search of her sisters.
Terry sighed.

He would be getting three cards, not one.

All thoughts of protest were forgotten though, as Maddie got up and closed the door. He forgot about his ankle, the miserable weather, and for a moment the fact his name was Terry Davis. All he could think was that she'd closed the door.

She came back to the couch, picked up her sandwich and went about finishing her lunch, though Terry couldn't get past that door.

He eyed her like she needed to be kept an eye on. "Maddie?"

"You need rest."

"Okay." He took another bite. "I disagree, but okay." He could live with rest, so long as she didn't lean in and kiss him like there was no tomorrow. Not that he minded. Once in a while was good-- it made his day, in fact, but he needed to keep his head and it was hard to do while he was bracing himself for Maddie.

She finished her PB and jam. She blinked at him, and his heart started to race. As she started to lean in, he backed away.

"I'm eating, Maddie." He opened his mouth to show the food he was chewing and repel all incoming kisses.

She made a face, folded her arms and looked like she would wait.

He swallowed. "I thought you said I needed rest."

"You can."

"While we kiss?"

She nodded.

"Let's give that a rest, too." He tossed the crust onto his plate, took a sip from his mug and found it had gone warm. "Unless you want me to get serious, I need to back off."
Cocking her head to one side and looking too cute for her own good, Maddie paused, as though weighing what he’d just said against what she wanted.

“How serious?” she asked.

“The kind of serious I promised to protect you from.”

She scooted away, and he downed the last of the apple cider.

“Thank you, Terry.”

“I’m just glad the door’s closed,” he smiled, setting aside his mug and plate to take the cold compress off his chilly foot. He nodded to the facing couch next to the closet and bathroom. “That other one is newer, and it’s also a little shorter. I was thinking maybe it could be yours. Think you can fit it?”

She stepped over, stretched out lengthwise and stared up at the ceiling. “We’ve got his and her couches, Terry.”

“So it would appear.”

The sore ankle had been worth it, and Terry leaned back and watched the happy contentment of his wife. When his un-socked feet grew cold, he stretched out on his own couch and enjoyed some distance-resting with Maddie.

“I’m glad it’s raining,” she sighed.

“You are?” He dug into his pocket, pulled out his phone while she rolled onto her side and looked as though she were being hugged even though he hadn’t laid a finger on her.

“I’m not glad your foot’s hurt, but I feel safe with you in here, especially while it’s raining and cold outside.”

“It’s most definitely raining.” He smiled as he checked the couches off his phone’s to-do-list. “I think I know what you mean-- I’m enjoying this, too.”

He started the phone app as rain pelted their window.

“Did you notice the carpet, Terry?”
"What?"

He tapped voicemail, then put the phone to his ear.

"I vacuumed."

His eyes grazed the carpet as a man started to speak.

"...I'm a private investigator calling on behalf of my client, Timothy O'Brien..." Terry's brain refused to work and the words didn't register. He sat up, played the message again, thinking this had to be a wrong number.

"I'm going to clean the couches." Maddie got up and started for the door, but Terry motioned her back. "What is it?"

"Your mom-- what's her name again?"

Maddie frowned. "Why?"

"Her name-- what was it?"

"Candace."

"And your father?"

"The Dragon wasn't my father."

"Not him, your real father."

"Harold."

Terry pushed up from the couch, headed to the door and grabbed Maddie's hand as he went.

"Terry, what's wrong?"

"We need your birth certificate." Terry pushed into the empty office, went to his desk and got the key to the filing cabinet he wanted. "You never told me you had a half brother."

"I don't."
Terry stopped. He looked at Maddie. This had to be a case of mistaken identity. He opened the
cabinet, found her file, and pulled out the birth certificates.

"What's going on, Terry?"

"I don't honestly know." He read the certificates, and they both said Candace and Harold Jones.

"Terry?"

"I have a voicemail from a private detective." Terry forced himself to slow his words so he didn't
run through them without thinking. "He claims he's working for the half brother of Madison
Olivia Jones, and that this brother is looking for her." Terry saw Maddie's face blanch white, and
he led her to the nearest chair. "Let's just take it easy. They could have the wrong Madison." Terry
started the message, then put the phone to Maddie's ear.

Her eyes grew wide, her breathing became fast and labored and Terry saw panic set in. Tossing
aside the phone, he pulled Maddie from the chair and into his arms. Though she needed to be
held, he tried to do it carefully.

"Calm down. Try not to hyperventilate."

"She's going to find me, Momma's going to find me."

"If she does, then she has more to worry about than you. You've done nothing wrong." Every
fiber of Terry's being, his every instinct was to protect Maddie. He'd never felt so protective of
anyone, in his life. "You're safe here. Remember your battle cry."

"I remember. Please don't let her find me, Terry."

"Hush. You're safe." Terry rocked his sweet love. "If anyone wants to hurt you, they'll have to get
through me first."

Calm eased into Maddie-- Terry could hear her breathing even out, feel her muscles relax,
though she didn't try to free herself from his arms. Her need for comfort was still too great.

"You don't remember having a half brother?" Terry peered down at Maddie, and she shook her
head, "no." "If we can trust the detective, she's not the one who's looking for you."

"I don't want to call back."
"Okay." Terry held Maddie and felt her begin to tremor again. "If you say so."

"I don't have a brother." She hid herself against Terry and dug in so hard he struggled to keep his balance.

"It's all right, I won't do anything unless you want me to. You're calling the shots."

"It's not me." Maddie stopped trembling as Terry rubbed her arm. "That detective has the wrong Madison. Tell him, Terry. Tell him he has the wrong person. Tell him to go away and leave me alone."

"Even if Tim really is your half brother?"

"I don't have one."

"Okay." Terry started to let go, but Maddie wouldn't let him.

"You think he's real?"

Terry gave himself a moment to collect his thoughts. "I think that detective knew a lot about you for there not to be something to this. Maybe someone's trying to scam us, but I think they have the right Madison."

"What should we do?"

"I think we should pray." Maddie nodded in agreement, and Terry bowed his head and quietly asked God for His protection. "Keep us from Candace Jones, or anyone else who would hurt Maddie, and deliver us from evil. Protect us, Lord, and give us wisdom. In Jesus' name, amen."

Maddie opened her eyes and looked up at Terry. "Now what?"

"That depends on you."

"I don't want to call."

"Then we won't."

"But you think I have a brother? One who's looking for me?"

Terry sighed. "It's not outside the realm of possibility."
She was calm enough to consider it now, and sank into a chair to think. Terry watched and didn't go to welcome John and Abby when the front door slammed shut and Izzy could be heard in the living room. Life was spinning, there were too many important things going on, and Terry was needed here. He was in shock, and so was Maddie.

"What if he tells momma where I am?" Maddie shook her head. "What if she's the one who put him up to this? And besides, I don't have a brother."

"A half brother," Terry reminded, leaning against the desk. "Your mom could have been in a relationship after she left you with the Dragon. He could be your little brother."

"Could I hear the message again?"

Terry retrieved the phone, and she listened to the detective's voicemail.

"It didn't say he was my little brother."

"Connor didn't have much time to leave the message. Maybe it was overlooked."

"But--" Maddie frowned, folded her arms and sighed.

Terry pocketed the phone and waited.

And waited.

She sat staring at the carpet, saying nothing, looking torn and miserable. Terry didn't lead, but let her come to her own decision. This had to be her making up her own mind. She'd asked his opinion, he'd given it, and now it was up to her. After all she'd gone through with her family, he wasn't about to tell her she had to face them again.

Her arms unfolded. "Please call him back, Terry. If I have a brother, then I want to know."

"What do you want me to say?"

"Make them promise I don't have to see Momma, and that they won't tell her where I am."

"They might have already."

"If they have, you won't let Momma hurt me."
"No, I won't." It heartened Terry that she trusted him that much, though it also scared him. He didn't know if he could trust these people, but he did know he could trust God. "Are you sure you're okay with me being the one to call the detective back? You don't mind?"

Maddie shook her head and started to hug herself. "I wouldn't know what to say."

"Then when I do, I want you sitting next to me so your wishes don't get lost in all this. We're just going to call back and see if this is real, then take it from there. We go slow. Does that sound good?"

Though Maddie looked shell-shocked, she nodded, "yes."

Terry pushed from the desk and started for the office door. "I'm going to fill the others in on what's happening. I won't be long."

When Terry went into the living room, he found Abby had gone home and John and Izzy were resting on the couch with hot cider. It was good they were already sitting down. Terry told them about the phone call, and Maddie's decision, and immediately saw the caution rise in their faces.

"Do you think we're doing the right thing?"

"Is this what Madison wants?" Izzy asked.

Terry nodded.

"Then I think you are, only be careful. Don't tell Madison, but after what her mother did, I'm slow to trust that family."

"I understand." Terry moved to the hall, stopped, and looked over his shoulder. "Pray for this call?"

"Count on it," John nodded.

Knowing his friends had his back, Terry returned to the office, only to find Maddie hugging herself within an inch of her life.

"Hey, don't hurt yourself."

"I'm not trying to," she whispered, as Terry rolled a chair beside hers.
"I won't agree to anything without first running it by you, so please don't leave the room while I'm on the phone." Terry leaned over, pulled a notepad from the desk, grabbed a pen, and handed them to Maddie. "If you want to talk to me without being overheard, write it out." Terry went to shut the office door, came back and took his chair.

"I can't believe this is happening to me." Maddie handed her pen to Terry as he listened to the message.

He jotted down Connor's number, then looked at Maddie.

"Ready?" Terry asked.

"What if I'm not?"

"We could do this some other time."

"No, do it now." Maddie sounded desperate to get it over, so Terry tapped out the phone number.

He took her hand as it started to ring.

"Hello, Connor speaking." The voice sounded groggy, like the man had just been roused from sleep.

"My name is Terry Davis-- I'm returning your call concerning Madison Jones."

"Whoa, yes-- please hold on." That woke him. Terry heard scrambling, some paper, and then the squeak of a chair and the breath of someone collecting their thoughts. "Thank you for calling. I first want to assure you and your wife that my client wants nothing, only to meet his big sister. If we truly do have the right Madison."

"I have my wife's birth certificate."

"You do?" The surprise was evident in Connor's voice, and Terry wondered what that meant. "That's great. We have so little documentation for Madison, it'd be great to have that kind of confirmation."

Terry got up, stepped over to the desk, grabbed the certificates and saw Maddie's face as he returned to his seat.
"Her parents’ names were just as you said--" and Terry read out some of the information from one of the certificates. "Forgive me if I ask you to confirm Maddie’s birth date?"

"I’m afraid we don’t have her DOB, but the Madison we’re looking for has gray eyes and blonde hair. Her middle name is Olivia, she has no distinguishable birthmarks, and she was adopted when she was eight years old. We don’t have the name of the family who adopted her, though Tim tried to move heaven and earth to find out. She should be about thirty-four, though obviously that can vary since we don’t know what month she was born."

Terry reached over, scrawled on the pad,

*Any distinguishable birthmarks?*

"I don’t think so."

*Then they have the right Madison."

She turned white and he dropped the pen, grabbed her hand, and gave it a tight squeeze.

"Before we go any further, I must ask if Candace Jones has had any part of this search." Terry waited, and all he got was silence. "Mr. Connor?"

"Please, it’s just Connor." There was shock in the man’s voice. "We found her, didn’t we."

"Yes, I believe you have, but I have to ask that no one tells Candace where Maddie is at. Maddie has made that very clear-- Candace must not be told."

"I understand. Wow. Yes, I understand. Candace was in no way involved in Tim’s search. Candace died-- I can’t remember the date-- I’d have to look it up-- but please, tell your wife she has nothing to fear. This has nothing to do with her mother."

Terry paused, let go of Maddie’s hand and wrote,

*Your mom passed away."

Maddie hugged herself. She looked lost, and Terry didn’t know what else to write but,

*I love you.*
She nodded.

"I'm sorry for your wife's loss," Connor said a little awkwardly. "Is there... anyone else you don't want notified?"

"Such as?" Terry asked.

"Mrs. Billingsly? Candace's mother? She's also deceased. Again, my condolences." Connor sounded anything but sincere, though Terry sensed he was trying.

"Hold on, please." Terry wrote out the news on the pad,

*Grandma Billingsly passed away. I'm sorry, Maddie.*

The news seemed to baffle Maddie. She looked confused.

"She's your mother's mom." Terry waited, and when he saw no recognition, Terry got back on the phone. "I don't think she remembers Mrs. Billingsly."

"Would it be possible to email a photo of Madison? I know Tim would appreciate a recent picture, and as a show of good faith, I'll send you the last known photo we have of her. Taken when she was eight."

"Let me ask Maddie." Terry wrote it out on the pad, tried to get Maddie to see it but she was staring at the carpet. He pushed the pad under her nose, she blinked, and he saw the lost look in her eyes. "Give me your email address," he told Connor, and exchanged addresses while Maddie hugged herself.

"Would it be all right if I gave you Tim's phone number?" Connor asked. "As I said before, Tim would love to meet his big sister. If she could call her brother, that would be great. The best time would be between six and ten in the evening."

Terry looked at Maddie. She was pale, her eyes were downturned and staring, as though they saw nothing at all.

"Maddie?" Terry didn't bother to try and write it out. "Do you want to call your brother?"

Her eyes met his, and he realized she was overwhelmed.

She couldn't answer.
"I can't make any promises," Terry apologized, "but give me Tim's number, and I'll make sure Maddie gets it. I'm afraid the news of her mother has hit her hard, so you'll have to give her some time."

"I understand, I'm very sorry." Connor gave Tim's number, then Terry asked some questions of his own about Tim.

Nothing big, just basic things. Like family.

"Tim's a straight-laced family guy," Connor explained. "He has two daughters-- a six-year-old from a previous relationship, and an eleven-year-old from his wife's first marriage. Tim's a little high-strung, but he doesn't beat his wife and he always pays his bills. He works as an accounting clerk for a small business here in Syracuse. May I ask if Madison has ever been married before? Does Tim have any nephews or nieces?"

"No, neither of us have been married until now, and she doesn't have any kids. I'm a partner in an independent contracting business, and one of the perks is that I get to work from home. We live in Three Mile Bay-- that's in Upstate New York."

"Yes, I know. Where you live, I mean. I had to look you up."

"Right."

Silence held the line, then Connor spoke. "May I ask a question, more for my own curiosity than anything else? You don't have to bother your wife-- if you can't answer it, then forget it. I've been searching for Madison off and on for the past six years, and barring mistaken identity, I'll close her case today."

"Your question?"

"I have a few, but I'll settle for one. When I found her through the public marriage records, her maiden name was Jones, even though we know she was adopted and her name had been changed. Why was she using Jones? Unless her adopted family also went by Jones... but then I would have found her much sooner."

Connor was a PI all right. Terry looked at Maddie, saw the shock still sinking in and didn't feel comfortable speaking so openly with this man about her past.
"Until the time I met Maddie, her life was not--" Terry stopped, tried to come up with something that wouldn't betray Maddie and yet satisfy Connor's hard work. "I'm not at liberty to go into details with you, but before she came here, her life was not at all easy. I've been trying my best to make up for that."

Silence stretched out and Terry reached over and took Maddie's hand. Her fingers lightly caressed his, as though she were only half paying attention.

"You've got my curiosity, Mr. Davis, but I respect the answer." A chair squeaked, then Terry heard keys tapping. "I'm sending you that photo I told you about. For me, this case has been one-of-a-kind. I usually get cheating spouses, fraud, missing persons-- though none like this one. This case has been unique, and it's ending as it started. Unique. Please pass my best wishes to Madison on her marriage. I wish her every happiness."

"Thank you, I will."

"Best wishes to you too, Mr. Davis."

For some reason, those words took Terry off guard. He didn't quite know how to answer, for there was a compliment in Connor's tone.

"I'll make sure Maddie has Tim's number."

"Thank you." Connor inhaled, the sound of it carrying over the phone.

And then they hung up.

For a long moment, Terry sat in the chair and stared at the carpet. That had to rate among the strangest calls he'd ever had, and it took some time to get his mind back from the fact it had actually happened.

Terry looked at Maddie. She didn't ask anything, but sat with her eyes fixed on space.

"It appears you have a younger brother." Terry picked up the notepad, read the number, then tapped the phone's screen. "I'm entering Tim into my address book. You know how to use that, don't you?" He checked Maddie and she nodded. "Tim sounds real."

She closed her eyes as though the news was too much to take in all at once.

He would tell John and Izzy about the call, later. Right now, Terry wanted to stay with Maddie.
He had no idea what to say to her. If being quiet would help, then he would stay and let her know she wasn't alone.

More than ever, Maddie wasn't alone. She had a brother.

* * * *

His head hurt like crazy and there was no way he could concentrate. Not with a call from Connor due any moment.

Tim dabbed the tissue to his forehead. He probably should take the painkiller his boss had given him, but he didn't like drugs. Never did. If his boss saw he hadn't taken it though... Tim hid the ibuprofen in his shirt pocket.

He'd blacked out and now Karen would be mad. He should have eaten breakfast like she'd said.

He tried focusing on the screen, on the rows of numbers and not on the phone. Somewhere, an hour and a half from here, his sister was listening to Connor's message. Or about to listen. He could see it... She was thrilled and dying to call the brother she'd never met, but had always known deep in her heart she'd always had.


Tim threw away the tissue and tried to focus.

The phone started to ring and he picked up before it finished. He didn't even give Connor time to say "hello."

"Did you talk to her?"

"I spoke to her husband, but first I need to know if you're sitting down? I mean really sitting down. I don't want a repeat of last time."

Vaguely aware that his breathing was starting to race, Tim looked about for a chair before realizing he was already in one.

"Oh, man."

"I want you to calm down. Just remember to keep this in perspective."
"Please," Tim put his head between his knees, pressed the phone to his ear and tried hard to keep his voice steady, "what did the husband say? Every word. Please, tell me every word he said."

"First, you need to check your mail. I forwarded you something Mr. Davis sent." Connor stayed on the phone while Tim sat up and tried to get his trembling hands to obey. They wouldn't work and the webmail screen on his computer started to blur.

"Are you still there?" Connor waited, then kept talking. "He sent me a recent photo. You have to see it for yourself."

"I-- I'm trying."

"Here, I'll MMS it to you. It's amazing, Tim."

An image appeared on Tim's phone and it took Tim a moment to realize what he was seeing: A blonde-headed woman with city lights far below her. A balcony, she was on a balcony. The camera's flash showed peaches in her cheeks.

He sought out her eyes and his heart fell over. They were familiar. So were the cheekbones, and the forehead.

"Connor?" Tim went back to the caller. "It's her."

"I agree. And Tim, get this-- she has her birth certificates. The names match up."

"You gave her my number? When will she call?"

"I did, but Tim--" Connor went on even as Tim started to interrupt-- "she's shaken up, so it might be some time before that happens. She didn't want us to tell her mom where she lived. Terry was very definite about Madison's wishes, so I had to tell them they had nothing to worry about. I told him your mother had passed away, and Terry said Madison was taking the news hard. So you're going to have to give her time to mourn."

"It's not fair. Mother gave me away. I only had her for a few years, and Madison is the one mourning?"

Connor said nothing.

"When do you think she'll call?"
"I don't know, but Terry promised to give her your number, in fact, he said that twice."

"And you believe him?"

"You have no choice but to take him at his word, but yes, I do."

"Why?"

"He sounded like a decent guy. He said Madison hadn't had it easy before she met him, and he's trying to make up for that. So you might want to cut him some slack. And no, he didn't go into details. I got the impression details were for family ears only, so if you play your cards right, that might include you." Connor went into a description of Terry, his job title, the fact Madison hadn't been married before, and that she didn't have any children.

For the first time in Tim's life, Madison was beginning to feel like more than just a wish, a bunch of photographs that stared back from a past Tim had never known.

It was hard to think.

Tim's head throbbed and he didn't want his boss to see him on the phone again. Not when he should be working.

"He calls her Maddie."

"Who does?"

"Terry."

"I want to like him, Connor."

"You'd better start trying. I believe she'll call, or her husband will, but my gut says you'll hear from them, and when they do, my best advice is to not blow it. Don't come on too strong about how much you missed having a sister, and just be yourself."

Tim wanted to toss back that it was easy for Connor to say. People probably liked Connor, he probably had friends coming out his ears. But Tim kept his mouth shut. He didn't want to be yelled at, especially when his head was hurting and his boss might come back.

"You'll have my report tomorrow. If you need anything more, you know where to find me."
"Thanks, Connor. Thanks for everything."

"Hey, you'll get my bill." There was humor in Connor’s voice, but also something else. A weary sense of victory. "You take it easy, Tim. This is happening because of you. You didn't give up. You just remember that."

Tim had no answer for that, and they hung up before Tim realized he hadn't gotten a word for word account of what Terry Davis had actually said.

Connor had probably given him the highlights, and Tim knew he would get a report.

Still, he wished he'd remembered to get every word. She hadn't had it easy? What did that mean, and had those exact words been actually used?

It took so much energy to think, to want something this much. Karen didn't understand that, but Connor did. Connor knew, and now Connor was going away. The case was closed.

Tim sent off a text to Karen:

*Good news, we found Madison-tell u more wn I get home.*

He took a long look at the picture on his phone, then went back to work before his boss returned. As Tim stared at the numbers on the screen, he thought of the smiling woman.

That was his half sister.

He needed no blood test to tell him what his eyes and heart already knew. A childhood wish was coming true.

* * * *

After all these years, it could still hurt this much. It startled Madison to know that, and she tried to keep it pushed back as she always had, back with all the memories and pain. They were dim and she wanted to keep them that way. The Dragon was recent, he refused to stay off in the corner, but Momma was different.

Momma's name brought hurt and Madison couldn't stand to remember. She'd fought so hard to numb herself to that pain, to erase and forget until she could almost wonder if she'd ever had a
momma at all. Just an eraser smear where Momma had been, a worn out hole in the paper where the memories used to be, nothing more.

She would not cry.

She would not.

Fresh pain mixed with the old, forcing Madison from her chair. She looked to Terry, and he got up, stood there as though he didn't quite know what to do or say.

"What do you need from me?" he asked quietly.

"Is your momma dead?"

The pained look in his eyes said she was, even before he nodded, "yes."

"Do you miss her?"

"Sometimes."

"Do you remember what yours looks like? I can't see mine anymore, but I remember soft hands. I remember her laugh. It was so pretty." Madison choked back the tears. "She's not coming back, is she? She's really gone?"

Madison started to cry and Terry stepped close. It was an invitation to be loved, to be comforted, and even though Madison felt unloveable and unable to be comforted ever again, the moment those arms came around her, she felt both.

It felt so good.

She gasped and cried, and Terry held her so gently, he wouldn't have crushed flower petals. The thought made her smile through the tears, but then she remembered Momma's laugh and it was all Madison could do to catch her breath before the next sob came. She'd wept after Momma before, but this time was different.

Terry was here.

He held her through the tears, and when they stopped coming, he didn't seem afraid of the silence when all she could do was lean into those arms and rest.
She breathed in, out, very slowly, then tried to do it with her mouth closed, only to find her nose no longer worked. Terry pulled a box of tissue from a desk drawer, then stepped back to give her room when she blew her nose.

"When John and Izzy see you've been crying, and find out why, I believe they'll send condolence flowers."

"Please tell them not to."

Terry nodded.

"Do you think I'll scare the munchkins?" she asked, as she braced herself to leave the office.

"Don't worry, they'll be fine." Terry put away their chairs while Madison took care of her nose again.

They headed into the hall, heard the girls in their room, and didn't disturb their play by looking inside. Madison hugged herself as they moved into the living room and found John and Izzy. Waiting.

Terry looked to Madison as they joined their friends on the couch.

"Do you want me to tell them?" Terry asked.

She nodded, thankful for the help. It was so much to take in, Madison wondered how they could possibly understand. Biting her lip, she half listened, half prayed as Terry explained the call from the detective, and couldn't help but notice how Izzy leaned forward and watched her when Terry got to the part about Momma passing away.

"How are you doing?" Izzy asked her.

Madison didn't know how else to answer, and nodded that she was okay.

There weren't any words for what Madison felt, or if there were, they stayed away from her, but she would be all right. She had her battle cry to remind her of the Lord, and she had Terry, not to mention the rest of her family. The concern on Izzy's face said volumes. She had help. All Madison had to do was ask.

"So what's your impression of Tim?" John looked to Terry, and so did everyone else. "What kind of man is he, do you think he'll hurt Madison?"
"All I know is what Connor told me. If what he said about Tim is true, then Tim sounds normal enough. He doesn’t sound like his mother, and that’s a big recommendation, right there. Tim hired Connor to look for Madison these last six years, so that has to say something about Tim."

"Tim doesn’t give up," John nodded. "And now he wants to meet Madison."

"He does." Terry looked to Madison, and she suddenly wished she didn’t have to be in the room. "I’m leaving it up to Maddie, if, or when she wants to call him. I already gave Connor a heads-up that she was taking her mom’s death hard, so hopefully he passed that on to Tim."

The fact she was taking it hard, registered on Izzy’s face. Madison saw it, and wished Terry had left that part out.

"Connor said he’d email us an old photo of Maddie." Terry pulled out his phone and Madison looked over his arm to watch. "I don’t know if he’s sent it yet— Okay, I’ve got an email here from Ben Connor and it’s got an attachment."

Everyone crowded around Terry. Izzy sat on Terry’s other side and John leaned in until everyone’s heads nearly bumped.

"The last known photo of Madison Jones, aged eight. Date unknown," Terry read.

He brought up an image of a scrawny looking girl in a blue dress standing in a backyard. Stringy blonde hair came to her waist, for she’d grown it long to please her momma. She wore no shoes. Her toes were dug into the cool grass, where not even the bugs could scare her.

Memories were stirring, and Madison turned away from the picture.

"Do you remember this?" Terry asked. "This is you, isn’t it?"

"It’s me."

The others kept looking at the phone, but Madison didn’t want to see it again. More thoughts were starting to come and she scrambled to keep them back.

"If you had mixed this photo in with a dozen others," Izzy said quietly, "I would’ve recognized you at once. Look at that lovely face."

"I’m not lovely."
"As your sister, it's my prerogative to disagree." There was a thoughtful smile in Izzy's voice, one that spoke of love. "You're not smiling, yet you look happy. Do you remember where this was taken?"

"No, I don't."

A woman with short blonde hair stepped into Madison's memory, her face so vivid, Madison could see the tiny beauty mark on her cheek. A tray of lemonade on a hot day, the crisp scent of freshly cut grass, a pretty laugh that made her want to run up and give her momma a hug.

Someone's hand gripped Madison's. She blinked, and saw Terry's concerned brown eyes looking back at her.

"Grandma's backyard. I remember Momma brought lemonade."

Drained and praying she would remember no more, Madison leaned into Terry and he pulled his arm around her for comfort. His arm stayed high around her shoulders where she could breathe, and it wouldn't trigger memories of another kind.

Painful to look back, yet painful to go forward. The stuck feeling was familiar, and so was the helplessness that went with it.

"Who would've thought getting married would lead to a half brother turning up?" John got up from the couch as thunder rolled above their heads. "We'll be going before the Lord about this, Madison. Our family will be making this a matter of prayer."

"Thank you." She was just starting a quiet prayer of her own, when Terry pulled his arm away and started to stand.

Terry gasped a little, fell back on the couch and Madison's heart jumped to her throat.

"Izzy--"

"I saw that," Izzy nodded, and waved to John. "You'd better call AJ and see if they can watch the girls. We're taking Terry to urgent care."

"I'll get our coats." Madison hurried while Terry protested that his ankle wasn't that bad.
All other problems were temporarily put aside in Madison's need to take care of Terry. He was hurting, and he was hers. Momma didn't take care of her own, but Madison did.

He needed socks, shoes that wouldn't bother his foot-- Madison rushed about their room and tried to keep her thoughts straight. She grabbed what she could, tugged out their coats, then headed into the hall as one of the girls came out from the triplets' bedroom.

"What's wrong?" Debbie asked, as she fell in behind Madison.

"Uncle Terry hurt his foot, but he's going to be all right."

On the couch, Terry looked sheepish, like he didn't want to admit his ankle was hurting. Madison would hear none of it though, not even when he asked to give it overnight, just to see how his ankle felt in the morning.

"I want to see it again." Madison got on the floor, carefully lifted Terry's pant leg but didn't touch anything. It was hard to tell, so she lifted the other pant leg to do a side-by-side comparison.

"Well?" Terry asked, as John talked on the phone.

"I think it looks a little swollen, but I'm not sure."

"Abby said they'll be here in five minutes with Ricky, so the triplets are covered." John hung up while Madison eased Terry into some socks, then a pair of slip-on shoes.

"I don't suppose I can talk you out of this?" Terry asked, and Madison shook her head, "no."
"Okay, but I'm only doing this because I love you." Terry smiled when Madison kissed his nose. The gesture seemed to soften his protest, for when she helped him into his coat, Terry didn't fight.

A few moments later, Abby burst into the living room with Ricky and Jake. They stood in dripping wet coats, and while Izzy hurried to get towels, John closed the door before the rain got in.

"Is he all right?" Abby panted.

"I'm going to live, if that's what you're asking." Terry groaned as he gingerly raised himself from the couch. "At this point, I'm guessing it's a mild sprain."
While John readied the minivan, Madison went back to their room to get a ball cap for Terry, and returned in time to see Terry moving to the door without her.

She went to him, and he let her help him the few steps to the door.

Everyone was moving around them, but Madison only saw Terry. She zipped his coat, put the hat on him, and he smiled and kissed her cheek. How she loved him, how she wanted to be here for him.

The front door opened, and John ducked inside. "The minivan's out front. I parked it close to the house."

"Thanks." Terry looked grateful, even if he was trying to walk without anyone's help. He sighed when Madison tried to get his arm around her shoulder, and when she gave him an extra-pleading look, he gave in and let her help him outside.

He didn't let her shoulder any weight, but she did help.

John moved ahead and opened the minivan's side door, and after they climbed in, John slid it shut. She hadn't been in the rain that day, but from the tired look on Terry's face, she saw he wasn't eager to be out and about again. They took their usual seats, his face wincing a little as his foot bumped against the interior.

It didn't take long before they were on the road, and now that she had time to sit and think, she wanted to see her promises. Madison jerked Terry's coat sleeve, whispered for the phone, and he gave it to her.

He watched as she turned on the notes app and quietly read the verses. Maybe this was no big deal for Terry, but he wasn't the one who had to watch him suffer.

First the shock of her brother, then Momma, and now this. Madison reminded God that she wasn't letting go, she was still holding on. Even though the sky felt like it was falling, God hadn't gone anywhere.

She put the phone to sleep, slipped it into her pocket and tried not to get discouraged. It was turning out to be a hard day.

Then she felt it.
Terry caressed her hand, then started kissing her fingers, one by one, starting with the smallest and working his way to her thumb. She bit her lip to keep from looking up. He was just trying to distract her and it would not work. There was some serious thinking going on, and this was his ankle after all, if he thought--

She gulped when Terry licked her thumb.

She glanced at the mirror, saw John watching the road and not them, and she turned to look at Terry.

Terry was watching the road as well, and didn't seem to notice her.

It didn't matter. She didn't blink.

"You did that on purpose."

"Did it work? Are you no longer thinking about how much pain I'm in?"

"Are you?"

"Not right now." He started to kiss her fingers one by one, and she frantically worked to get her hand free before the lick came and John or Izzy thought Terry had completely lost his mind.

A giggle welled up in Madison, caught in her throat and nearly made it out before she smothered it by kissing Terry.

Pulling away before anyone saw them, she gripped Terry's hand.

"I did it on purpose," he whispered.

The minivan turned into a parking lot pooled with rain. John stopped by the entrance of the Urgent Care Center, let them out, then went to park the minivan while they hurried inside.

Walking with a limp, Terry went without help to the reception desk.

He filled out paperwork while Madison waited at his elbow. She wished he would do it sitting down, but was too timid to speak up while a nurse was nearby.

"Shouldn't you sit?" Izzy asked, and Terry grunted without looking up from his paperwork.
Emboldened, Madison tugged at his arm, and finally led him to some chairs near the wall. He went down those forms, scratching in this, filling in that-- Madison tried to see what it meant but got lost in the wording. Insurance stuff.

Then he limped to the desk, handed in his clipboard and was directed to a waiting area teeming with people.

They found one empty seat.

"It's yours," Terry waved at Madison, but Madison folded her arms and looked at him until the elderly man in the next chair chuckled.

"He has a sprained ankle," Madison explained, and the man nodded in approval.

"Woman sounds like she knows what she's talking about."

Terry sighed, and took the empty chair. He shifted his foot more than once, and Madison knew he was in some pain. Terry wasn't a complainer, but for once in his life that was going against him.

Someone was called, a seat on the other side of the room became available, and the elderly man got up and claimed it, leaving the one beside Terry empty.

Izzy motioned Madison into the chair. "He did it for you-- take it."

"We can trade when your feet get tired," Madison offered. Unzipping her coat, Madison looked up as John came into the waiting area.

Looking a bit drowned, John strode over, and stood next to Izzy.

"Looks like we picked a good day to come," John joked. "Hey, is that Mike?" John went over and talked to someone he knew, while Terry was confined to his chair. Mike-- whoever the man was, came over and talked to Terry, and for awhile, the men seemed to have a passably good time.

Then Mike got called, and Terry slumped in his chair.

John nudged Terry in the arm. "At least you can sit."

"Sorry for dragging everyone out here like this."
"Did you roll your ankle on purpose?"

"No."

"Then knock it off." John pulled out his iPhone and Madison saw Terry start to look for his own.

She took it out of her pocket, and was about to hand it to Terry, when it rang.

Her nerves were stretched so thin, the ring startled her.

She dropped it.

"At least it was on carpet," Terry sighed, and leaned over and picked up the phone. "Look at that-- another call from Syracuse. The last one was from Connor."

"The PI?" John asked.

Terry nodded, and turned the ringer all the way down.

"Are you going to answer it?"

"I probably shouldn't even have this thing on while we're in here." Terry waited. "It can't be Connor. It's not his number."

"Hey, wait a moment." John lowered his voice and Madison and Izzy leaned in to hear. "What if it's Tim?"

"It can't be-- I have his number in my address book. His name would show up if it was him."

"Then it's a wrong number," John shrugged.

Terry blew out a breath, moved his finger over the slider and answered the call.

"Hello?" Terry's brows shot up.

Madison watched him and knew something was happening.

"What?" she asked. "Who is it?"
"Let me put you on hold a moment while I talk to Maddie." He touched the screen, dropped his head and breathed like he needed more air. "Your niece is on the phone."

"Please tell me you mean Abby."

Terry raised his eyes. "She says she's Tim's step-daughter, and she wants to talk to you."

A gulp squeezed down Madison's throat.

"How old is she? Do you know?"

"If this is the step-daughter, then she's eleven. I have no idea if her parents put her up to this, but I'm afraid to ask."

Though she felt lightheaded, Madison reached for the phone and Terry handed it over.

A million thoughts jammed into her brain at the same time, careening against each other and getting nowhere fast. Though Madison felt she was in no way ready for this, she managed to squeak out,

"Hello?"

"Hi?" came from the other end. The voice was young and even more nervous than Madison. "Are you Mrs. Davis?"

"Yes, I am. Could I ask your name?"

"I'm Paige." The girl gave a long pause. "Are you really Madison? Are you really her? Because if you're not, would you please tell me up front? Tim's been looking for you for the longest time, and if it's not you, I don't know what will happen. He's in the kitchen with Mommy-- they think I can't hear them, but I can. Tim's got his hopes up so high, I'm afraid he'll take it really hard if he's wrong. I just need to know. Is it you?"

"It's me."

"Promise? Promise it's you?"

"I promise."
"Okay. Then I guess it's all right. Madeline and I have been worrying about him, so if you're real, then I guess Tim will be okay."

"Madeline is your sister?"

"Yeah. We've been making sacrifices. That's what Tim calls them. We've been cutting back on groceries except for things Mommy needs for a healthy pregnancy, so we can pay the investigator. Mr. Connor gives Tim a low rate, but we're not rich. When we're saving money, we don't go to the movies, and we don't have vacations. Except Mommy sometimes has Tim take us out on bike rides, and we make sandwiches and go on picnics and stuff. She's like that."

"She sounds nice."

"We haven't been riding for a while. She says she's getting too big, but I think she's tired. Mommy hasn't been this tired since Daddy passed away. My real daddy." Paige let out a sigh. "Please don't tell Tim I called."

"He'll know when he sees the phone bill, won't he?"

"I guess so."

"How did you get this number?"

"I saw it on the top sheet of his notebook."

Madison heard a door open, then,

"Uh-oh."

She heard arguing, a man's angry voice and a girl's defensive tone going back and forth. She made out a word here and there, enough to know Tim had found his daughter and that he knew who she was talking to.

"What's going on?" Terry asked.

Madison covered the phone. "Tim didn't know about the call, but he does now."

"And?"

"I think angry would be putting it mildly."
Terry mouthed an, "Oh," and leaned back.

The urgent care room had emptied enough so that Izzy was now sitting on Madison's other side. John still had to stand.

"Hello?" A man's voice sounded in Madison's ear. "I apologize for my daughter's intrusion. It won't happen again." The call hung up before Madison could say a word, and she looked at Terry.

"What?" Terry asked, and Madison told him what had happened.

"I need to call my brother."

Terry nodded. "Please save the news about your past for when I'm there to help. This isn't the best time. Agreed?"

She wasn't brave enough for that talk, and nodded in agreement.

"I suggest going out to the minivan. For your sake, as well as mine, don't make this call alone. Please, take Izzy or John with you. In fact," Terry shifted in his seat, "my foot isn't hurting too badly, maybe I could put off the exam--"

"Oh, no, you don't." Madison got up, and so did Izzy. "You're staying put, if I have to ask John to hold you down. And I think he would, too."

John grinned, and told them where he parked the minivan.

As the women left, Madison glanced back at Terry. He looked helpless, as though he hated to be sitting where he was, when he what he wanted was to be with her. She knew he would be praying. She knew Terry well enough for that, and felt comfort in that knowledge.

"Is this rain ever going to let up?" Izzy sighed as the entrance doors opened to a smeread sky. "I think I see the minivan." She clicked open her umbrella, then held it high so Madison could take cover with her. "Try to keep your feet dry."

The women splashed across the parking lot while thunder and gray filled the heavens. It was an unusual day, the sort of day Madison knew she would never forget. Somewhere, she had a niece who had been going without vacations and groceries so her family could afford a private investigator to find her.
Izzy unlocked the van and both women climbed inside. Madison took the window seat, Izzy slid the door shut, then took the seat next to Madison.

"Are you nervous?" Izzy asked, closing the umbrella.

"Scared is more like it. Would you pray with me?"

The women joined hands and Izzy asked God for wisdom, that He would give Madison the right words to say to her brother.

Then, with Madison still holding onto Izzy's hand for support, Madison put the phone on her lap and tapped the screen for the address book. It wasn't after six like the detective had said was the best time to call, but Tim was home. She'd just heard him.

Placing the call, Madison put the phone to her ear, then held her breath as someone picked up.

"Tim? It's me. It's Madison."

"You... didn't have to call back so soon. I'm sorry Paige intruded. She shouldn't have."

"It's all right." Madison tried to steady the phone so it didn't tremble with her voice. "She wanted to make sure it was really me, so you wouldn't get your hopes up for nothing. I thought it was sweet of her to look out for you like that."

Regret sounded in Tim's voice. "Paige is a sweet kid."

"She said your wife is expecting?"

"Yeah. Anytime now."

"Congratulations."

"You're talking to me." Tim sounded as though he were pinching himself. "There's so many things I've wanted to say to you, now that we're actually talking, it feels surreal. I've dreamt of this moment all my life."

"I don't know what to say."

"Didn't you know I existed?"
"I'm afraid I didn't."

"Didn't you have a sense? Didn't you ever wonder if you had a half brother?"

"I'm sorry."

"You know, you were my hero growing up." Tim spoke as though he were talking to a famous person. "I'd hide under the bed and imagine my big sister would come and find me, and take me to live with her family. You would always save me. I'd even dream about it at night. Are you sure you didn't know about me?"

"I'm so sorry, Tim." Madison rubbed her forehead, but her heart was aching as well.

"I wish I could've been you. Why couldn't Mom give me up for adoption, too? If she didn't want me anymore, why couldn't she love me even that much? Do you know why?"

It was too hard. Madison felt the tears and couldn't hold them back.

"Instead of a family, I got left with Grandma. I got a 'goodbye' from mom when I was five, and from there on out, it was 'Shut up, and do as you're told.'" Tim's voice broke. "I accidentally found out about you from Grandma, and when I did, I knew I wasn't alone. I had a sister. I had to find you. You were all I had left."

Madison cried so hard she couldn't hear Tim. She fought for breath while Izzy soothed as best she could, considering Izzy had no idea what Tim was saying.

"Where have you been? Why couldn't I find you sooner than this?"

"I can't-- I--" Madison put the phone down. The urge to find something sharp came back, and it came back strong. She wanted to run, to cut, or curl up and never open her eyes. She put the phone to her ear. "I can't talk about that now. I'll tell you later."

"Then we'll talk again?" Relief sounded so thick in his voice, Madison realized he was crying, too.

She couldn't do this. She stared up at the dome light and tried to catch her breath.

"Yes, we'll talk again."

"I'd love to see you one day."
Madison nodded. "One day."

"I live in Syracuse."

She wiped the tears from her eyes. "Terry told me."

"It's an hour and a half from where you live."

Madison reeled. It was?

"Some day, I'd love to see you."

"Tim, I have to go."

"Please, I need you. It's all slipping away. You're all the family I've got left."

"What do you mean? You've got your wife and daughters. You've got a baby on the way. I am not all you have left."

"My wife is going to leave me, she's just waiting for the baby to come. It's happened before-- after Paige was born, my first love left me and our baby, and now Karen will leave me, too. At least your dad passed away. Mine walked. Mom left me, so did Andrea, and now Karen. You don't know what that's like."

Madison fought to keep from scratching her arm. She would not go there. She would not.

"Has Karen ever said she'll leave you?"

"No. But today, she yelled at me when I got home early from work."

"Why did you get home early?"

"Because I blacked out when Connor called to say he found you, and my boss sent me home."

It took effort to keep going, but Madison pushed on. "Why did you black out?"

"Aside from the fact I was out of my mind with shock?" Tim sounded reluctant to say. "I guess it was because I didn't eat breakfast."
"So Karen yelled at you for not eating breakfast?"

"Your point?" he sniffed.

Madison couldn't believe this. She was crying and arguing with a half brother she hadn't even known existed before today.

"She's probably not leaving you, not over that."

"Are you sure?"

"Tim, I have to hang up." Madison felt weak, drained of strength to the point of passing out, herself. "I'll try to call again, tomorrow."

"Thank you-- thank you for calling when you did. I'm sorry Paige barged in on you."

"It's okay." Madison closed her eyes. "I like your step-daughter, Tim. You have a wife who takes you out on picnics, and two girls who care about you."

"Yeah, Karen does that."

"Those are what I would call blessings."

"Blessings would imply the existence of God."

"Then what would you call your family?" Madison sighed. "I have to go. Terry is in urgent care with a sprained ankle, and I'm out of energy."

"But you'll call later, won't you? You'll call tomorrow?"

"I will. I promise."

"Thank you, Madison. I hope your husband is all right."

They hung up, leaving Madison to nearly pass out where she sat. Her tears had already stopped, but her insides felt wobbly, as though if anyone else tried to lean on her, she would topple over.

"That sounded like quite a conversation." Izzy patted Madison's hand. "Don't try to tell me anything-- you'll only repeat yourself when you see Terry."
Terry. Madison fought to get out of the minivan. Her hip ached, her heart was being squeezed in
every direction, and if she were asked at that very second to add two plus two, she feared what
she might say.

She was losing it, but she needed to get back to Terry.

Madison sent up a prayer as she and Izzy plunged into the rain, crossed the parking lot, then
hurried into the building.

*When my heart is overwhelmed... when my heart is overwhelmed...*

They went back to the waiting area, only to fi

*find Terry still there with John. The men waved to
them, and thankfully there were seats enough for everyone. Madison took a chair next to Terry,
grabbed his hand, and tried to ignore the concern on his face.*

"Start from the top," Terry whispered, and the three listened intently as she told them of her
conversation with Tim.

As she went on, Terry's eyes grew alarmed, but Madison kept going, and kept her voice as quiet
and calm as she could. She tried to manage Terry's concern with Tim's need for a big sister. And
Tim did need her.

"Are you all right?" Terry asked.

She smiled. She was all right.

"Did you tell him about your 'adoption'?" Terry groaned when a nurse called his name. He
brushed it off, and waited for Madison to answer.

"No, I didn't tell him." Madison got to her feet, helped Terry up, then pulled his arm around her
shoulders.

She was going with Terry.

She was his wife, and she was going.

Terry was so preoccupied with Tim, he forgot to resist her help. He leaned on her, and though
Madison stooped under Terry's weight, she kept putting one foot in front of the other, not
realizing her own strength.
Something was happening to Madison. Like someone reaching for something in the dark and just barely making out what was in front of them, she sensed it rather than understood it. Her muscles were being used, though they weren't controlling her butterfly wings yet. She was becoming stronger, even though she didn't feel strong.

As her body moved beside Terry's, she could feel the wind tugging at her wings.

Her life was changing, and so was she, and the only thing that kept her from plunging headlong into fear was her faith in God. God knew what He was doing.

He had formed this butterfly, and even though her wings weren't ready yet, the wind would not crush her.

It might feel like it from time to time, but she was still here. She was still alive, and that meant she had to keep trying. Madison sighed. Life sure took a lot of effort. She had no idea how much work it took for people to keep going, but now that she was out here, trying to live like everyone else, there was no turning back.

As they sat down in the examination room to wait for the doctor, Terry took her hand and Madison breathed deep.

For a day filled with falling skies and a first meeting with a half brother she'd never known she had, Madison was amazingly at peace. She looked down at her hand joined with Terry's, then at Terry's smile, and knew why that could be.

Love could do that.

"We [Terry and Madison] have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him."
~ 1 John 4:16 ~

"I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine..."
~ Song of Solomon 6:3 ~
Chapter Thirty-five

Everyday Courage

"Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands."
~ Nehemiah 6:9 ~

For someone who'd been run through an emotional blender by her brother, Terry thought Maddie looked remarkably calm. She quietly watched the doctor examine his sore ankle, and when it was time for him to move to another room to get his foot X-rayed, she went with him. Though they acted like newlyweds who couldn't bear to be out of each other's sight, it didn't embarrass Terry in the slightest. Let the doctor and the entire medical staff smile all they wanted-- this woman loved him, and Terry wore it like a badge of honor.

A brother. If only Terry could feel as calm. Maddie now had a surprise brother and Terry now had a brother-in-law. Wow, had that ever come from left field. From the sound of it, Tim had some problems-- Connor had mentioned something about Tim being a little high-strung, and from Maddie's worn out eyes, Connor had been telling the truth.

Despite all that, she wasn't scratching herself, she didn't look seconds away from self-injury. Either she was doing a good job of acting, or Maddie had come away all right.

When he could, Terry held onto Maddie's hand to let her know he was there for her, though from her soft fingers, it felt more like she was comforting him, than the other way around. And she was comforting. After the X-ray was over, and he could go back to Maddie, her touch felt wonderfully reassuring. Terry felt guilty for hurting his ankle on the same day her brother turned up, but as long as Maddie was all right, then Terry figured, so would he.

A brother-in-law. Terry still couldn't get over that.

By the time they rejoined John and Izzy in the waiting area, Terry felt more than a little eager to get home.

"It's a mild sprain," Maddie told them, and John looked satisfied that it wasn't something worse.
As she told them what else the doctor had said, Maddie moved hard into Terry's side. The message was clear. She was going to help. Not wanting to push her away, Terry put some weight on her shoulder—enough to let her know she was doing something useful, but not so much she would fall over. She was helping enough people, she didn't need him bleeding away precious strength. He knew he'd have to rest his foot, but momentarily toyed with the thought of going against doctor's orders. His sprain had been so mild, the doctor hadn't bothered to give him crutches. So maybe he could do away with the rest.

"The rain stopped." Maddie was all peaches and cream, and when she looked at him and smiled, he found himself smiling back.

As they drove home, Terry worked on patience to let his ankle heal. He wanted to be the one helping Maddie, especially now that she had Tim, and he wished there was something he could do to help. Making an injury worse wouldn't help Maddie though, and Terry prayed for more patience. And for the patience to have it answered. He was reminded of the man who prayed for patience, and wanted it now.

"I'm sorry my ankle is happening at the same time as all the rest of this." Terry looked at Maddie as she squeezed a soft hand over his. "You're taking good care of me, and I love you for it, but I want to help. What can I do to help you?"

When she didn't answer right away, he could tell there was something.

Maddie bit her lip, and when he coaxed her with a smile, she finally pushed out the words. "If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to keep my half of our appointment with Carol."

"That's tonight, isn't it? I'd forgotten all about that."

"Please, Terry, I need to see her. I can take Izzy or Abby with me, so I won't be alone."

"Do you feel like cutting?"

"Not at the moment." Maddie looked at him and he sensed she was trying to be honest. "I thought about it when I was talking to Tim, though. But I didn't. I didn't even scratch. You can ask Izzy."
"I believe you." Terry tried to breathe and stay calm. Okay. So she'd been under as great a strain as he'd thought. No big surprise there.

"I'm okay, Terry."

He nodded, the thump of his heart quickening despite the assurance. "Whatever you need Maddie-- you'll have."

"I'll drive her," Izzy spoke up.

"Do you want me to leave the minivan in front of the house?" John asked Izzy.

"No, we'll take the car." Izzy had already decided, and Terry smiled his thanks.

John flashed his grin in the rear view mirror. "Go back to your conversation-- forget we're even here."

Terry wanted to laugh, but his heart felt heavy.

"Thanks, Izzy." Maddie tucked her head against Terry's shoulder, and the weight of it had a calming effect on Terry. She took his hand, and as the vehicle moved down the road, Terry felt the smooth underside of her palm, the small curve of her long fingers. He knew God was keeping them safe. The water had risen but He had kept their heads above the waves, and they were still alive. So life was coming at them strong-- they could do this. God wasn't giving them a test they couldn't endure. Clutching that thought, Terry saw home ahead, the outline of their house showing through the trees, and silhouetting against a moody Three Mile Bay.

They pulled off the main road, slowed to a stop in front of the house as white forked over the water. No fly fishing today. It was a stray thought, one that made Terry smile in spite of himself. He slid open the side door, then eased himself out while Maddie hovered at his back.

Abby had the front door open, and was looking at him as though he'd just come through surgery.
"Mild sprain," Terry said blandly, and Abby shouted the news inside like it was something wildly important.

It wasn't.

As Terry limped inside the house, he heard the clamor of the munchkins and felt one of them take his hand. He looked down and saw Debbie.

"I'm okay, Sweetheart."

"Then why did you have to go?"

Terry had to admit. She got him there.

"Is Dad putting away the van?" Abby asked.

"We have an appointment tonight," Izzy nodded, "but we'll use the car."

"Uncle Terry isn't planning on going anywhere, is he? Not in the shape he's in?" Abby looked at Terry as though he were planning an escape of some sort, and Terry resisted the urge to tease his niece.

"I'm in fine enough shape, thank you very much."

"I'm taking Madison to Carol's," Izzy explained.

"I could take her."

"Thanks, Abby, but there's no need. Madison and I will do just fine." Izzy pulled off her coat as the little ones waited for their hugs. "Is that dinner I smell?"

Abby smiled, and Terry let go of Debbie to sink onto the living room couch. He knew that smile. Abby had been in the kitchen, and unless Jake had been involved, dinner stood in question. Ricky climbed onto the couch and looked at Terry, his small face breaking into a smile when Terry's did.
"Did your mommy fix dinner?" Terry asked, and Ricky nodded soberly. "That's what I thought."

"I may have cooked," Abby laughed, "but I followed Jake's instructions to the letter. If it works, it won't be because of me-- it'll be because Mom's been a good teacher, and Jake gave good directions."

"Well, however it turns out, thanks for trying." John wearily shrugged off his coat. "I don't know about everyone else, but I'm glad to be home."

"Everyone else is, too," Terry said from the couch. Terry handed his coat to Jake with a nod of thanks. "I guess the rain really played a number on the folks in this area, because urgent care was packed to the gills."

"You're sure it's just a mild sprain?" Abby asked.

"Yup. I know I'm limping, but it's not that bad." Terry looked about for Maddie, and didn't find her. "There's hardly any swelling, though I still have to ice it and give it rest."

"You need to elevate." Maddie sounded no-nonsense as she knelt at Terry's feet and began to take off his shoes.

Terry looked to Ricky for help.

"Do you want your card?" the boy asked.

"Card?" Terry watched as Maddie pulled out a chair, padded it with pillows, then carefully propped his leg. He was now elevated. He made some adjustments until the pillows were comfortable, then noticed Maddie was gone. Where was she now?

"I think he needs his cards." Ruthie sounded very sure, and all four children ran to the hall.

"They kept busy," Jake smiled, as Abby and Izzy went into the kitchen.
Terry didn't ask doing what, knowing he would soon find out. John sank into the recliner and seemed to enjoy the show. A moment later, Maddie came back with something cold wrapped in a towel, and placed it on Terry's ankle. Easy for John to enjoy things, he wasn't the one with a cold foot.

As Maddie stepped away and started to collect coats, Terry snagged her hand, and tugged her back to the couch.

"Sit with me?" he asked.

"I have to help in the kitchen."

"Please?"

She looked as though she needed the rest anyway.

It seemed she couldn't resist seeing him beg, and she circled to his left, sat down, and he scooped an arm around her shoulders.

"Here they come," Jake warned, as four munchkins charged into the room with paper in their hands.

"What's this?" Terry laughed. He dropped his arm as the kids climbed onto the couch, surrounding them from both sides.

"It's our cards-- to make you feel better and get well soon." Ruthie held up hers. "Mine first, please." She sounded so polite as she thrust something into Terry's hand. "Jake helped."

"Daddy helped me, too," Ricky said, waiting patiently to go second.

Even as Terry and Maddie admired the drawings and carefully scrawled well-wishes, (no doubt also with Jake's help), Terry could see Maddie fighting like crazy to keep her eyes open. She was running on fumes, and if she had any hope at all of making that appointment with Carol, Terry
knew Maddie needed to get some rest before tonight. He kissed all four munchkins for their thoughtfulness, then said he would put these in his room to remind him to get better.

He was about to call over Abby and Jake so he could tell them something, when Abby announced it was dinnertime.

"Good news-- Mom said the food turned out really well." Abby came into the living room with a smile she usually saved for landing large pike. "Stay where you are, Uncle Terry. Dinner's coming to you and Aunt Madison. I thought we could eat buffet-style in here, so you could keep your foot up, and we could keep you both company."

"Thanks," Terry smiled, as Jake took the kids to get their hands washed. "When you and Jake have a moment together, Maddie has some news to tell."

"You can't be pregnant?"

"Not even close. When Jake is here, we'll tell you what happened with the rest of our day."

Abby looked to her father, and John only smiled. "You're buying a car?"

"How about a pony?" Ruthie came in with clean hands and a big smile. "Ponies are more fun than cars, and they don't need gas stations."

"I'd rather you get a dog." Lizzie followed her sister into the living room and looked at Terry. "If you're getting a pet, then why can't it be a dog? Why does it have to be a pony?"

"You can ride a pony."

"Then get a really big dog."

Terry searched for a place to jump in, then noticed Abby coming back with two plates of steaming hot chicken Alfredo casserole. It prompted John to push up from the recliner and come get a closer look. Abby presented a plate to Terry, one to Maddie, then gave them napkins and silverware. John looked to Abby, then at dinner, and raised his eyebrows in appreciation for
his daughter's handiwork. The sight of dinner broke off the debate over Terry's future transportation, and the kids ran to the kitchen to get their plates.

Soon Abby and Jake had pulled chairs next to the couch, John was back in his recliner, and Izzy was curled on the other end of the couch with Debbie. Ruthie, Lizzie, and Ricky ate on the floor with their toys, and this time, the TV stayed off. After John had Terry say a prayer over dinner, Maddie nudged Terry in the side to get him going.

"Guess who called today?" Terry smiled and tried a bite of casserole as the munchkins on the floor started up in a chorus of off-the-wall guesses. "This is good chicken Alfredo, Abby."

"Forget the chicken," Abby sighed, "cut to the chase. What's your news? Who called?"

Maddie nodded to Terry, coaxing him to not drag it out.

"A private investigator--" he started.

"A PI?" Abby gasped. "No way. An actual private investigator? Like on TV?" She stopped being starstruck a moment, and turned serious. "Are you in trouble? Is someone investigating you?"

Terry sighed, and tapped his fork on the plate. "This is good chicken."

"I don't want to know about the chicken."

"Then let me finish." He then told them the strange conversation with Ben Connor.

Abby went from baffled to stunned in as many seconds as it took Terry to get the words out of his mouth. As for Maddie, she kept quiet, and kept eating, hardly ever looking up longer than for a few seconds at a time. Since Maddie didn't usually eat without being coaxed, Terry was grateful she was keeping her strength up for the appointment with Carol.

"A brother. Aunt Madison has a half brother." Abby sat with her mouth open, still looking completely stunned.
That's not all. Tim's step-daughter called Madison." Terry pushed on, and noticed Jake wasn't eating, either. This was the first AJ had heard of anything about Tim and his family, and AJ had a lot of catching up to do. Since Maddie had been detailed about her talk with Paige, Terry didn't hold back, and related everything Maddie had told him. This was family, and theirs had just gotten bigger by several people in one day.

"Then Maddie called Tim."

"There's more?" Abby swallowed, and nodded for Terry to go on.

The food really did look good, and Terry tried to get a bite in whenever he could without Abby or Jake urging him to get back to the story.

As Terry told them about Maddie's talk with Tim, Abby covered her mouth, and listened so intently, a ladybug could've tiptoed across the floor and Abby would've noticed. When he came to the part where Tim leaned on Maddie with his own problems, Terry watched to see Abby's reaction. Abby was protective of her family, but Tim was also family, so when Abby remained quiet, Terry wasn't surprised.

"I can only imagine what you and Aunt Madison must've gone through today." Abby blew out a breath, and looked completely wowed. "I don't know how I'd take the news of my mom's death--even if she had left me with a creep. I'm guessing it was still a shock." Abby looked at Maddie, and Maddie didn't seem to know what to say. "A brother, even a half brother is great. I know I've never told Mom or Dad this, but I've always thought it'd be kind of nice to have a brother. You know, to go fishing with? Don't get me wrong, girls, you guys are the best. I wouldn't trade you for a boatload of fishing buddies."

The triplets grinned, and Debbie cozied against Izzy as they kept eating dinner.

"Are you going to meet him?" Jake asked, starting in on his meal for the first time. His face brightened. "This is good, Abby."

Now it was Abby's turn to grin.
"I don't know." Maddie shrugged and looked uncertain. "One day. I'd like to see him. I'd like to see his family, and meet all my new nieces. I never thought I'd have any besides the ones in this room."

"When you're ready, we could call, and drive down there to meet them," Terry offered. "Or they could come up here." Terry saw Maddie go pale at the thought, and wondered if he should've kept his mouth shut. "There's no rush. When you think it's a good idea, let me know." He saw Maddie calm a little, and understood the feeling, even though he wasn't in her position. She wanted to go forward, and yet was grateful she could do it in small steps.

"You're someone's hero, Aunt Madison." Abby smiled wide. "That's got to feel good. I've never been anyone's hero before."

"I don't know about that." Jake gave Abby a quiet, steady look. "You've always been mine."

Feeling as though he were intruding on a private moment, Terry turned his attention on dinner. He heard Abby's breath catch, saw out of the corner of his eye as Abby brushed something from her cheek, and tried hard not to smile when Abby reached over and touched Jake's hand.

Those two.

As Maddie finished her meal, her eyes began to close. She set aside the plate and looked ready to fall asleep right there. Terry was about to ask if she wanted to go lay down in the bedroom, when she curled tightly beside him, leaned against his shoulder like one big human pillow, and started to doze off.

"Abby, would you get the extra comforter from the master bedroom, please?" Izzy looked over Terry at Madison, all curled up at Terry's side like she was keeping warm. "John, you'd better turn up the heat. I haven't seen the forecast, but I'm guessing it's going to freeze tonight. Jake, I hope you and Abby make use of that fireplace."

"We will, Mom, don't worry."

When Abby returned with the comforter, Terry held up his plate, and Abby covered him and Maddie with the blanket, leaving plenty left over to entirely drape the chair propping Terry's leg.
From this vantage it looked like an absurd tent, so Terry pulled it back until it only covered his foot, not the back of the chair.

"Is this okay?" Terry whispered, checking the woman cuddled at his side.

Maddie gave a low, contented moan, already half asleep. He held back from telling her that if she didn't look better than this before it was time to leave, then-- man, this was hard. He didn't want to get in her way, so if she thought she could handle it, then so be it. He wouldn't stop her, but it would be hard to see her go after the long hard day she'd just had.

The fact it was raining again, didn't encourage him.

As Terry finished his chicken Alfredo, he kept watch over Maddie and tried not to think about what he often did when it rained at night. That first night when rain and low temperatures made him search the Old Mill Campground for someone who needed help. The memory chilled him, and he tucked the blanket around Maddie and tried to think of something else. She was making good progress from the lost puppy he'd found, for she no longer reminded him of one, but the time would never come when he could go through a freezing night like this and not thank God for the fact Maddie wasn't out in all that cold.

With that, Terry tucked the blanket a little more.

* * * *

Warmth surrounded her like a hug from someone wonderful. Madison burrowed her face against the pillow, only to become aware of the pulse under her ear. Terry's heart. That had to be his heart, for it filled her with love and made her want to stay there forever. She listened with every fiber so it would become her beat as well. Peeking her eyes open, she found herself napping on his left arm, her head on his chest.

Knowing his arm must be stiff, Madison sat up, and Terry stirred. The house had gone to bed, the living room night-light was on, and she could hear rain beating the roof.

"Don't worry about Carol," Terry groaned as he got his arm working, "I rescheduled your appointment." He shifted his leg and Madison worked to help him move the pillows. "I tried to
wake you when it was time to leave, but you kept sleeping, and I didn't have the heart to shout. Carol had a cancellation, so we rescheduled you to eight o'clock, tomorrow morning. Is that okay?"

Lightning blinked in the living room window, and Madison saw the night-light flicker.

"Is that okay with you, Maddie?"

"Thanks, Terry. I'm so tired, I don't think I could've gone tonight, anyway."

"Then I'm glad it worked out. I wasn't crazy about you leaving again-- not when you were already so spent. If you thought you could handle it though, I wasn't going to get in your way." Terry pushed back the chair and lifted down his leg.

"Thanks for letting me try, Terry."

He nodded. "Izzy made up our couches, so unless you want to sleep here for the night, I suggest we turn in like sensible people and go to bed."

"I want to be sensible, Terry."

"Good. So do I." Terry started to lean forward and get up, but winced, and Madison scrambled and to help him off the couch. "Thanks, getting up hurts."

"I like it when we do things together," she smiled, as he gingerly stood. "It's like you need me, and I'm good for something."

"Hey." He pulled her hand, and tugged her close until their eyes met in the half darkness. He balanced on one foot and used the chair for support, and she smiled in spite of his serious gaze. "You are useful. Not because you're my wife, or you're a part of this family, but because you're a human being made in the likeness of God. You have worth."

"And you need me," she finished hopefully.

"Like I need my next breath."
"Never stop breathing." She moved into Terry, and his arms came around her shoulders. His balance shifted, a hand went to the chair to steady himself, but he held her and she didn't ever want him to let go.

"As long as I have life, I won't stop needing you," he whispered.

Madison closed her eyes and listened to the rain, to the sound of her heart, and to the sound of Terry's breathing. Private music, just for them.

He shifted his weight and groaned softly.

"At least you only have to stay off your foot for a small while, Terry. Three days isn't so long."

Terry pulled away a little, but she held on. "The doctor said to take it easy for one or two days-- I didn't hear three."

"He said one to three," Madison countered, "but when I repeated, 'three days,' he nodded 'yes.'"

"How about we compromise and go with two?"

"Two isn't three."

"I know," Terry smiled.

"Okay, but if it still hurts, then you rest one more."

"Fair enough."

In her head, Madison was starting to call that room by its right name. There were couches in there, but it was a bedroom. She wanted to get used to that name and not flinch every time she said it, or someone else did. Crazy people did that, and she would not be crazy. Even if she was, it didn't mean she had to give in. She would fight it.
Madison clicked on the bedroom light and saw their couches covered in sheets and blankets, and looking inviting. Izzy had done a good job.

"I don't think I'm going to need help in here," Terry said, releasing Maddie's shoulder. "Something's always going to be within reach-- an instant crutch." Terry used one of the couches for support as he moved between them, then turned sideways and moved to the dresser, snagged some pajamas from the top dresser drawer without losing his balance, then headed into the bathroom with a triumphant grin. The door clicked shut behind him.

The house was asleep, and Madison closed their bedroom door as quietly as she could without waking anyone, especially the triplets down the hall. She had no idea if they were light sleepers, or if Terry's gargling in the bathroom would wake them. She'd never slept here before. Strange how nighttime and the shut door made the room seem smaller. She hadn't noticed that when it was day. A slight chill crept up her arms as she looked at the bed that was supposed to be Terry's. Izzy had made up the couches so the pillows were on the same ends.

That wouldn't work.

Hoping Terry would stay in the bathroom a little longer, Madison went to work remaking her bed. Maybe, one day, she would switch back the other way. When she was ready. That day was not this one. She hurried, and tucked, and was still working when the bathroom door opened. Not looking up, she kept going as Terry made his way around her couch.

He didn't ask what she was doing, or why, but collapsed on his bed with a tired groan.

"Bathroom's yours."

She looked up, and green flannel pajamas greeted her. Terry hadn't bothered to push back his blankets, for he'd dropped on top of his couch and lay on everything like a tired man who didn't care if he got cold.

"If you get up, I'll turn down your covers," she offered.

His eyes were sliding shut, but she leaned over and tugged his hand.
"Terry?"

"Yeah." He rolled onto his side, pushed off the couch and yawned as she moved to get the blankets ready. "I think I could use the pillows in the living room for my foot." He said it as though he were making a suggestion, and not a request, but he didn't need to say a word more.

She hurried to get the needed pillows, happy she could help. When she came back, he thanked her, and piled them near the armrest so he could prop up his foot.

"Do you want me to turn out the lights?" she asked.

"No, I'll wait for you." Terry shifted until he looked comfortable. "We'll pray after you're done with the bathroom."

She nodded, felt a bit self-conscious and moved to the dresser to get her pajamas and robe. It was then she noticed Terry's wedding band in a tray with some loose coins. He didn't sleep with his wedding band, and she knew she wasn't supposed to, either. Even though she had. Madison looked at her left hand, fourth finger, and the words, "I am loved," tumbled into her heart. Smiling, she took the rings off and carefully placed it with Terry's in the tray. Not wanting anything to hurt them, she picked out the coins, then glanced at Terry's couch. He was fighting sleep, so she grabbed her clothes and hurried before he dozed and she missed out on their nightly prayer.

Terry had a really nice bathroom, but the best part was the combination bathtub shower. It meant she no longer had to have someone take her through the master bedroom-- she was now independent, she could shower whenever she wanted. Madison changed into her teddy bear pajamas, put on the robe, and wondered if it was silly that she felt nervous. Nothing was going to happen.

As she moved into the bedroom, Terry gave a sleepy smile. "There's no night-light in here, so you might want to leave the bathroom light on."

She went back, turned on the light, then closed the door halfway. She wondered if she could sleep in her robe. Would he think she was odd? He would notice the robe, but then he'd probably already noticed she was odd. Madison moved between the couches to turn off the light.
by the bedroom door, and realized Terry wouldn't be able to see her if she took her robe off there. His head was by the door, so she'd be behind him.

It was half dark anyway, so even if he turned around, he wouldn't be able to see much.

Her baggy pink and black PJs might not be very attractive, but they were married and sharing the same room, and Madison figured it paid to be careful. Taking a deep breath, she scrambled out of her robe, then dove into bed as fast as she could, tugging the blankets far over her head.

"I could comment," Terry said from the other couch, "but I won't."

"I'm ready to pray now."

She pushed the blanket under her chin, then closed her eyes while Terry quietly thanked God for leading the detective to Three Mile Bay, so Tim could talk to his sister for the first time; Terry prayed for Tim, and Karen, and their girls, and for the health of the baby that was due any time. He thanked God for the day's other blessings, including the chance to exercise patience by enduring a sprained ankle, and that it had only been a mild injury. For the couches, the roof over their heads, and the fact they were together. As Madison listened, she realized Terry was pouring his heart out before the Lord, and that it was all gratitude.

When Terry finished, the sound of rain on their window filled the silence.

Her blanket was getting warm, and from Terry's breathing, she could tell he was still awake.

"Emily called us this evening," Terry said quietly.

Madison turned on her pillow. "Why didn't you wake me so I could thank her for the bread machine?"

"I tried, but you were out like a light." There was a smile in Terry's voice, and it made Madison smile, too. "They got back Sunday night because Brian had work today." Terry gave a sleepy sigh. "Emily said the trip went well. Her father was in one piece when she came back, so they're happy." Terry yawned, and it made Madison yawn and stretch beneath her covers. "Emily wished us congratulations. She was glad Vegas worked out."
"I'm glad too. I think I'm beginning to like Emily."

"Really." Terry breathed, and when he spoke, there was a decided smile in his voice. "What about Brian?"

Madison wanted to hurl something soft at Terry, but he was quietly laughing and it wouldn't have done any good. He stilled, and she listened to the rain, loving the way it made her feel cozy all the way down to her socks. She felt so safe.

"Terry?"

"Hmmm?" He was fading now, but she heard him sniff and asked her to go ahead.

"I'm remembering things."

"That's good." Terry began to snore a little, so she lowered her voice and kept going.

"Momma had trouble holding down a steady job, so we sometimes lived in a car." Madison took a moment to let the memories seep in, and they came much easier than she expected. On a night like this, she could remember almost anything, and be all right. She spoke dreamily, and let the words flow out how they wanted. "We'd visit Grandma-- I remember her, Terry-- we'd visit her and they'd yell at each other until Momma got her money and then we were back on the road. I hadn't remembered that until now. Seeing that picture reminded me of the way it used to be. I could be fearless-- I'd go barefoot and scare Momma by finding bugs in the grass with my toes, and yet when I was really little, I was frightened to death of the swing set in Grandma's backyard. I wouldn't go near it."

"Why?" Terry asked, his voice now much more awake than before.

It took Madison a long moment to accept what she was now remembering. She'd pushed away those memories for so long, it felt as though they hadn't happened. But they had. "The old man who lived next door told me that if I was a bad girl, the first time I got on a swing, God would make me fall off and break my neck. So I stayed away and it made Grandma so mad. She said she'd put it in just for me, and when the old man heard that, he couldn't stop laughing."
"Who was he? This old man?"

"No one. Just an old man. I always stayed away from the swings no matter where we went, because Momma was constantly telling me I was bad. There wasn't any way I wouldn't break my neck."

"He sounds like quite a neighbor," Terry breathed quietly. "You still don't believe that about the swings, or about yourself, do you?"

"I didn't even remember it until just now. I've spent so much of my life trying to forget Momma, I forgot the things that came with her." Madison listened to the rain and the memories kept coming. "How do I make them stop, Terry? I'm so tired-- I need to make them stop."

Terry started to hum, the tune familiar and comforting, and then he added words in a hushed voice:

*Jesus loves me, this I know,*  
*For the Bible tells me so...*

It was a simple song, but one that reminded her of something important. She truly wasn't alone. His singing voice was a little rough, but at the same time it reached inside her soul and made her warm. She felt rocked back and forth, and comforted. She felt protected, and loved. When his voice faded away, she felt love for the One Who had first loved her, and for the one who had loved her enough to sing to her.

"That's your song," she whispered.

"You don't know how right you are." Terry sounded as though he were remembering something of his own. "When I was little, I used to sing that when I didn't know what else to do. I'd close my eyes and sing to myself. Do you think you can sleep now?"

"I love you, Terry."

"Oh, Maddie. I love you, too."
Terry exhaled, and his next breath sounded like the beginning of sleep. She heard rain on the window again, her arms felt heavy, and she could barely keep her eyes open.

Tired and feeling safe, Madison trusted herself to God and let sleep come.

* * * *

Tim’s morning was getting off to a dismal start. Being sent home early was one thing, but to be told he had to stay home to be on the safe side, was another. What was his boss? a doctor? The man didn’t know what he was talking about. “To be on the safe side.” What did that mean? What was it supposed to mean? Just because he’d passed out yesterday, didn’t mean he was sick or needed time off. Tim bit back frustration as he hung up the phone, fearing this might be a sign of no-confidence from his boss. There had been four layoffs in the past three months, and so far, Tim had managed to escape with his job intact.

He went back to the breakfast table to finish his coffee, now that there wasn’t any rush to get out the door.

Karen took another bite of sliced apple. "Who was that?"

"Mr. Wendell.” Tim thought about all the times he had showed up to work without being late, the times he’d helped out without being asked. It was being passed over like it hadn’t even counted. Like he didn’t count. He was next. He felt it.

"Honey?” Karen was looking at him, and he hurried to smile. "What did he want?"

"Who?"

"Mr. Wendell. Are you all right?”

Tim nodded, and stirred in another sugar.

"Well? What did he want?"
"He wants me to stay home today. To be on the safe side." Tim tossed aside the sugar packet and dimly wondered how much unemployment he could draw before he found another job.

"That was nice of him." Karen got up, went to the fridge and took out the milk. "Then I guess you can enjoy your morning for a change."

Tim looked at his wife. She didn't get it. She really didn't. This wasn't a kindness, it was a slap in the face.

"Mr. Wendell is always so thoughtful-- he reminds me of Mr. Scrooge. You know, after he was visited by the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come?" Karen smiled as she poured a glass, then put the milk back in the fridge. "Ever since he gave us that large ham for Christmas, I haven't been able to get the image out of my mind. Do you want some milk?"

"You already put it back."

"I can get it out again."

He stared at her.

"Tim, what's wrong? What did I say?" Karen blinked at him and Tim closed his mouth before he made her any angrier. "Please, talk to me. Don't clam up. Just, for once in your life, talk to me."

"Thank you, I don't want the milk." Tim stirred his mug, and tried not to watch as Karen eased into her chair.

Her stomach bumped into the table-- she soothed a hand over her belly, and smiled as though the baby had already been born, and could see her and smile back. Karen looked up at him, and he turned away before she caught him staring.

"What are your plans for the day?" Karen waited as he tried to make up his mind what to say. "I really wish you'd talk. Sometimes, I feel like I'm in this marriage by myself."
"I hadn't... thought about it yet." Tim scooted from the chair to wash his cup out. He had to get 
points for that. It meant less work for Karen. When he turned, and saw Karen's disappointed 
face, he didn't know what to say.

"I'm not going to leave you, Tim. I wish you'd believe me."

"I do."

Karen gave a tired sounding sigh, one that sounded more than a little discouraged.

Not knowing what else to do, Tim started rinsing the breakfast dishes and placing them in the 
dishwasher. She always liked it when he was helpful. "I don't have any plans for today," he said 
finally, wanting like crazy to break the silence, "but I thought maybe I'd call Madison. If she's not 
too busy."

"So instead of talking to me, you'll talk to her?" Karen sighed, and didn't say anything more. She 
looked as though she were fighting a losing battle, and it irritated Tim.

He switched on the dishwasher, then left the kitchen before he said something else to make her 
angry. He was losing her. He knew it. He felt as though he were waiting on the train tracks, 
trying to stop the inevitable, and of course he'd be destroyed like last time. He'd been through 
this nightmare before, but now he had help.

He had Madison.

* * * *

When morning came, Terry woke to find Maddie dressed, and in the living room reading verses 
off his phone and entering new ones from her Bible. All those childhood memories had left 
sadness behind, for he recognized the look in her eyes, that struggle to put the past where it 
belonged, for he'd had that same struggle, himself. Wanting to help his wife, Terry limped to the 
couch to join her, and they did their quiet time together.

Even though the morning grew hectic, Terry noticed Maddie's spirits kept up, and he felt better 
about not being able to go with her to the eight o'clock appointment. He wished he could go
with her to Carol's. He didn't like staying behind, but he kissed his wife as she left with Izzy, and gave her to God's safekeeping.

With Maddie gone though, the house felt empty. And not just because she wasn't there to fill it. The triplets had preschool Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday mornings-- that is, when they weren't staying away because of the flu, and now that the flu had run its course, it was back to school for the munchkins. When John returned from dropping them off, Terry didn't like the fact he was so glad to see his friend again. Loneliness wasn't supposed to kick in that fast. Terry had seen the house empty before, but with his leg propped up, he felt stranded on the couch, and it didn't feel natural. There should be more noise than this, more activity. More something.

As John settled in the recliner with his laptop, Terry felt grateful for the company and the fact John didn't go to the office where they usually worked.

All this quiet was getting to him.

No munchkins, no women, and even the rain had stopped. It didn't feel normal.

Terry checked his email, leaned back on the couch and started to answer a client when the phone in his slacks pocket rang. He let it go to finish his thought, then fished out the cell phone while he looked over his reply. The client had been vague, and Terry wanted to be as concise as possible before hitting send and making a confusing situation even worse. Work helped. It made him feel connected, and he didn't have as much time to think about being stuck with a bum ankle.

His mind on the email, Terry answered without seeing the caller ID staring him in the face.

"Hello, Terry Davis. What can I do for you?"

Silence.

Terry scanned his email, tacked on a period, then turned all attention to the caller. "Hello?" Terry waited, and was about to ask if the caller was still there, when he heard a quick intake of breath, then,
"It's-- it's Tim, Tim O'Brien."

"Well, hello, Tim." Terry smiled into the phone, and John's head bobbed up. "Thanks for calling. I'm afraid Maddie isn't here right now."

"She isn't? Do you know when she's coming back?" Disappointment sounded heavy in Tim's voice.

"She'll be gone for an hour and a half, maybe two. Her schedule got turned around yesterday when I sprained my ankle, so she's playing catch up today." Terry paused. "Maddie told me about your call. I know we haven't met, but I feel like I know you. I'm glad you found your sister."

"Thanks, I'm glad too." There was uncertainty in Tim's voice, as though he wasn't sure of himself, of Terry, or of what he wanted to say. "She told me about your ankle. I hope it's feeling better."

"It is, thanks. It's just a mild sprain, but Maddie has my leg propped on a chair and these pillows under my foot to keep the swelling down. There isn't any swelling to speak of, but Maddie's tenacious. When she makes up her mind, she puts her whole heart and every ounce of her being into it-- she can be very intense."

"How long have you known her?" The question seemed innocent enough, though Terry sensed it wasn't at all the reason why Tim had called.

"Let's see... this is October, and I met her in early September, so it's been about a month now. It feels longer only because we pack so much life into each day."

"How did you meet?"

Terry stopped short of answering. It was the natural next question, but there wasn't a funny story he could tell, nothing that wouldn't bring on more questions, and he wasn't so sure he should answer. Not without first talking to Maddie.

"This could take a while," Terry hesitated. "How much time do you have?"

"All day," Tim said glumly.
"Then let me get back to you. I have to check with someone." Terry thanked Tim for waiting, then hung up to call Maddie. As Terry waited for her to pick up, he noticed John blankly staring at his laptop, an obvious sign that his friend's concentration was anywhere but on his work. There was simply too much going on. "Hey, Maddie? Guess who just called?"

"Tim?"

"Good guess." Terry took a deep breath. "I'm interrupting your session, aren't I?"

"I was talking to Carol."

"Then I'll make this as brief as possible. Tim asked me how we met, and I want to know how much should I say? Do you want me to tell him about the Dragon?"

"You shouldn't have to tell him alone."

"Maddie, I don't mind. If this will make it easier for you, then I'd rather be the one to break the news. You can fill in the missing blanks later, and answer anything I wasn't able to, but I think I can help you both by telling him now. He deserves to know."

"I trust you."

"Thank you, Maddie, that means a lot. Would that be a green light?"

"Be gentle with him? like you are with me?"

"I promise."

"Then the light's green. Just please don't tell him about my goals? He can know I have problems, but not my goals."

"I give my word."

"Thank you, Terry. I'll pray."
"I will, too. Talk to Carol, and let me handle Tim. We'll be okay."

They hung up, and Terry paused for prayer. John sat quiet and didn't even bother to stare at his laptop. Then, gathering his calm, Terry called Tim. Tim answered so fast, it made Terry wonder if he'd had his hand on the phone the whole time.

"I just got off the phone with Maddie. You might want to grab a chair, because this could take a while." Terry took a deep breath. "You were asking how I met your sister, and it's a long story. I have to start from the beginning, before she came to Three Mile Bay, where I first met her. To do that, I need to tell you where she's been for the past twenty-six years."

"Okay. Connor said something about Madison not having it easy before she met you, and that you were trying to make up for that." Tim sounded too optimistic, too hopeful.

"Not having it easy is putting it mildly." He had to get Maddie's brother ready for bad news.

Terry started from the beginning-- not at the Old Mill Campground, but with a frightened eight-year-old. There was no other place to start, and Terry prayed for strength. He told it as simply as he could, which wasn't very hard, for he didn't know that many details, but he knew enough to turn Tim into a very quiet man. As Terry came to Three Mile Bay, he was able to offer more, though Terry still kept things as simple as possible so Tim could keep up. It was a lot to ask anyone, let alone Tim O'Brien, but by the time Terry came to the end of his narrative, Tim was weeping.

Terry waited, and gave this man who'd been searching for his half sister, some time to find his voice.

"How badly was she hurt?" Tim asked. "How much can you tell me?" Despair and rage mixed in his voice, and in the background, Terry could hear a woman trying to soothe him.

"She's not in any physical pain right now, or if she is, it's minimal. She has osteoarthritis of the hip, and she has a limp, but her doctor has her on an OTC painkiller, and most times the pain is manageable. She's also in therapy for self-injury. I don't know if you're familiar with that or not, but it's when someone uses physical pain to cope with intense emotional pain."
"Is she all right?"

"She hasn't cut in about a week and a half, and that's good. I don't want to discourage her. It can be addicting though, and she's been doing it since she was thirteen. I don't have to tell you that's a lot of history to overcome."

"Oh, man."

"She's a survivor, Tim. She's also a child of God, she loves the Lord, and she isn't in this alone. Not by a long shot. She's putting one foot in front of the other and going forward, and she's doing it right in front of me. I'm watching it happen. I tell you, Tim, everyday courage takes the most bravery. Courage is hard-won stuff, and those everyday battles-- win those, and you win something priceless. She's proving that."

"I always knew she must be special." Tim sighed. "Are you sure she's not in any pain?"

"Most of her pain isn't physical. She has a lot of scars, and they're not pretty, but most of them are on the inside. Each day is a struggle for her. Memories intrude, and her body hasn't forgotten what happened. Intimacy is a problem."

Tim was silent.

"I'm incredibly blessed to know her, and not a day goes by that I don't thank God for the gift of her friendship, and her love. Maddie is a remarkable woman. Of course, she's my wife, so I'm hardly unbiased."

"That's okay, I don't mind." Tim sounded as though he'd been smiling when he said that, and a moment later, Terry heard him put down the phone to blow his nose. When Tim picked up again, he started talking. "I can't believe there wasn't any family all this time, and no adoption. All these years-- I can't believe it. Grandma lied to me while my sister was being--" Tim went silent. "Is he dead? You said he was dead, right? I thought I heard you say he was dead, but I can't remember. I can't--"

"He's dead."
"I can't believe she was handed over like that. It's not true. Is it?"

"I'm afraid it is. Maddie will answer any questions you still have, but I'm thankful for the chance to speak to you first. You needed to know, and I didn't want her to have to tell you. She's been through enough."

"I understand. Tell her not to worry, I understand. And it won't go any further than this-- I don't spread stories around the water cooler." Tim sniffed heavily into the phone. "I won't tell anyone except my wife. She's looking at me right now like I've gone completely nuts, though she's shaking her head 'no.' First I pass out, now this. I can tell Karen, can't I? Do you think Madison would mind?"

"Karen is fine."

"So that's why we haven't been able to find her?" Tim sounded nasally, as though he were wiping his nose. "All this time. I should've been looking harder for her, I should've--"

"You couldn't know, Tim. This is in no way your fault."

"I wish I could believe that." Tim sighed. "Karen's putting a cold compress on my forehead, so I better hang up. Tell Madison... tell her I'm sorry." Tim gasped so hard Terry could hear it over the phone. "Thank you for trusting me enough to tell me all this. I wasn't expecting it, but it makes me feel like family."

"That's because you are," Terry said quietly. "Maddie will get in touch later, and then you can ask her whatever it is you wanted when you called."

"I did want to ask her for some advice. That is, if I'm not bothering Madison too much." Tim cleared his throat. "You've done a lot for my sister. I'd like to thank you. From the way you told her story, it makes me think you don't want to be thanked, but all the same-- thank you."

By now, Tim was crying again, and Terry had a hard time saying anything that would be easily heard. In the background, Karen tried to calm her husband, but Terry couldn't make out what was being said from all the loud weeping. When the line went silent, Terry hung up. A grenade
of emotion had just gone off in that man’s life, and it appeared he already had problems of his own. Terry hated to add to them, but this was Maddie's brother. Half brother or full, a secret this big would have been impossible to keep.

"How did it go?" John asked.

It was a full five minutes before Terry could answer. Somewhere in Syracuse, Karen was trying to hold Tim together; Terry could only hope and pray that he’d handled the matter with enough care so Tim would be all right.

As all right as anyone could be, with news like that.

When Terry could speak, he told John what had happened, and related Tim's half of the conversation-- what little of it there had been. There wasn't much to say, for John had heard most of it. The morning had moved at a snail's pace for Terry, and now he watched the time for when Maddie would come home.

How he wished she would come.

* * * *

The trees outside her window were one continuous green blur, the hues darker than usual since the skies were overcast. The rain held back, but Madison didn't care. She kept thinking about what she and Carol had talked about. Madison had so much she'd wanted to ask, she'd gotten a notebook from Carol to keep her thoughts straight. She'd made notes, had written down things she didn't want to forget, and had even found the courage to ask things she normally wouldn't have dared.

One thing Madison knew for sure, it wouldn't have happened if Terry had been there. His sprained ankle had been a blessing in disguise.

She held the new spiral-bound notebook on her lap, a quiet witness of what she'd said in Carol's office. Izzy kept driving, and didn't talk, and Madison noticed she hadn't asked about the notebook-- a kindness Madison didn't take lightly.
Then there was Terry's talk with her brother to think about. She had so many things going on, she felt dizzy with motion.

"Are you doing all right?" Izzy sounded a little concerned, so Madison worked up a smile.

"I was just wondering how Terry did with my brother."

"You could call and find out."

"Are we almost home?" Madison asked.

"We're not far." Izzy checked her speed, and Madison decided to wait.

It was hard though. One thought spilled into another, jamming her brain into a crazy tangle. Normal wasn't like this. Normal drove their car to work every day, got married, led responsible lives, and did normal things. Like pay bills and have kids. And normal sure didn't have to break the bad news to newly discovered half brothers about their hard-to-believe pasts. Tim would never believe it. If Madison had walked into a restaurant, pulled aside the first person she saw, and blurted out her life's story, she doubted that person would take her seriously.

Of course, if she actually did pull a stranger aside, there was also a high chance that person would call for a straightjacket. But that wasn't her point.

"We're almost home," Izzy said, but Izzy's words didn't register.

Madison would never be normal, so why was she putting so much effort into something that would never work?

When the car rolled to a stop in front of the house, Madison dropped her head back. She felt tired, like she'd been climbing uphill and needed a rest. She forced herself to move, popped open her door, and cold wind pushed into her face. The pages of her notebook began to flap, she looked about, and clamped it shut before anyone saw what she had written.

The front door opened, and John came out with a wave. "Did you find the office all right? Did you get lost?"
"Terry gave good directions," Izzy smiled. "Did you miss me?"

"Didn't even know you were gone." John said it laughingly, but he slipped a gentle arm around his wife as they went inside. "Terry, they're back."

Madison took off her coat, hugged her notebook and went to the couch-- all without looking at Terry. She set aside her purse and tucked into Terry's side, loving the way his arm came around her shoulders and made her feel safe and warm. Even protected. Her reasons for trying, and trying hard, were coming back to her; they hadn't gone anywhere, she just had to keep going.

"Thanks for driving me, Izzy." Madison smiled at her, and Izzy smiled back.

Madison felt Terry's eyes as he quietly studied her face.

"Hard session?" he asked.

"It was long." Madison rubbed her cheek against his cable knit sweater. "Thank you for talking to Tim. I can't thank you enough for that. How did he take the news?"

The hand on her shoulder caressed in small, comforting circles. She looked up, and noticed Terry motioning to John. John nodded back, and led Izzy into the hall. Terry looked down at Madison, and the caresses on her shoulder deepened.

"Terry?"

In a quiet voice, Terry told her about his phone call with her brother. Her heart ached, and she buried her face in Terry's sweater as he spoke. Tim had believed her, because he had believed Terry. A mixed blessing. Now someone else was suffering because of what the Dragon had done to her, and she hated that. She wished Tim didn't have to know.

"He took it like a man, but it hurt." Terry's chest rumbled with a groan. "I can't imagine what he's feeling, but then, he and I are in the same boat. We love the same woman."

"Should I call him now?"
"If you're up to it." Terry pulled out his phone, and handed it over. "The O'Briens might be having lunch right now, but you could try him anyway. I think we have his cell phone number."

Madison tapped her brother's name in the address book, and waited.

"He's not picking up."

"Guess he's eating." Terry checked the time. "I hate to mention it, but someone we both know is getting on the hungry side. You see, I hurt my ankle carrying a couch for this lovely woman, and now I'm stuck here. I'm not supposed to use my ankle, so I can't get food from the kitchen. Isn't that something? I don't suppose you know anyone who might be going that way?"

Though she suspected him of trying to cheer her up, she couldn't help it, and smiled. When she kept looking at him, he moved closer. He lowered his head, and she met his mouth with a kiss. His lips were so gentle, she wanted to stay there all day, then a stomach rumbled and Madison had to fight hard not to smile.

"I'm sorry." Terry looked so embarrassed. "I'm not romantic, I know--"

She stopped him with a kiss. "Do you want leftover chicken, or tuna salad?"

Lunch was spent on the living room couch with Terry, and Madison wouldn't have had it any other way. She had a friend in him, one she enjoyed spending time with, one she truly liked being around. When he wanted something, he didn't bully, and when he kissed, he didn't force.

The more she knew him, the deeper her love grew.

The house shifted gears as Terry went to work on his laptop, John left to pick up the triplets, and Izzy cleaned up after lunch. Madison put the new notebook in her dresser drawer, set Terry's get well cards from the munchkins around the picture frames, then got out the vacuum to start her house chores. Stray brown rose petals could be found in the living room, and Madison wanted to get them all today. The engagement roses had been laid to rest, but its crystal vase was in the kitchen for safekeeping, and every now and then Madison liked to peek in the cupboard and remember her pink blooms.
She was no ladyfair, but they had been oh-so-sweet.

Noise filled the living room as she pushed the vacuum over the floor, its motor whirring so loud she had to shout to ask Terry to raise his good foot so she could clean beside the couch. She got around the TV, the table, and was about to start down the hall, when the front door opened and John came in with the girls. Madison smiled and kept going, but John waved her down.

"What?" she shouted.

"Someone--" John mouthed the words but she couldn't hear, so Madison had to shut off the vacuum. "Someone's outside," John said in a hurry. "There's a minivan across the street, and a man is staring at this house. And Madison-- I'm not making this up, I promise-- he looks a lot like you."

A lump tried to squeeze down Madison's throat, but her mouth had gone dry. She looked to Terry. Somehow, Terry didn't seem too surprised.

"Did you know--"

"I didn't," Terry shook his head, "but I can't blame him, can you? Not after everything he's heard today. He must have drove non-stop from Syracuse, to get here so soon."

"If he saw John and the girls, do you think he's wondering if he has the wrong house?"

"Not after seeing the triplets," Terry smiled. "When I told him your story, I gave a decent description of this family, and the girls. He knows who he just saw out there."

Pushing her hands together, Madison left the vacuum, went to the couch, and took a seat next to Terry. She would wait until Tim was ready to come to their door. Until then, Madison grabbed Terry's hand and watched the window. She couldn't see the van from where she sat, but knowing it was out there, was more than enough to keep her praying.

Tim was here, but what next? Life didn't stop because you were happy, it kept moving, kept coming, kept pushing you to either fight or give up. She was learning that. There wasn't much
room for an in-between. You had to make decisions, and live with them, and then keep looking
and asking God what to do next until it was time to make another one. Madison fairly vibrated
as she waited for her brother to find the courage to get out of his van, and come ring their
doorbell.

God help her, she was going to meet Tim, face to face. Madison checked the time. If her brother
couldn't find his courage, and do it soon, she would go out there and find it for him.

"But I trust I shall shortly see thee, and we shall speak face to face."
~ 3 John 14 ~
"He [the LORD] sent a man before them, even Joseph, who was sold for a servant: Whose feet they hurt with fetters: he was laid in iron: Until the time that his word came: the word of the LORD tried him."

~ Psalm 105:17-19 ~

It was a wide white house set against trees with a magnificent view of Lake Ontario. It didn't feel real to him, and yet she was in there. He'd seen those little girls. How many sets of triplets could there be in Three Mile Bay? They'd been exactly as Terry had described. This was the place. He had the right house.

Tim fist ed his hands when they didn't stop trembling. All those childhood dreams, all those wishes, and now he was here. His sister lived here. It wasn't the grand mansion he'd pictured as a boy, but painted with the sunlight filtering through the clouds, it still took his breath away. The picture moved with the clouds and he could see autumn lightly touching the trees, only to darken again as the sun went back into hiding. The leaves were turning where he lived, making it finally feel as though it were autumn. To Tim, it just didn't feel like autumn until he could see it in the trees, on the sidewalks, and on neighbors' lawns.

He looked down at his hands and wondered how much longer he could stall. He wasn't up to this. Maybe he should get Connor, see if Connor would go up to that house and knock on that door for him. Better yet-- Tim started the minivan-- he would return Terry's missed call and hopefully talk to Madison from the safety of home. If she was back by now.

Something moved at the house. A door. The front door opened, and Tim's heart slammed against his chest. A tall woman came out, and looked across the road where his van was parked. He swallowed as their eyes met.

For one long moment, time stood perfectly still. When he was small, no one could see her but him, she'd been his protector, a pretend but real big sister he could run to when there was nowhere else to go. His childhood memories felt dim now, for now, he could see her. This was
no pretend, no wishful thinking, and yet he'd been waiting for this moment for so long, he almost feared it. She might disappear.

She had an otherworldly look to her, delicate and almost fairylike, her oversized sweater and blue jeans hanging loose on her frame. As she stepped from the door and came to the edge of the road, he could see she was very real, and very determined.

She waved to him but he couldn't move. A car sped between them and she waited for it to pass. She wrapped her arms around her middle, then limped across the road with an urgency he couldn't understand. Was something wrong? She came to his van and looked at him through the window, and it wasn't until then that he thought to turn off the engine. At once, her face turned into a smile. She looked back at the house, then at him, as though waiting.

"Tim?" she called.

He couldn't help thinking of all those things he'd heard about that day, and that all those things had happened to this one person, and that this one person was his sister.

Gulping, he got his hands to work.

She smiled as he unfastened his seat belt, then opened the door.

"It's Tim, isn't it?" she asked, and Tim nodded as he lightly shut the door and tried to find his tongue. "For a moment, I thought you were leaving. It's me. You found the right house."

"I thought I had." Tim stood with his arms at his sides, not knowing how best to greet her. He looked at the hand Madison put out to him, and his heart sank. It seemed not enough, out of place, even awkward. Even Grandma had always hugged him "hello," though she'd never meant it and it had always left him feeling cold. The smile that came with Madison's hand though, didn't leave him feeling cold. Madison meant it. Her grip wasn't much, but she didn't let go until he was smiling and feeling really and truly welcome.

"I can't get over how much you look like our mom."

"Really?" An undercurrent of pain crossed Madison's features. "John said I looked like you."
"I guess fair skin and light hair must run in the family. My daughter Madeline is like that, and has some of you in her." Tim started to point at Madison's eyes, but Madison looked wary; Tim stopped, and put his hand in his pocket. "Your eyes-- you and Madeline have the same shaped eyes, though hers are brown. Like Andrea's." He was talking without thinking, but that was because of nerves. He needed to settled down before he frightened her.

"Do you want to come in?" Madison offered. "Izzy's getting snacks."

"I'm sorry for showing up like this." Tim hoped he wasn't messing things up-- not after all the years he'd waited to finally meet his sister. "Karen said I should've called first. If you want, I'll leave."

"I didn't ask you to leave." Madison started across the road, paused, and seemed to check if he was following. She hugged herself and waited, so he got his feet working and went after her. "You're younger than me, aren't you?" she asked.

"I'm twenty-six. And you?"

"Thirty-four."

He nodded. "Your birthday?" Tim slowed his pace to match hers. "When is it? Connor and I didn't know."

"March seventeenth." Madison watched the ground as she walked. Her limp didn't shock him so much since Terry had told him about it, but still, Tim tried not to stare. "When's yours?" she asked.

"My birthday?" Tim sniffed to keep the tears back. He'd managed to stop them on the drive to Three Mile Bay, and didn't want to start up again.

He was about to answer the birthday question when Madison opened the front door and Tim became aware of others, and a round of "hellos" met him as he stepped into a comfortably furnished living room. The man on the couch with his foot propped up, gave Tim a hearty
smile. Even before Madison got out the names of who was who in the room, Tim went over and offered his hand. He knew who that man was, and he couldn't wait.

"Thank you," Tim said, and Terry smiled, and offered him the empty recliner, for everyone was standing as though about to leave.

Tim felt as though he should try and say more to Terry by way of thanks, but he didn't know what. What do you say to someone who saves another life? There weren't enough words in the English language to say it all. Without Terry, Tim would most likely be visiting a grave today, and the thought pushed tears to his eyes. Fighting back the mental picture, Tim pulled off his coat, sat down and offered a shaky smile to the people around him-- Izzy, John, and the triplets--the people who weren't blood relation to Terry, and yet seemed to share the strong bond of family with him and Madison.

Izzy let the girls say "hi," then took them into another room, and a moment later, John excused himself, and Tim was suddenly alone with his half-sister and her husband.

Madison gave the men some small plates and napkins, then served them a snack tray of cheese and crackers.

"We didn't ask them to step out of the room," Terry said, loading a cracker with cheddar and half an olive. "I guess they didn't want to intrude so you could talk to Madison. If you need me to get up--" Terry smiled, and Tim shook his head that it wasn't necessary. "Do you have any questions for her?"

"I admit I probably do." Tim helped himself to a cracker, then let Madison take the tray away. "Nothing comes to mind at the moment. The second I leave, I'll probably think of several things at once, but right now, my mind is a blank. That sounds crazy, doesn't it?" He glanced at Madison, but she just smiled. Tim munched on a cracker. He noticed Terry worked out. Terry had more muscles than anyone had a right to, sitting at a desk. As for himself, he was an accountant. That said it right there.

"How long have you been married?" Madison asked.
His marriage-- yes, he wanted to talk about that. "Two years. Karen's four years older than me, though, so that might explain it."

"Explain what?"

"I don't know." Tim stared at his cracker, wishing he hadn't turned chicken so soon in the conversation. If Madison didn't know what they were talking about, then he should've kept quiet.

"Terry's thirteen years older than I am," Madison offered.

Tim looked at his sister, and she smiled.

"Do you see your marriage intact a month from now?" Tim had to ask.

"Yes. With God's help, I do."

A God answer. Tim sighed, and finished off his cracker. "How about a year from now?"

"Same answer." Madison moved to the snack tray. "Do you want more?"

Tim took more food since he couldn't remember what he'd had for lunch. If he'd had lunch. "I guess it makes sense that you'd share your husband's religion. You do, don't you? It's probably for the best, that way, you have less to fight about when you disagree. How long did it take him before you came around to seeing his way of things?"

"I was a Christian before I met Terry."

"Before?" Tim blinked at his sister. "How long before?"

"While I was with the Dragon."

Now Tim was staring. "How could you possibly believe in God during all that?"
"Did you get the Bible Hour where you live? The old pastor who stood in front of a camera and just preached the Word? It was a plain TV show, and the Dragon would make fun of him and turn it whenever he caught me watching, but I would watch whenever I could. I'd pretend to not care, so it would save me from getting beaten."

Tim swallowed hard. It wasn't easy to hear about his sister getting hurt, or to hear her say the Dragon's name out loud. Tim wished he could ignore the man's existence altogether.

Madison set the snack tray on the end table, then took a seat next to Terry. "When I left the Dragon, I stopped looking back, I stopped remembering, but I've been remembering things lately, and that show is one of them. There was the old man who said I'd break my neck if I got on a swing-- I know, it sounds odd, but it's true-- and then the old man who told me the story of Joseph in Egypt. He didn't tell it to me in person, but the way he spoke made me feel he was talking to me somehow. Do you know the story?" Tim did, but said nothing. "Joseph had ten brothers who were envious of him, and nine of them wanted to kill him, but the tenth talked the other nine into throwing him into a pit instead, and while that brother was gone, the others sold him into slavery. Joseph was taken from everything he knew, his father was told that he was dead, and he was sold into another land, to a master who's wife tempted him daily to sleep with her. When he kept refusing, she went to her husband and falsely accused Joseph of trying to seduce her. Even though Joseph had served his master faithfully, his master put Joseph in jail, and he was bound with shackles that hurt his feet, and after all of this, Joseph still believed in God. I mean, talk about everything going against you.

"The pastor on TV said God needed to bring Joseph through the fire of testing before He could raise Joseph to the work God intended. That there was a purpose for all suffering, great and small, and that meant me. If I was in sin, I needed to repent, and if I was walking in obedience, then I needed to keep going and to not stop, just like Joseph. I figured if Joseph could keep believing in God after all of that, then I could start. The next show was about salvation, and that's when I came to Christ."

"How old were you?" Tim asked.

"I don't know," Madison shrugged. "It was after I was trying to ignore the years and stopped keeping track of my age. It only made it harder. I could see people celebrating New Year's on TV,
though, so I knew time was passing. I kept watching Pastor Kyle-- the man on TV-- until the show stopped and I couldn't find it anymore."

"I remember him," Terry nodded. "He was only on the air for a few months until he passed away. I don't remember which year it was, but he was a good man."

"However long it was, God really used him to help me. I didn't know he died." Madison leaned against Terry, and Terry slipped an arm around Madison's shoulders. It was a small gesture, but a loving one, one that made Tim wish he was on such friendly terms with Karen. The only time they ever touched was when the lights were off, and even then, it was for just one purpose.

"Do you want more food?"

"Huh?" Tim looked up to find Madison talking to him.

Madison wiped her eyes. "Do you want more crackers and cheese?"

He glanced at his plate, and cringed at the crumbs scattered across his lap. He started sweeping them into his napkin before they got onto the neatly kept carpet.

"Do you want to see our wedding photo?" Madison got up and started for the hall while Tim kept sweeping up crumbs.

She wasn't easy to provoke, he had to give her that. Neither was Terry. He might've insulted them by asking how long it had taken Terry to bring her around, and seeing them together in person like this, it was clear they loved each other. Still, no one had yelled, and for that, Tim felt thankful. They were on different wavelengths, though. If God made Madison happy, then so be it, but Tim had had enough. He didn't need to lean on Someone he couldn't see, and wanted to tell her that. He bit back a curse as crumbs knocked from his plate and onto the floor. If only he could bring himself to let loose with a swear word once in a while, he wouldn't feel like such a hypocrite. He'd never believed growing up, and neither had his Grandma, so why he still held back, was beyond him. He guessed some habits were harder to break than others.

"Do you fish?" Terry asked.
Tim nearly dropped his plate at being addressed so unexpectedly.

"I only ask because we have a lot of water-- but you've probably already noticed." Terry smiled. "John and I do a lot of fishing. I love to cast my line out and just enjoy the peace and quiet. It's so quiet, you know? You should join us sometime."

Tim didn't know, but he found himself smiling. "It sounds great. I tried fishing once, but I kept getting tangled in the line."

"Hey, that's all part of the experience. Did you catch anything besides yourself?"

"Does plant life count?"

"I don't see why not. It's a living thing."

Both men looked up as Madison came in. She held a picture frame, and turned it about for Tim to see. He swallowed as he took in the photo beneath the glass. His sister loved, and was loved, and it put a lump in his throat as he saw that love in the photo. He set aside the plate, wiped his hands on his pants, then accepted the picture frame from Madison. He wondered how she would act if she were in his shoes. If she had to part with her spouse, the person she so obviously loved, how would she act?

"If--" Tim looked up at his big sister, knowing he was taking a chance by asking such a personal question-- "if you thought you were losing Terry, what would you do?"

"If I thought he was dying?"

"No, if you thought he was about to leave you. What would you do?"

"Terry? Leave me?" Madison hugged herself and looked at Terry.

Terry gave Tim a pained look, but kept quiet. Tim had said, "if."

"Well," Madison began, "I guess I would pray. Probably a lot. Then I'd ask him to give us some time. I'd want to talk and find out why he was leaving."
"Talk?"

"Yes, you know-- what we're doing right now, only with the person you're married to? I'd ask for help from people I trust, like Izzy, and John, and Pastor Bill. I'd take whatever was bothering Terry, and look at my Bible and see what God had to say about it, and then pray, and obey whatever it was God was trying to tell us. And then, if Terry still left me after all that, I'd ask God to help me keep going, even though it'd be so hard." Madison wiped her eyes. "I'd have to remember that I still had God. What it would do to my family-- I don't even want to think about that."

"Maddie, could I get some coffee?" Terry gave her a smile and she brightened, sniffed away what looked to be more tears, and hurried into the kitchen. Terry looked at Tim, and when Terry spoke, it was in a whisper. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't make my wife cry."

Tim wanted to protest, but at least he wasn't being shouted at.

"This family-- God, me, the people in this house, and the house next door, are all she has." Terry shook his head. "I would never leave her."

"She has me," Tim put in, and Terry blew out a breath.

"You're right. She has you and your family now. I stand corrected, I apologize."

Tim stared at Terry. He wasn't used to getting apologies, or others telling him he was right and they were wrong. About anything. Never budge, and hold out to the bitter end. Sometimes, Tim felt as though he would die that way.

"I apologize for making her cry." Tim sucked in a breath. As long as he was at it, he might as well do a good job of it. "I didn't mean to imply you would leave my sister."

"It was hypothetical," Terry nodded, "so I understand. You have to understand Madison though, that for the time I've known her, she's had abandonment issues. She trusts me not to leave. That trust is founded on love, respect, and on my word of honor, and I hate to see her even
contemplate that trust being broken. If it ever happened, this family would stand by Madison, and I'm pretty sure John would have words with me."

"I envy that." Tim stared at his hands. "When Andrea left me, everyone said how sorry they were but no one seemed surprised. They were shocked she didn't want shared custody of our baby, but they looked at me, and it was one big collective shrug." Tim watched Madison come in with two steaming mugs of coffee.

"Did you have a chance to ask Andrea not to go, or did she leave without warning?" Madison was jumping into the discussion without fear, and Tim kind of admired that.

"She gave me some warning. I asked her not to go."

"And what did she say?"

Tim accepted a dark orange mug from his sister. "Well, she yelled a lot."

"Do you remember what she said?"

"There was an insult I won't repeat, but aside from that, I don't remember."

"You came because you wanted my advice?" Madison asked.

"And to meet you," he nodded.

"Aside from getting right with God-- two words: Listen more."

The God part didn't surprise him, and he nearly rolled his eyes, but the two words made him blink. "Listen more?"

Madison handed Terry a ridiculous yellow mug with a smily face. "One of Terry's best qualities is that he listens to me. Even though I'm not as smart as he is, he doesn't treat me that way. He listens to what I have to say, and I know what's in his heart, because he talks to me, and he knows what's in mine. It's work, and I know it has to take patience on his part, because like I said, he's smarter than me, but he still listens."
Tim nodded, quietly disappointed with the advice. He and Karen were different, but they talked. They talked every day, or the kids would never get off to school.

It was good coffee, though.

"Would you like to see the bay?" Madison asked, the tilt of her face dimly reminding Tim of a woman who used to call herself his mommy. "We have a dock, and I hear the view is really nice from there."

"Is it raining?" Terry glanced at the window. "There's rain in the forecast."

"I'll stay dry," she smiled, and Terry winked at her and took a sip from his mug. She looked at Tim. "How about it?"

"My boss has a vacation house by a lake somewhere," Tim smiled, "and my sister lives like this all year round. You guys probably get clobbered in the winter, though. Yeah? I thought so. Still, to live out here. It'd almost be worth it." Tim got up from the recliner, and Madison hurried to get her coat. "Don't worry," he told Terry, "I won't make her cry again."

"I've been known to make her cry a time or two, myself, so I won't hold you to that. Just try not to, and we'll call it even."

John strolled into the living room as Tim pulled on his coat.

"Madison and I are taking a walk outside."

"It's a good time for one," John smiled, "the sun's coming out. I don't know what your plans are, but Izumi said you're welcome to stay for dinner."

"It's kind of your wife--" Tim glanced at the time-- "but I should probably start for home in another hour."

"Another time then."
Tim nodded. He felt as though he would like this man if he got to know him, just as he liked Terry. Madison was a given. She was his sister, but it did relieve him that he liked her. He hadn't realized how much she looked like their mother until he'd seen her in person. It would've been a nightmare if she had turned out to not only look like her, but to have been like her in temperament, as well. It would have been a tragedy of Greek proportions. Grandma had been wrong about that-- Madison was not a bad seed. Tim was not better off not knowing who his half-sister was, or what she had become. If Grandma had been alive, Tim would've dragged her wheelchair to this house and made her to eat her own words. Not that Grandma ever would, but it still would've given Tim a measure of satisfaction to see her so clearly in the wrong. Of course, he never would've had the courage to face her down like that, but still. He could dream.

When Madison came back, she led Tim through the kitchen, and out the back door. The view stunned him. It had caught his attention from the road, but up close and in his face like this, it crashed his senses one by one, until all he could do was stand and gape.

"It's nice, isn't it?"

Tim looked at Madison. "I don't get out enough."

"Paige said you went out for bike rides."

"Not very much." Tim looked out over the water, the trees lining the shore, the bodies of land in the distance, and breathed in the air. "We have trees in Syracuse, and we have water, but this--this is amazing." He followed Madison, not really caring where they went, so long as he could take in the nature around him. Gray clouds and white capped water only added to the rugged beauty. And this is where his sister lived. "I still can't believe I found you. After all these years. I've been looking for you--" Tim slowed to match his pace with hers-- "in one way or another, for most of my life. And now here you are." He shook his head. "I feel like I'm dreaming, or pretending so hard that I'm fooling myself into thinking this is real."

They moved down the shore at a slow pace, until Madison stopped, and looked at him. The wind whipped her blonde hair about, but she didn't seem to mind.

"What is it?" he asked.
"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For looking for me." Madison's voice trembled. "I've been wanting to tell you this for a while. When I was with the Dragon--"

"You don't have to say anything. I understand."

"No, please, let me get this out." Madison closed her eyes a moment as though steadying herself, then looked at him with such earnestness, Tim felt the impact of her emotions, even though he didn't exactly know what she was going to say. "When I was with the Dragon, it hurt knowing that I wasn't missed, that no one was looking for me because no one cared that I wasn't there. That the world could go on without me."

Tim gulped.

"That I can look back on all those years, and know that someone on this earth was looking for me-- for ME. You don't know how much that means to me. Thank you."

Tim swiped at his eyes. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

"For what?" Madison stepped close as he burst into tears.

"I'm sorry I didn't find you sooner. I should've been trying harder. It's my fault, it's all my fault. I'm your brother, I should've tried harder."

"Tim." Madison laid a hand on his arm, but he couldn't see her for all his tears. "It's all right. You found me. You didn't give up, you found me, and you're here."

"I'm sorry."

"It wasn't you." Madison lifted his chin until their eyes met. "You weren't the one who left me there, it was Momma."
"Why? Why did she do it?" He couldn't help asking the question, though deep in his heart, he knew the answer. Facing the truth was never easy, but it was hard to ignore after what Mom had done to Madison, and to him. Walking away was Mom's specialty.

Madison hugged herself and drew her mouth in a firm line. "She always called me her big mistake. I think the Dragon was her chance to make things right for herself. She said I had to do everything he told me, and that I was his. She was going on a long trip, I wasn't supposed to call her, and I was his." Madison shook her head and looked as though she were refusing to cry. "I think she was making things right for herself, and punishing me at the same time."

"Punishing you for what?"

"For being alive."

Those words twisted in Tim like a knife. "Do you ever wish she'd had an abortion, instead?"

"And miss out on life?" Madison bit her lip before saying more, and he could tell sorrow was pressing at her hard. "Sometimes I think it's the ones who know pain, who can really appreciate joy when they find it. Life isn't a small gift, when you think about it. All the miracles that had to come together to keep us breathing, at this moment. All the times I came close to dying, when all the Dragon had to do was choke me a few seconds longer..." Madison paused. "God kept me alive, and life is a gift."

Tim dried his eyes. "I wish I had your optimism."

"It's not called optimism, it's called faith." Madison started down the shore again and Tim followed. "Do you mind if I let Abby and Jake see you? It'd just take a moment. I'd love for them to meet my brother."

Tim could hear the sisterly pride in Madison's voice, and since he didn't want to disappoint, he let her take him wherever she wanted. Which appeared to be a small yellow house. He could hardly believe all this was on private property, and took in the wild scenery, the windswept shore, the tall trees, and found himself wishing Grandma were there to eat her own words.
Even in her fragile moments, Madison had a quiet strength Tim admired. And this was the woman Grandma had told him was evil. This was the woman whose pictures had been destroyed so Tim would forget that he had a half-sister. It hadn't worked. He had never forgotten. All remaining photos that had survived Grandma, had been secretly kept by Tim over the years, and he promised himself to give them to their rightful owner. They rightly belonged to Madison.

Tim kept back from the door as Madison knocked and waited for someone to answer.

The phone in his coat pocket rang, and Tim pulled it out to see Paige's name on the screen. She was home from school by now, and had probably heard from her mom about his going to see Madison. Still. Tim stepped away to answer the phone.

"What is it?" he asked, trying to get the call over with before he was needed at the door.

"Are you talking to her? What's she like?"

"Paige, your phone is for emergencies only. Is everything all right at home? Are we in labor?"

"No."

"Then get off the phone and do your homework." He thought about it, and added, "Please."

"I only wanted to know what she's like."

"She's nice. Now do your homework." Tim put his phone away and looked over to see Madison watching. "That was Paige. I should probably go if I want to get home before Karen gives up on me for dinner."

Madison turned back to the yellow house, and shook her head. "I don't think they're home."

"Then I'll have to meet them some other time." Tim turned to leave as the front door swung open to a man who looked like he'd stepped from a sportswear catalog.

"Hey," the man said, and started talking to Madison. Dressed in a blue flannel shirt and jeans, the man looked ready to go hiking in a laid back sort of way, and his face sported a day's worth of
stubble that gave his youthful face some age. Tim couldn’t help staring, and realized it wasn’t the light beard, it was something about him-- his eyes, the way he looked as though he’d seen more than enough, and it hadn’t been good. It reminded Tim of Madison, and strangely enough, of even Terry.

"Jake, I’d like you to meet my brother." Madison smiled at Tim, and Tim stepped forward to shake Jake’s hand.

"Sorry I left you waiting at the door." Jake showed them inside. "Abby and Ricky are at the store, and my hands were full." Jake nodded to an easel set up by the window. "Abby’s going to kick herself when she finds out who visited and she wasn’t here to say ‘hi.’"

No one needed to tell him what Jake was painting. From the view, Tim could see it was Three Mile Bay.

"It’s very good," Tim nodded. "Who’s that?" Tim pointed to a lone person on the shore with a fishing rod, the line arching in a graceful loop against the sky.

"Who else?" Jake grinned as he wiped clean a thin tool, then returned it to a matching set in a wooden case. "That’s Abby, my wife." There was a great deal of affection in his voice. "When she holds a fly rod, it’s as close to poetry without words as you can get. Do you fish, by any chance?"

"That’s the second time I’ve been asked that, today."

"In this family, you can count on being asked that on a regular basis." Jake smiled. "Maybe we can get our families together sometime, and go fishing."

"Then you fish?"

"Not if I can help it." Jake tossed aside the towel and went to his easel. "I love to watch her, though. She’s definitely in her element, and when I paint, I like to think I’m in mine. Problem is, when I’m struggling on the canvas, it can feel like I don’t belong there."

"You can’t tell by that," Tim nodded to the easel.
Jake shook his head. "I wasn't fishing for compliments. I know it needs work."

"I'm afraid we've got to get going." Madison smiled as she moved to the door with Tim. "It's okay, we'll show ourselves out. Please tell Abby we were sorry we missed her and Ricky. I hope you keep going with the painting, Jake. It's already beautiful."

"Thanks, Aunt Madison." Jake smiled goodbye as they stepped outside, and Tim braced himself against the cold, and zipped his coat the rest of the way up to keep warm.

Though the sun had traveled in the sky, Tim didn't hurry as they made their way back to the house where Terry was waiting. Tim knew he should leave, but paused at the kitchen door to look out over the bay before going inside. "You have a family." Tim turned to his sister. "I know you were never adopted, but you have the kind of family I only dreamed about when I was little. True, there's no mansions, but you have all this--" Tim gestured to their surroundings. "There's no huge garage full of fancy race cars--"

"Race cars?" Madison asked.

"No huge swimming pool, no armed guys with muscles that can swarm in and save me with just a nod from my big sister--" Tim smiled when Madison laughed-- "but you have the important thing: a family that loves you. You weren't adopted when you were little, but you have one now. I heard Jake call you 'Aunt,' and Terry isn't a blood relation to any of them. No, you've been adopted, you have a family, and I'm glad I was able to see it."

"I'm glad you were, too."

"You're happy here?"

"What do you think?" Madison smiled.

"I had to ask." Tim pulled car keys from his pants pocket, and followed Madison inside.

"How do you like our bay?" John asked, getting up from the recliner.
"Stay where you are, please." Tim held up the keys. "I've got to get going before Karen worries herself into labor. Your bay is breathtaking."

"Come by sometime and go fishing with us. Bring the family," John coaxed. "It's getting colder this time of year, but if you don't mind the cold, neither will we. Terry and I will probably be out there soon, anyway."

"Thanks, I'll keep that in mind." Tim shook John's hand, then went to the couch and smiled at Terry. "Thank you for taking care of my sister. Someday, I'll be able to see you, and not say that, but until that day comes, thank you."

"I'll be hoping that day comes soon." Terry shook Tim's hand. "Have a safe drive back to Syracuse. Say 'hi' to your family for us, and don't forget about that invitation. You can leave your fishing gear behind, and use ours, just come-- we'll get tangled together. If there's anything I'm good at, it's untangling line. You can ask the triplets."

"Thanks."

"Tim," Madison stepped in, "when Terry and I get married a second time, I'd like you and your family to be there."

Tim nodded, emotion getting in the way of coherent speech. He stepped toward Madison, wanting a hug but unsure if she could give him one. He choked on a sob as she moved close and gave him a warm hug. All those wishes had finally come true. He had found his sister, he had found Madison. He squeezed her, then let go and headed for the door before his eyes misted over into something serious. Izzy called goodbye after him, but he was already out the door and heading across the road. He couldn't stop now, he had to keep going.

Jerking open the passenger door, Tim looked back at the house and saw Madison standing on the doorstep. She lifted a hand, and he lifted one in return.

Light moved onto the road, and Tim looked up to see the clouds part to a brilliant blue sky. Gray pushed in and covered it over, but sky showed again, and when Tim looked out over the bay he could see sunlight glinting on the waves. His eyes tracked back to the house, and he
smiled at Madison. Tim climbed into his minivan with the thought that if there was a God, then today, God was smiling.

As Tim started the engine, he had to mentally kick himself. Sure enough, now that he was leaving, he could think of at least half a dozen questions he'd wanted to ask but hadn't. Another time. He knew where she was now, and wouldn't have to hire a private investigator to find her again. If it wasn't for the fact he was probably in the process of losing his job, he could thank his boss for giving him the day off. What a day it had been. There had been heartbreak, but he had seen his sister with his own eyes, and he had seen her family. She'd been adopted, after all.

With a sigh, Tim pulled away and headed for home.

* * * *

She watched until the minivan disappeared, until she was left with her thoughts and the wind that tugged at her coat. Though she knew she should be grateful he lived as close as he did, Madison couldn't help wishing he lived closer. The cold pushed at her, she looked up at the heavens and was reminded that an hour and a half trip to Syracuse wasn't so very far away. She could never have known when she'd bought that bus ticket to the farthest destination she could, with fifty-two cents left in her pocket, that she would wind up only an hour and a half from Tim. But it had been where Terry lived.

God had led her, she smiled, and on that thought, she hugged herself against the weather and went inside.

"How did the visit go?" Izzy asked, as Madison hurried to close the door to keep the cold out. "Did Tim see the dock?"

"No, but I took him to AJ's house." Madison took off her coat while one of the triplets looked into the living room as if curious to see what was going on. Madison smiled at Debbie, and Debbie came in. "My brother met Jake. Abby and Ricky weren't home, but I was glad he could at least meet Jake. Isn't that wonderful?" Madison asked Debbie, and Debbie smiled and nodded that it was. "Oh, Terry!" Madison moved to the couch. "Thank you for telling him about me, so I wouldn't have to." She leaned over the couch, admired Terry, then planted a kiss on his handsome chin. "I love you."
"Then your walk went well?" Terry asked.

"I don't love you because it went well. I love you because you're thoughtful, and kind, and--"

"Maddie--"

"And because you're mine."

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. He gazed up at her, quiet now, and she thought she heard him sigh. As far as Madison was concerned, he was just plain wonderful. She pushed from the couch to take off her coat. It was getting close to dinnertime, and though someone had put the vacuum away, she wanted to get it out and finish her chores before it was time to work in the kitchen with Izzy.

Madison paused as she stepped into the hall. She looked back.

Terry's eyes were closed, and a slight smile rested on his lips. Like he was thinking about something pleasant. She hoped it was her.

The other two triplets were in their room, for as Madison went to put away her coat, she could hear them playing on their computer. From the sound of them, they were having a good time, though they sounded more subdued than usual. They were probably a bit tired after preschool, but also wondering where dinner was. She needed to hurry.

It didn’t take long to finish the vacuuming, and Madison skipped the dusting, and went straight to the kitchen when she saw Izzy heading there. It felt good to have a purpose, to be useful. The more she learned, the more she felt she could give back to those around her. Dinner was only one of those things.

Soon Lizzie and Debbie showed up in the kitchen to watch, and the house fell into a calmer rhythm.
Her thoughts, though. Madison had so much on her mind, when dinner went into the oven and Madison had a moment to rest her hip, her thoughts went back to Tim and how she'd told him life was a gift.

It was, and she didn't want to miss out on any of it.

She remembered the notebook sitting in her dresser drawer. She didn't want to miss anything that God had in store for her, but it wouldn't happen if she didn't take that next step. *My Father worketh hitherto, and I work.* With a quiet prayer, Madison kept her heart between herself and God. She knew she should tell Terry, and she would. Only not yet.

Something was forming inside her-- an idea, not a strange one, really, in fact, it was quite normal, but for Madison, it was outrageous, and wildly bold.

Oh, she would tell him, but not yet. If for some reason she should change her mind, then Terry would never know. Besides, he'd probably question her a dozen times, and that would only make her even more nervous than she already was. If that was even possible. He'd probably leave the decision up to her, anyway. So if her courage was helped by keeping him in the dark, then he'd just have to stumble around for a while. He didn't have to worry, she wouldn't let him get hurt.

The timer went off and Madison got up to check dinner. Izzy stayed at the table and let Madison open the oven, and it took a great deal of concentration on Madison's part to pay attention to what she was doing, and not on what was tugging at her heart.

"Izzy?" Madison looked up from the baked dish. "Could we work on wedding plans after dinner?"

"Of course we can." Izzy's face brightened at the suggestion. "As soon as dinner's cleared away, we'll get started and make a list. Have you two set a date yet?"

Madison shook her head, "no." Though she had a question of her own, she kept it to herself.

Dinner was ready, and while Lizzie went to tell her sisters, Madison got out the silverware and napkins. The TV switched on in the next room-- probably by one of the men, for they were
planning to eat in the living room since it was easier for Terry to keep his foot propped up there, than in the kitchen.

Madison picked up a plate, scooped up a large helping of casserole, paused, then added a little more before grabbing a fork and napkin and taking it into the living room. She smiled as she brought it to Terry.

"Wow." Terry's eyebrows raised as she gave him the plate. "I don't usually eat this much."

"You're always telling me I need to eat," she coaxed.

He looked at her sideways, but picked up the fork, then bowed his head to quietly pray over his dinner. She figured he deserved a little something extra for being kept in the dark.

When Madison came in with her own plate and claimed the seat next to Terry, he lightly bumped her in the side.

"Did I hear you right? You're starting to plan the wedding with Izzy?"

Madison nodded.

"Do you remember our agreement?" He looked as though he sure had. "I got the ring I wanted, so to keep our deal-- the one we made in the parking lot at Farrington's-- we agreed to a small wedding. You get a nice dress, a few flowers, a homemade cake, and we only hold hands on the honeymoon. It's only fair. I got what I wanted, so now it's your turn."

"I remember." Madison watched TV and tried not to watch Terry. She breathed deep and braced herself. "Since it's my turn--"

"What are you up to?" he asked in a smiling voice.

She kept her eyes on the TV.

"Since it's my turn, can I ask for something?"
"Name it."

"Could I set the date?"

"Any day you want, Maddie."

He ate dinner and watched the news, and all the while Madison's heart thumped in her chest. This was no small goal she wanted, but she wasn't done asking for favors. She needed to ask one more.

"Terry?" Madison tried to sound as calm as possible. "Carol was thinking that, since this morning went so well, and if I thought I needed it, that maybe we could divide up our sessions." Madison slid a glance in Terry's direction.

He looked at her with a fork halfway to his mouth.

"I could spend some time with Carol, alone, and then we'd finish the session together." Madison gulped hard. "What do you think?"

"I'm thinking I missed a lot this morning." Terry opened his mouth to say something more, but shook his head and looked resigned. "If that's what you need, Maddie, then sure. I'm glad Carol's working out."

"She is, Terry. She really is."

"Okay." He smiled and looked at Madison. He was a little concerned. She could see it in his eyes. "You'd tell me? If you were in trouble and fighting the need to cut again, you'd tell me?"

She nodded.

He gave a thoughtful smile and went back to dinner, and Madison focused on breathing. The air was getting thin around the couch, but she kept sucking it in and kept herself conscious, and somehow, managed to get through dinner without Terry noticing that she'd only eaten half of what she'd dished onto her plate.
To her surprise, John helped clear the dishes so the women could start planning.

When the kitchen was clean, and John was safely out of their way and in the living room, Izzy got out her recipes and laptop. Madison pulled out her clicky pen and spiral notebook— the one Terry had bought for her— and the women placed everything on the kitchen table in serious fashion. They were soon joined by a curious Ruthie, and the three of them wasted no time in getting down to business.

"Dick is still waiting for Terry to get back to him with the guest list for the engagement party," Izzy began, "and I'm guessing Sara Doyle would like that list as soon as possible, but hasn't pressed for it, because she knows you and Terry have been busy. So maybe we can get Terry started on that. Terry, did you hear?" Izzy called to the next room.

"I heard."

"Make sure you run the guest list by AJ— it's supposed to be their welcome home party, too."

"I'll email Abby a list, tonight."

"Thank you." Izzy smiled at Madison. "One down."

"One down," Ruthie said, and put both elbows on the table to look at Madison's notebook.

Madison hadn't started taking notes yet, but it was kind of exciting.

"Now," Izzy opened a recipe box. "Abby's been after me to get these into a database. You wanted a homemade cake. Here's a few of my best recipes, but Agatha has a wonderful carrot cake that I don't have. You can look through these and see if there's anything you like."

"Maddie," Terry called from the living room, "should we invite Tim and Karen to the party?"

"Of course," came John's loud reply, also from the living room.

"But her baby is due any time," Terry reasoned. "She might not want to come."
"Invite them both, and let them sort it out," came John's suggestion.

"Sounds reasonable," Terry said. "Never mind. Go back to your cake."

Madison and Izzy exchanged smiles, and Ruthie grinned. Just as they were going back to their cake, the doorbell sounded. John called that he would get it, and Madison sorted through recipes.

"I didn't have my keys--" Abby came into the kitchen and went straight to Madison-- "so I had to use the bell. Jake told me your brother came for a visit. I'm so sorry I wasn't there to meet him. What was he like? Did he stay long?"

"He apologized for not looking for me harder."

"He did?" Abby melted into a smile. "That's so sweet. Does he fish?"

"Pull up a chair and help us," Madison coaxed, and she showed Abby a cake recipe.

"You're planning the wedding." Abby grinned, tugged off her coat, and pulled out a chair next to Ruthie. "When's the date?"

"It depends. I want to invite Tim and Karen, but Karen's due any time, and I don't even know if they can come to the engagement party." Madison saw Abby's eyebrows go up, and gestured to the living room. "Terry's coming up with a guest list. He said he'd email it to you."

"Madison, you don't have to come up with a date right this minute," Izzy smiled. "We're just getting started. I'll heat some water so we can have tea, and we'll talk flowers."

Though Abby looked a bit pained, she stayed and "talked flowers." By the time they came to dresses, Abby was pouring her third cup of chamomile and looking as though she wished it were coffee. Not Madison though, she liked tea.

"Do I really need to wear a big white dress?" Madison asked.
"Why not? If Mom could've had her way, I would've had to go through the same ordeal, so I don't see any reason why you shouldn't."

"Abby."

"Mom, you wanted me in a fluffy white gown. Admit it."

Izzy squeezed her eyes shut, and Ruthie giggled at "mommy's funny face." "The way you make it sound, Abby. I didn't wear a wedding dress, and neither did you. Finally, someone in this family has a chance to do it right, and the dress is the one place besides the ring where Terry and Madison agreed they wanted to do it nice."

Madison winced. They had agreed. In the parking lot.

"But if she doesn't want the big dress--"

"Then she doesn't have to have one," Izzy finished. "This isn't my wedding, it's hers and Terry's. Just tell me what kind of dress you'd like, Madison, and I'll do my best to help you find it."

"It's just that..." Madison didn't know how to put it into words. She didn't want to look pretty. The thought of looking attractive for a man, made her sick to her stomach. She steadied herself and remembered that man would be Terry. One step. All she needed was one step to make progress. Her mouth felt dry, but she finally got out the important words. "Should it be white?"

Abby looked at her mom.

"Ruthie, why don't you go play with your sisters?"

"But, Mommy--"

"Please?" Izzy gave her daughter a pleading look, and Ruthie climbed off the chair and left the kitchen at the slowest possible pace. As though she wanted to hear what was going on and hoped something might slip out if she lingered. Izzy gave her a look and Ruthie moved into the living room as Terry came hobbling in.
"Terry, you should be on the couch." Madison got up to take him back, but Terry planted himself at the table.

"I think I'll sit in here for awhile."

"We were talking about the dress," Izzy said, and Terry gave a look that said he already knew.

Slowly, Madison sat down.

"May I interrupt for a question?" Terry asked. He looked about, and when they all nodded for him to go ahead, he placed his hands on the table as though he were feeling the wood. "Everyone here is familiar with my history. What I'd like to know is this: Do you consider me a virgin?"

The question caught Madison off kilter. Wasn't he too embarrassed to just come right out and ask? It had taken her a great deal of courage to ask whether or not she should be wearing white, and for Terry to put himself out there like that, and to just ask-- Madison held her breath. Izzy didn't look surprised by Terry's frankness, and neither did Abby. In fact, the look on Abby's face right now spoke volumes.

Fierce pride. Not proud with a capital P, but loving pride in an uncle who had the courage to ask an embarrassing question for someone else.

"You were raped." Abby spoke clearly. "You might not be a virgin in the technical sense, but in every other way, you are. It's something you have to give. It can't be taken." Abby took a big sip of tea, made a face, then set the cup down. "Anyone want coffee?"

"I agree with Abby," Izzy said quietly.

Terry bowed his head, his point made like Madison was sure he knew it would be.

"Will anyone blame me," Madison heard her own voice tremble, and willed herself to be strong like Terry, "if I wear white, even though Terry and I are already married?"

"If they do, they'll have to get past me." Terry looked at Madison, and Madison knew he meant it.
She sniffed the wet back, no longer feeling as ashamed as before. "Does it need to be fluffy?"

Terry laughed, and sniffed, and pushed out of his chair. He leaned over, softly kissed Madison, then went back to the living room.

"They come in all styles," Izzy said, and opened her laptop. "Let me show you a few examples. You can be very basic, or very elegant, or go fluffy, like Terry said, but it's up to you." Izzy turned her laptop around and showed Madison a screen of white dresses. There were twenty to a page, and there were at least nine pages. "This store isn't local, but it might give you some ideas."

One by one, wedding gown photos went past Madison, and she began to wish she could send one of those models down the aisle for her, then swap them out at the last minute for the vows. Just so she wouldn't have to wear the dress. She wasn't pretty like they were, and she'd have to look attractive. Wear makeup. Have her hair arranged. Right now she just ran a brush through it, and that was that. But seeing those models, it gave her an idea of what she should try for, and it made her weak in the knees just thinking about it.

One step at a time.

Even if she had to crawl on her hands and knees to move forward, she would.

* * * *

He couldn't help watching her, even though she was in the next room. In his mind's eye, he could see her at the kitchen table, leaning over a notebook, writing out wedding plans in that painfully slow hand of hers. His ear trained to her voice, and each time she said something, he stopped typing and listened.

Reception at the house, was Izzy sure she didn't mind having people here...

Terry went back to the guest list. Though it did no good to guess at what was going on with her, he couldn't help wondering. She needed alone time with Carol so she could face planning the wedding? They'd agreed to keep it small, and she had Izzy's help, not to mention Abby and Agatha. The dress? Could that have been it? But divide all the sessions over that? He frowned.
This wasn't helpful, and Terry shook it off and focused on the screen. She was doing good right now, he wouldn't talk himself into concern over nothing.

He went down all the people he knew in the area but cut it down to those he'd promised to the wedding, friends who were like family, fishing buddies who would never turn down a free meal, and any he thought Abby would like to have at the party. Smiling, he started to type a name, paused, and wondered if Jake would mind. Terry went ahead and added the person, figuring Abby could always make changes if she thought it best.

Eyes growing heavy, Terry yawned and pushed on. If he forgot anyone important, he hoped they would forgive him, and pulled out his smartphone to check his address book. Just to be on the safe side. He'd made it to the H's when Abby came from the kitchen, looking tired and ready to fall into bed.

"All that wedding talk is making me grateful Jake and I eloped," Abby dropped onto the couch, and looked over Terry's arm at his laptop.

"You didn't elope, you had a small ceremony with your parents watching. It's not eloping if your parents are there. Is it?" Terry frowned. He was getting tired. "Hey, since I've got you here, what do you think about inviting this guy to the party?" Terry highlighted a name and saw Abby's eyes pop wide.

"Tyler is back?" Abby punched Terry in the arm. "Why is it I'm always the last one to know?"

"Maybe it's because you two were once close to getting married, and people aren't sure if they should tell you?" Terry shrugged. "Or maybe because he isn't here yet--" Terry laughed as Abby punched him again-- "and I heard from Gus that Tyler's coming back sometime this week."

"Wait a minute. Gus? The guy who manages the gas station on the corner-- that Gus?" Abby sighed. "For a minute there, I almost believed it was true."

"Then you don't think Tyler's coming back?" Terry studied Abby. "Do you know something I don't?"
"Not really." Abby stretched out. "Jake and I got a call from Tyler while we were in San Diego a few years back. He was dating some woman, and it wasn't going very well, and I think he just wanted someone to talk to, and so he called us." Abby leaned forward on the cushion. "When I came back to Three Mile Bay and didn't find him here, I figured he found a reason to stay where he was."

"Then should I take his name off the list?"

Abby looked thoughtful a moment, and sighed. "Gus? We're going on his word?"

"He's a good mechanic, Abby."

"When it comes to gossip though, he stinks. And that's not a recommendation for gossippers."

"I'm leaving Tyler's name on." Terry watched Abby push off from the couch. "Unless you think Jake would prefer I didn't."

"Tyler won't be there, so it won't matter either way. But if he is, Jake won't mind. Last time I saw, they were actually getting along together very well."

"Really."

"Yeah." Abby gave a good-humored laugh. "As Tyler's former girlfriend, I find it disconcerting, but it beats being enemies by a mile." She waved to the recliner. "Good night, Dad, 'night, Uncle Terry. Email me when your list is done, and I'll send it on to Dick."

"Keep warm," John said, and smiled sleepily when the door closed behind Abby. "I remember a time when I thought the best thing in the world that could happen to Abby, would be for her to marry Tyler Greene. And now--" John groaned as he got up and went to lock the front door--"whatever happened to him, I know the best thing for our Abby wasn't Tyler. Hearing her tonight, I know it was Jake." John scratched at his shirt and looked at the kitchen. "Sounds like they're really serious in there."

Terry nodded in ready agreement, and paused as he heard Madison's voice.
They could get Agatha to help with the cooking...

And went back to his list.

John went to get the munchkins ready for bed, and Terry looked over the guest list for the party one last time before hitting send. It would have to do. He shut the laptop, only to hear rain on the roof.

Man, just what they needed. More rain. Another long day behind him, Terry set aside his computer and began working some of the stiffness from his leg. He lifted his foot off the chair as familiar sounds of bedtime drifted into the living room.

"Who brushed their teeth?" John called out in the hall.

Terry smiled at the chorus of me's that followed. With no one around to help him, he turned on the couch and managed to push up without feeling the familiar twinge in his foot, the one that told him he hadn't gotten away with anything. He left his laptop behind for John to put away, and used anything within reach so he would put as little weight on his ankle as possible. Limping into the hall, he grinned at John as John directed from the door of the triplets' room.

"Where's your other slipper? Debbie, is that Lizzie's nightgown?"

He nodded good night to his buddy, then switched on the bedroom light. Though John had turned up the thermostat, the room felt chilly and Terry knew the night would be another cold one. Terry moved out of the way and nudged the bedroom door shut. Leaning on the couches, he moved down the length of the room, around to the dresser, pulled out his pajamas, some socks, then went into the bathroom.

It was even colder in there.

Minutes later, he came out and made the journey to his couch. He would be grateful when all resting was over, and he could use his ankle again. The overhead was still on but his good leg was getting tired and so was he. Terry climbed into bed, then pulled the covers up only to realize he'd left his propping pillows in the living room. He groaned. Life was so simple when you had
two good feet. Terry started to think it might not be important to keep his foot elevated, when he felt his ankle.

He could go back to the living room, or he could call for someone. Or... Terry rolled off the couch, moved to Maddie’s, and opened the closet to tug out some coats. Wadding them, he took his makeshift pillow back to bed, and used them to prop up his foot. It wasn't as comfortable as the pillows, but it was cold, and he was tired.

And in a bit of a mood, he realized, as he tugged the covers over his body.

Great. The overhead light was still on. He pulled the blanket over his head rather than get up. He’d just gotten everything in place. Still, that light. Terry sighed, and pushed the blankets off his head as someone knocked on the door.

"Come in." He felt quiet relief as Maddie came inside. "Before you close that door, would you see if John put away my laptop?"

Maddie smiled and went back into the hall while Terry waited. The girls knew better than to touch the laptop, but he wouldn't get any rest until he knew it was safely back on his desk.

The door creaked open.

"John put it away," Maddie said, coming in with the pillows from the living room. "I saw it on your desk, and it was plugged in." She shut the bedroom door behind her, then moved to Terry's couch and placed the pillows on the blanket by his feet. "How is your ankle?"

"Better, now that you're here." He sat up to pull out the coats, and saw her smile. "Thanks for these. My family is good to me, and that's a fact."

She bit her lip, and he could tell she was pleased.

He adjusted the pillows, then tugged the blankets up and got comfortable as she moved off to get ready for bed.
Though the overhead light was still on, his laptop was safe, and Terry started to drift off, though he tried not to. He drifted again, and when the bathroom door opened, he saw Maddie come out in her PJs and robe. She left the door ajar, for it would serve as their night-light, and as she moved between the couches to turn off the overhead, Terry reminded himself to get a real night-light sometime, one she would like. Something with an angel, if he could find it.

He was about to remind her they hadn't shared in a good night kiss yet, when he noticed she kept by the door. Probably so she could take off her robe. He was too late, he'd missed his chance, and Terry made sure he kept his head turned away so she wouldn't make another flying dive into bed.

"Did you have a good time planning things with Izzy?" he asked.

"I did. We started the wedding list, but there's a lot to do."

"Let everyone help, don't take it all on yourself." Terry peeked out of the corner of his eye and saw Maddie climb under her blankets. He gave her a moment before leading her in a hushed prayer, then breathed deep as the room settled in for the night. "Sweet dreams," he whispered. "I love you."

He had just fallen asleep, when something in the room woke him. Maddie's blankets rustled, and Terry soon found himself looking up at her face.

"We forgot to kiss good night," she whispered.

"Worse things could happen," he smiled, but his next breath was cut short by a kiss. She added something extra to that kiss, for when Maddie pulled away, he was left wanting more. He hoped she couldn't read his mind, but an apology was there in her eyes. She looked ready to say something he didn't want to hear, and he put a finger to her lips. This was enough, he loved her anyway. Terry touched her cheek, and she gave a faint smile before stealing back to her couch.

"I love you, too, Terry."
He smiled, and shut his eyes, and willed himself to breathe. Loving her was never straightforward, it was mixed with strains of the bitter and the sweet, with sadness and joy, but it was what they had, and for that, Terry would be grateful. Always grateful.

With that tucked in his heart, he let the rain cradle him to sleep.

"This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is Thy faithfulness. The LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in Him."

~ Lamentations 3:21-24 ~
Chapter Thirty-seven
The Call from Syracuse

"God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it."
~ 1 Corinthians 10:13 ~

Long after she heard Terry's soft breathing fall into the rhythmic pattern of sleep, Madison couldn't close her eyes. That good night kiss had hurt both of them. She could still see his face, that male look that said she'd put too much into her kiss. The last thing she'd wanted to do was hurt Terry, or remind herself of the fact that she wasn't being a real wife to him.

Being married to him, kissing him whenever she had the chance, helped her. It eased the tension, and gave her so much comfort to know he was there, that she'd loved being with him. But this last time had been different. She hadn't been careful, and she'd let herself kiss him without holding back. Like she would if she were normal, if she were anyone but herself. And now she'd done it. Now she had to face the consequences.

Blood pounded in her ears so loudly she wondered it didn't wake up the house.

Images flashed before her, and she turned on the couch to escape.

*Wedding dresses. Think about those.*

It was better than what she was running from, and Madison forced herself to picture a white fluffy thing with a long veil. Her body tensed. *No, please, God.* Air pushed from her lungs. She saw the Dragon, she saw him touching the wedding dress, and she wanted to cry, wanted to vomit, and all she could do was sit up to try and stop the images from coming. She had enough movies in her head-- real movies-- she didn't need to think up new ones.

She could still feel him, she knew him so well. She hated his touch, despised it to her very core. The way it made her feel, the way it weighed her down with so much garbage until all her senses were clogged with him. Sometimes the only way she felt alive was when that slice of pain cut through, and she saw that red pulsing from her, and then she'd know she was still alive. Then the
pain would be so much worse, because she'd be sure she was still alive and nothing had changed, nothing had stopped. But she'd changed the pain to something she could control. She could stop that pain, she'd had that power. The cutting had started long before she'd ever seen the pastor on TV. Though she didn't know how old she'd been when hope had first come, she'd been much older, and it amazed her to think she'd never tried to kill herself. She hadn't though. Not even once. Madison writhed on the couch. If only she'd stopped cutting before now, this wouldn't be so hard. She wouldn't need it so much when she was struggling with another fight.

Madison scooted onto the floor, huddled on the carpet beside Terry's couch to be closer to him, and pulled her knees to her chest. Her body craved something she couldn't stand, and her answer was to punish it with something God didn't want. Oh, she was crazy, all right, crazy and so far gone she wondered why God even bothered with her. It was cold on the floor, but she welcomed the sharp chill-- anything to stop it from happening. It was coming though. She could feel it.

The stitches on her stomach were still healing, but if she sat a certain way, and held it long enough, she knew they could turn her skin on fire. Madison sat that certain way, held it, and let the pain steady her before she realized what she was doing.

"God, help me. Please, help me," she whispered.

As she moved to stop the pain, her tears started to fall. She breathed through her mouth to keep from sobbing out loud and waking Terry. God cared that she hurt herself, but sometimes she wished He didn't. Could she say that? Was it all right to think that, or would she be thrown into hell for even forming the words in her mind? Though the rain helped to smother the sound of her tears, it didn't stop the movie that had already started to play. It was playing, desire was washing over her and she needed help. She knew this one, knew her own cries, every laugh of the Dragon's, for he'd made her watch it thousands of times. To move would mean even more punishment, so she had to watch.

If only she could've cut. And yet, as the images moved in front of her and her own torture played out, something else washed over her. The knowledge that God cared, and that help was coming.

* * * *
Sleep had strong hold on Terry, but something nudged at his dreams. Clear sky filled most of his view as Izzy walked onto the rooftop where he stood mixing a bowl of pancake batter. The sky was tinged to a perfect blend of orange and pink, and his breath was taken away by its beauty. Izzy moved directly in front of him, seemingly unmoved by the brilliant display around them.

"She can cry without making a sound, you know."

"Yes," Terry nodded, as he blithely poured pancake batter onto the roof tiles, "I know."

Though Izzy hadn't said who they were talking about, Terry implicitly knew. Her name filled his mind, and all at once, his heart surged with sadness. The world felt upside down as Izzy stared at him. He felt an urgent need to wake up. It wasn't real. He knew none of it was, but the feeling grew stronger. He must wake up.

Gasping, Terry forced his eyes open to the weirdest dream he'd ever had. Maybe not the most bizarre, but it was up there with the flying rubber chicken. He rubbed his eyes, still conscious of the rain lightly hitting their window, steady as before. Terry adjusted himself in bed, and was ready to try and get back to sleep, when he noticed Maddie's couch was empty.

He sat up, and saw her lying on the floor beside his couch, hugging her knees.

"Maddie?" Terry leaned over and touched her shoulder.

She felt stiff, a wooden doll barely breathing. Shoving back his blankets, he got down on the floor while his heart beat wildly with alarm. By the light of the bathroom door, he could see the look on Maddie's face.

Oh, no. She was with him again. She was with the Dragon.

"Honey, you've got to fight this." Terry touched her cheek and a pained moan fell from her lips. "Please, Lord, don't let him win. Make this back off. It's okay, Maddie. The Dragon can't hurt you. It's safe to wake up. Can you hear me? Maddie?" A squeeze to his hand told him she could hear, and he kept going. "That's it, fight. I'm not going anywhere, and neither are you. When this is over, the movie will be gone, but you'll still be here. You're stronger than he ever was, Maddie."
He kept rubbing her hand, and after what seemed like an eternity but was probably only moments, she began to blink.

"I--" she sounded breathless but at least she was talking. "I need to cut. Terry--" she began to hyperventilate, and Terry pulled her to his side, and laid her head against his chest.

"Easy, take it easy." He kept his arm up around her shoulders, and swept the hair back from her face. "You're safe. You're with me, and you're safe."

She was still frozen, but she was pulling in deep breaths of air. She was coming back to him.

Her words had jarred him though, and he looked about. There were no knives that he could see, no blood on her pajamas, and when he pushed back her sleeves to see her arms, he could find no marks. Thank God. He closed his eyes a moment and took in a deep breath. She wasn't hurt, she wasn't bleeding. Adrenaline was pulsing through him and he needed to calm down for her sake.

"I hurt my stitches," she gasped. "When I realized what I was doing, I stopped."

"Then you did good." Terry held her tight so she wouldn't slip back into the movie. "I wish I could do this for you. I wish I could fight your battles for you, kill your dragon, and be your white knight. I'm afraid it doesn't work that way."

"I know. You are my white knight, though." She crowded against him. "I want to cut so badly."

"Why? Can you put it into words?" He waited as she clung to him, and as her pulse slowed, her words came without the sense of struggle.

"I want to cut."

"Why? What set it off? Did one thing set it off more than another?"

Her eyes turned down as though he'd struck a nerve.

"Maddie," he whispered, "please, tell me."
She looked up at him, and in the half light of their bedroom, her gray eyes seemed dark and inviting, though he knew she wasn't inviting him to come closer.

Her lips moved almost without making a sound, "I wanted to give you more than a kiss good night."

Though it surprised him, he knew it shouldn't. He knew she had feelings for him that ran deeper than what she liked to admit. Terry sighed, and squeezed her gently. "I could've pulled you from the flashback sooner. When you need help, please, wake me."

"I should've remembered what Carol and I talked about," Maddie said quietly. "I wrote it down in my notebook." Maddie hugged her face against Terry's nightshirt, and Terry tried not to think about how good it felt.

He shifted a little so he was no longer sitting on his ankle.

"Terry?" Maddie sniffed and looked up at him. "Would you hold me, please? I think I need that right now."

"I am holding you."

"No, I mean hold me. For real."

"Maddie, this is real."

It wasn't what she meant though, for she started to move his arm. He made no comment, just let her do as she wanted as his arm shifted from around her shoulders to around her middle. He wasn't so sure this was a good idea-- not after coming out of a flashback. Her bowed head, the way she kept her hand on his, told him she was being deliberate, she wasn't acting rashly. He tried to keep breathing like he always did, but when his arm settled near her stitches, he couldn't help but flinch. He didn't want to hurt her.

She looked up at him, and this time it wasn't his imagination. The invitation was real.
"Just kiss?" she whispered, and he nodded, and lowered his head to claim her mouth. She pulled back all too soon, and he forced himself to break away. "Terry, I can't breathe."

"I know, neither can I." He blew out a breath to clear his mind, though after a kiss like that, it would take more than air to start thinking straight again. "Are you all right?" He looked at her and breathed easier when he saw her nod, "yes."

"Don't leave me?" she asked. "Not until I'm calm?"

"Why? Do you still need to cut?"

She leaned her forehead against his shoulder, and he felt her begin to rest. "I always feel better when I'm with you. I hope you don't mind, but I can soak in some of your strength when you're with me, and your faith makes my faith stronger. I don't feel as crazy when I'm with you. Things make more sense. And I know it's because of you." She looked at him again with such earnestness, she started to kiss him, but he backed away.

"I need a moment to cool off."

She hugged him and he held her, and enjoyed the privilege of holding her around the waist. She was so small-- he knew that already, but she felt smaller somehow now that he could feel her. He kept breathing, kept focusing on what he needed to do. Don't take advantage of the moment, slow down, don't become so involved a cold shower would be the only way out.

"My choices got me here, because this is what I wanted," Maddie said softly.

Terry tried to shut out those words. They were not what he needed to hear right now.

"Choices are important." Maddie looked at him and he reminded himself to breathe. "When I talked to Carol, she said the choices we make are important."

"Maddie, we're not ready for anything more than this, tonight."

"I know."
"Good." Terry breathed in relief. "For a moment there--" He was cut short by the softest, most exquisite kiss he'd ever tasted. Not that he was a connoisseur, but even for Maddie, it was meltingly sweet. As he deepened the kiss, he felt his arm around Maddie grow tighter. "I have to stop," he breathed, and she nodded in understanding.

"Don't leave me?" she asked. "I won't cut while I'm with you. Hold me until it's safe?"

Terry nodded, and she clung to him hard.

Though the floor was probably ice cold, Terry couldn't feel it, for he was visiting the sun and fighting to cool down. Maddie hung on and he knew she needed to stay close until she felt calmer and the need to cut no longer pushed at her as much. At least he was good for something. If he had known what that good night kiss had cost her, he would've stayed up with her. They were learning though, and for that he was thankful. He sat and held on to her, the narrow walkway between the two couches not affording enough room for him to avoid the subtle pull in his ankle. It didn't matter. She was more important.

"Thank you, Terry. Thank you for staying with me."

"That's the most unnecessary thanks I've ever had in my life." Terry breathed in her air. "I get to hold the one I love. For real," he smiled. "Thank you, Maddie." He kissed her hair and sighed deeply.

"If I was normal, you'd be sleeping right now," she reasoned.

"Well, that's true."

"And you'd have a real bed."

"When you put it that way, I don't know why I didn't marry Emily." He felt Maddie move against him in a stifled laugh. "Oh, I remember. That pesky love. It makes all the difference, doesn't it? Which would explain why I'm unreasonably happy on a hard floor with an abnormally wonderful woman who loves me for reasons I still can't fathom."

Maddie giggled. "Terry."
"Love is why I'm holding you, Maddie, why you're smiling at me right now, and why I figure God woke me to help you. There's no need to thank me for staying with you, for I intend to do that for the rest of my life. And I count that an honor."

"You're an awfully good friend to me, Terry."

Terry smiled, and was rewarded with a kiss. He hadn't said it to be thanked, it had simply been the truth. If he wanted to own another truth, Maddie had him wrapped around her little finger. He kissed her hand, kissed her forehead, held her, and let the cold floor do its job of cooling them down.

"Next time, Maddie, wake me when you need me? Don't wait until it's too late, but wake me the moment you feel it coming on."

She nodded, and Terry gave her an answering squeeze. He needed her to keep her word on that. Finding her on the floor by his bed was not something he wanted to repeat.

* * * *

This was better, so much better. She'd needed to feel Terry against her and not the Dragon. To replace darkness with light, shame with love. She kept a hand over Terry's, and every so often she'd look down at the arm snugged around her waist and remind herself who was holding her. She could see her butterfly wings now, their vibrant colors catching in the sunlight, just begging to take to their sky. To their wonderful, Terry-sky. She was born to live, and she would live with everything she had in her.

"You're trembling, Maddie." Terry breathed against her ear and she drew as close to his chest as she could without climbing inside him. "Try to calm down."

She tried, but courage was spilling from her like a cup running over. She wasn't ready-- she knew she wasn't, but still. She had wings, she could do anything.

Terry began to rock her, and sleep started to tug at the edges of her mind. It felt so good. Terry's pajamas were soft, his arms were gentle, and even though she kept them in view to make sure it
was him and not the Dragon holding her, calm began to settle inside of her. It felt like warmth, a
kiss of sunshine on her heart that spread to her soul, then to her fingertips, only to dance
between her and Terry with tiny shimmers of something wonderful. Tingly in a settled, warm
and happy sort of way, where you wanted to curl up like a happy cat sleeping in the sun. Feeling
drowsy but glowing, she kissed Terry's shoulder and felt herself slip away.

"Honey?" Terry whispered and Madison blinked open. "Is it safe to let go? Do you feel better?"

She nodded, and the arm around her waist eased off. Though she'd been feeling so good, a part
of her hated the fact she felt some relief that it was gone. As she crawled from him, she turned to
look at his ankle.

"I've got to get some blood to my legs," Terry groaned. He gingerly moved back to his couch, and
saw that she was watching. "I'm okay, Maddie, my ankle feels fine."

She held onto those words as she climbed into bed. "Good night, Terry. And thank you."

Smiling, he pulled his covers up. "Sleep well, Maddie. I'll see you in the morning."

Madison cozied into her blankets, and before long, was fast asleep.

* * * *

"What's that?" Madison fought against the grogginess, unsure at all that she wasn't dreaming.
Wasn't that a cell phone? It sounded like Terry's. She struggled to focus her eyes. The bathroom
light was on, and the room looked as dark as before. Was it still night?

Madison pushed onto her elbows and saw Terry reaching for his cell phone.

"What time is it?" she asked.

The screen on the phone lit up Terry's yawning face. "A few minutes after three."

"In the morning?"
He smiled wryly, and handed her the phone. "It's probably for you. I hope everyone's all right."

How could Terry know all that by just looking at the screen? Madison reached over, took the phone, and saw the caller's name. She gasped, and quickly answered.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"It's Mommy." Paige sounded distracted, but not in a panic. "Mommy's busy staying calm, and Tim's timing contractions and writing them down. Maddycakes kept climbing on their bed to watch, so Tim said I had to keep her out so he could think."

"Maddycakes?"

"She's crying, and keeps asking for Mommy, but Mommy's going to the hospital soon, to have the baby. Isn't that right? Contractions means it's going to happen soon, doesn't it? Would you stop bugging me?" Paige put the phone down, and Madison could hear her talking to someone called "Maddycakes." She soon realized it was their nickname for Madeline.

Madison told Terry the news. "Tim's timing contractions."

"That's what I just said." Paige came back. "Tim said I could call you if it would keep us out of his way." Another voice sounded in the background. "No-- I called her, so I get to talk to her first. You have to wait your turn." Paige sighed. "We can't sleep."

"They can't sleep," Madison repeated to Terry.

Terry scrubbed his face and smiled.

"I wouldn't be able to either, if I was about to have a new brother or sister. Do you know what you're going to have?" Madison tried to keep her voice light, and wondered if she should be trying to call help for Karen. Was Karen about to deliver that very second? Did Tim need help, or should she just try to distract the girls? Madison decided to just go for distraction and leave the deciding to other grownups besides her.
"We’re going to have a girl. I think Mommy was hoping for a boy, even though she never said so."
Paige sighed. "Maddycakes wants to talk to you."

"Okay." Madison looked to Terry. "I’m going to talk to Madeline now."

Terry's brows went up.

"Hello?" a teary but eager voice piped up and Madison could hear hope. "Daddy says you're my aunt."

"Yes, I am."

"Can you be Paige's aunt, too? Pleecease? She doesn't have any."

"I don't see why not."

"Did you hear that? She said she'll be your aunt, too!"

Madison heard some movement, then Paige came back.

"Thank you so much. I told her not to ask, but we've never had any aunts before."

"It's a privilege," Madison smiled, using a big word for a big honor. "How old is your sister? Terry told me, but I'm afraid I forgot."

"Madeline is six. She's named after you, you know."

"That was nice of your father."

Paige sighed, "I called Grandpa and told him Mommy was having contractions. He's Daddy's--my real Daddy's father-- and he just cried and hung up. I was only trying to be useful. I thought he'd want to know."

"How about your mom's father? Have you called him?"
"He's deceased," Paige said tactfully, as though she'd heard it from someone else. "Mommy doesn't have much family left, but us. Tim doesn't, either. Even my Daddy only had one brother. Sometimes I wish we had this huge family tree of people, and then we'd be more like everyone else, instead of just plain us. Sometimes it feels like no one would care if we fell off the face of the earth, except maybe a few dorky friends, and of course our landlord. He'd miss us for sure, he'd blow a gasket if we missed our rent. Wait a minute... Maddycakes wants me to ask how long it takes for babies to be born? She's right-- how long is it supposed to take?"

When Madison repeated the question to Terry, the Maddycakes got a quick smile from him.

"Well," Terry hesitated, "since this isn't Karen's first baby, I'm guessing the actual delivery will only take a few hours. Don't promise the girls though, that's just an estimate. From a guy, no less."

"First babies usually take longer?" Madison winced when Terry nodded, "yes." She relayed the information back to the girls, then came back to Terry with another question. "Will it hurt?"

Terry sighed. "Tell them a doctor will make their mother as comfortable as possible."

Madison covered the phone. "But it's going to hurt?"

Terry nodded, and Madison went back to the girls with the message about their mother being made comfortable.

"Do you know what your parents are going to name the baby?" Madison asked.

"Mommy wanted to call her Anna, but Daddy promised the private detective to name the baby after him if he found you, and, well, he found you. Mommy really let Tim have it when she heard that-- I mean, he didn't even tell her until after the fact. But Tim gave his word and Mommy said we should always keep our promises, even if they're hastily made."

"So they're naming the baby Connor?"

Something sounded in the background, and Madison tried to hear what it was.
"Tim's taking Mommy to the hospital. He wants to talk to you--"

"Madison? Thanks for keeping the girls busy." Tim's voice was anything but steady. "A neighbor's coming over to watch them, and should be here in about five minutes. Less, if she runs. Karen's contractions are close together, and her water just broke, so it's time. Remember us to that God of yours, if you would. I have to go--"

"Aunt Madison?" By the small voice, it sounded like Madeline again. "I'm scared. Paige went with Daddy to help Mommy outside, but I'm scared."

"Where are you, Sweetheart?"

"On Paige's bed. Paige and I have the same room."

"I'll stay on the phone with you until your neighbor gets there. Your daddy said she's on her way, so you won't be alone."

"The doctor will make Mommy comfortable?"

"Yes, he'll do his best. I'm sure he will."

"Mommy's doctor is a her."

"Then she'll do her best." Madison smiled, amazed she was talking to her niece. A blood relative, one named after her.

Muffled sounds came over the phone and Madison tried to translate them into what she knew was going on in Tim's home. Madeline reported the fact she was now in the bedroom doorway, watching Mommy go down the hall, then the fact Mommy was now in the minivan, and after that, Madison heard an elderly woman's loud voice, and guessed the neighbor had arrived.

"Mrs. Powell is here," Madeline said in a hush.

A few moments later, Paige took the phone back, her voice all breathless and urgent. "They're gone. Now what, Aunt Madison? What do we do now?"
"You wait, that's what," Madison heard loudly in the background. It was a friendly voice, but one that spoke as though she had a hard time hearing herself speak. "Say goodbye to your friend, dears, and I'll fix an early breakfast."

"I heard," Madison said, and Paige blew out a breath. "Call us anytime you want. We won't mind, even if it's in the middle of the night."

"Thanks, Aunt Madison, thanks so much."

"We'll be praying, Paige."

"Thank you."

They hung up, and Madison looked to Terry. "Karen's on her way to the hospital. I forgot to ask her to call when Karen has the baby, but Tim probably will."

"Someone staying with the girls?" Terry nodded as Madison relayed everything she'd been told, including the fact Madeline had been named after her. He smiled at that. "I'm glad they could call you. I'm guessing there won't be anymore sleep in their household, tonight. Well, we might as well get some rest before morning." Terry checked the time. "It's early yet."

"I told the girls we'd pray," Madison said, as she put the phone on her pillow. "Tim even asked if we'd remember them before God."

"This has him scared, then. He didn't have to ask. I've already been praying."

They prayed again, with Terry asking for mercy for Karen and the baby with such heartfelt earnestness, Madison realized Terry had faced this sort of thing before. "Izzy had a difficult pregnancy with the triplets," Terry explained when the prayer was over. "It's always a merciful blessing when the baby is placed in the mother's arms for the first time, and both are healthy. In Izzy's case, there were multiple reasons to be thankful."

Fatigue mixed with happiness as Madison lay down and pulled the covers up. She was an aunt to several nieces and two nephews, but she was a real aunt, too. She was an actual sister, though she
considered herself a sister to Izzy, as well. She was a wife. She was a friend. She was so many things she'd never been before-- she had people in her life who she loved, and who loved her, it made her feel special. All those years in her chain, she never could've imagined herself as special as this.

Hugging Terry's phone to her pillow in case the girls or Tim should call, Madison drifted to sleep without even trying.

* * * *

When morning came, Terry let Maddie rest as long as she wanted while he watched from his couch. She looked so content, so peaceful, so happy, he hated to break in on her slumber. He was glad he'd entered Paige's number into his phone's address book. He'd guessed the girl would call again, and was grateful beyond words that Paige had been able to reach out to Maddie when she had. If only for a few words of comfort.

He'd been so proud of Maddie, the way she'd handled herself with Paige and Madeline. She'd been learning from Izzy, and it showed, though Terry saw plenty of Maddie's own compassion showing through. Bless her, Maddie was so willing to help, Terry loved Maddie all the more for that willingness.

The reminder of Karen made him send up another prayer for mother and baby.

Then his thoughts turned closer to home, to the good night kiss that had caused so much trouble. It was clear they were treading into deeper territory, and though it encouraged him, it also put him on even higher guard. He wanted to know what to do, how best to help her, and how not to hurt her. If she'd come with a manual, he'd have memorized it cover to cover by now, but she hadn't. All he could do was listen and make sure he was paying attention. If she needed him to hold her so she wouldn't cut, then he could do that.

He wished he could do more.

He watched over his wife, safe on her couch, beneath her blankets, all snug and warm. Her journey was his, for they were on the same path. Wherever this journey led them, they would go
through it together. Yes, he would hold her. He would hold her for as long as she needed, and then some. Just please, God, help her not to hurt herself.

He closed his eyes and took in the quiet, then noticed the rain had stopped. The room was silent, all he could hear was the faint breathing from the other couch. He moved his foot and thought it a good sign when it didn't protest. New mercies. They needed new mercies for a new day.

A sigh came from Maddie's couch, and Terry opened his eyes to watch her stir.

"Is it morning?" she asked with a long, stretching sigh.

He glanced at the time. "It most definitely is. If you need more rest, though, go back to sleep. You've had what I'd call a long night."

"Do you think Karen's had her baby?"

"We haven't had any calls. I'm guessing it hasn't happened yet."

"I thought you said it would only take a few hours." Maddie rolled onto her back and stared up at the ceiling. "Shouldn't it have happened by now?"

"Not really," Terry smiled. "The baby will come when she's ready, and not a moment sooner."

Silence. Then, "Terry?" Maddie's voice sounded a million miles away. "Do you think a woman always knows when she's pregnant? I mean, just after it happens, do you think she always knows? All those years when I was with the Dragon, and he'd beat me when I missed my period, do you think he was right? Do you think I was pregnant?"

The number of questions, and especially the last one, knocked the breath out of Terry. He couldn't find his tongue, and it took him so long to answer, Maddie sat up and looked at him. He prayed to God she'd never been pregnant, but he couldn't know. The very thought of it, tore him up inside.

"Terry?"
He cleared his throat. "Do you think you ever were?"

"I never felt a baby in me, but when I was late, or I missed and he didn't find out, I thought I was. So I had to be pregnant, didn't I?"

"Did your belly ever show?"

She shook her head. "My period would start up again, and then I'd hold my breath to see if he noticed the next time I missed."

"He starved you, Maddie. If you're underweight, your body can have an irregular menstrual cycle, and if you're severely underweight, it can stop altogether."

"It can?" Maddie seemed to brighten at the thought. "Then maybe he never killed my babies."

Terry couldn't take it. He rolled off the couch without giving his ankle any thought. He couldn't think about the Dragon, about him hurting Maddie, or her children, without wanting to take a baseball bat and doing some major bodily harm to a man who'd lost all right to be called a human being. But the Dragon was a man, and no mere animal incapable of knowing right from wrong. That's what made him so despicable. That's why God hated sin so much, and that's why there was a hell.

"Your ankle--" Maddie called after Terry.

Terry stopped at their bedroom door, and turned to look at her. "I was just thinking. You don't need to be a monster to violate someone the way we were. You just have to not care. Animals didn't do this to us, people did. It's not rocket science, is it?"

Maddie shook her head. "Your ankle."

She looked at him with such tenderness, he shifted off of his foot, even though it felt fine.

"Did you mean what you said about starvation? or did you just say that to make me feel better?"
"I meant it." Terry put effort into calming down. "When I was working the crisis hotline, I counseled people with eating disorders. It can happen."

Maddie bowed her head. When she looked at him again, it was with tears in her eyes. "Thank you."

He could only nod. It amazed him once more how freeing a little knowledge could be. She still couldn't know that she hadn't been pregnant for one of those beatings, but he could see it gave her hope to think that life might not have been taken from her. He understood that, and as he watched Maddie get up to face the day, he thanked God for giving him the experience he did, to be able to tell Maddie what she needed to hear. Seeing her take hope, gave him hope.

She smiled at him. "Everyone has probably eaten by now, haven't they?"

"Probably." Terry leaned against the armrest of his couch, and saw her dry her eyes.

"Do women always know when they're pregnant?" she asked, going back to her first question.

"I don't think it's written anywhere that a woman is supposed to know she's pregnant so early on. If that were true, pregnancy test manufacturers would go out of business. Only stands to reason."

"So I'm not a bad mother if I didn't know?"

"Absolutely not." Terry bristled at the thought of such a notion. "I'm guessing some women might know, and others might not. He beat you because you were late, Maddie, not because you were showing."

Maddie nodded, and kept making her bed. When she swiped at her cheek, Terry wanted to go over and give her a bone-crushing hug. He loved that woman.

As she smoothed out her blanket, there were traces of sadness in her eyes, and when she saw that he noticed, she gathered her clothes and started for the bathroom. She looked back at him. "I need to put some things up on our walls. Would you mind the clutter too much?" She asked as though it would be an intrusion, a hardship for him, and he quickly shook his head.
"I don't mind." He had no idea what she was talking about, but it didn't matter. The fact she wanted something, was enough for him. "Do what you want with this room, Maddie. You don't need my permission."

"But I want your agreement."

"You have it."

Maddie sniffed, a faint smile came to her lips, and it breathed life to his heart. "You're so wonderful, Terry. I won't let my stuff get in your way. I just need to tape some things up, that's all. Carol and I talked about it, and after last night, I-- I need to put some things up on the walls so it'll help me to be strong."

"Do what you need to. You have my full support, and all my love."

Her smile looked blessedly sweet. She went into the bathroom, shut the door behind her, and he was left to be grateful that even though he didn't know what last night had to do with taping things to the wall, she was at least smiling. A moment later, he heard the shower going and knew Maddie was getting a good start to the day.

He moved to his couch, sat down, and rotated his ankle. Some stiffness, nothing more. Not a big surprise, seeing he hadn't been using his ankle yesterday. It felt decent, not bad at all for a mild sprain. One more day of rest, just one more. He was ticking off the hours when he could use his ankle again, when the phone on Maddie's couch rang. Terry stepped over, picked up the phone, and saw Tim's name on the screen. He would've tried shouting to the bathroom, but Maddie wouldn't have been able to hear him with the water running.

Terry moved the slider, and answered. "Hey, Tim. How's Karen doing?"

"Incredible, she was just incredible." Tim sounded as though he were walking. "I saw it happen, I mean I actually saw it happen. I was there. In the room with her. Andrea didn't let me anywhere near her during Madeline's birth, but Karen wanted me with her, and I got to see the whole thing."

"So the baby's here."
"Yeah, she's here, Connie's here. She's amazing, Terry. She's sleeping right now. She was crying at
the top of her lungs a half hour ago, but then Karen fed her, and after that, she fell right to sleep."

"How is she? And how is Karen?"

"Connie Anna is a healthy seven pounds, eleven ounces. Karen is exhausted-- she's been brave
about the whole thing, certainly braver than I'd ever be if I had to do something like that, but
she's doing good. They're both great, and they're both healthy."

"Praise the Lord. That's a real answer to prayer, Tim. Maddie and I have been praying."

Tim was silent a moment. "Thanks. We appreciate you and Madison being there for the girls last
night. You didn't have to be, and when I told Karen, she wanted me to be sure to thank you
both. And she wanted..." Tim paused and Terry sensed Tim was working himself up to ask
something, but lacked the courage. "I'm on my way home to shower and change, and check on
the girls. I told them they could stay home from school this one time, since I
figured they
wouldn't have been able to concentrate on their studies, anyway. We've got three now, Terry.
Three girls. This one has Karen's eyes, but my ears. Definitely my ears."

"Congratulations, Tim. Maddie just stepped out of the bathroom. Let me pass the phone to her." Terry handed the phone to a hastily dressed Maddie with wet blonde hair. She must've finished
her shower, only to hear him talking to someone, and had hurried to get out of the bathroom.

She gulped, and took the phone, but Terry didn't spill the beans. He let Tim have that joy, and
stepped back to watch Maddie's eyes go wide. As she listened, her mouth spread into one
continual smile. Good, something to make her happy, to make her heart turn to thoughts of joy,
instead of memories she couldn't change. Terry grabbed some jeans, a clean shirt, and headed to
the bathroom, careful to not hurt his nicely healing ankle. While Maddie kept up her
conversation with Tim, Terry's own thoughts turned to how soon he could convince Maddie
that his ankle was well enough for travel.

"Terry?" Maddie came limp running with the phone to her ear, and nearly slammed into the
bathroom door as he was closing it.
"Are you all right?" Terry sighed as Maddie came up smiling, her eyes shining with excitement.

Her hand covered the phone so Tim couldn't hear. "Karen is inviting you and me to come see the baby today, and Tim wants to take us to lunch. Please, Terry?"

Terry grinned. "And here I was, afraid I wouldn't be able to talk you into a long drive."

Maddie looked puzzled, and Terry pointed to his foot.

"I forgot. We can't--"

"Oh, yes, we can. If Tim and Karen are game, then we're coming. Is Tim sure his wife won't mind?"

"Tim said she told him to ask us to come."

"Then we're coming. Get Tim to email us directions, find out from him when hospital visiting hours are, and while you're at it, get out of the bathroom so I can change." Terry closed the door when Maddie smiled and stepped back.

Terry chuckled, then remembered his conversation with Tim, that moment when he'd sensed Tim had wanted to ask him something but hadn't. Tim had probably worried that an hour and a half drive would be too much to ask, but it wasn't. Even one with little notice. This was an important event, and he and Maddie were more than happy to come. Terry only wished he could bring John and Izzy. This was something meant for family and close friends of the O'Briens though, and Terry was simply grateful that it appeared he and Maddie were to be included in that number.

The morning held good news, for not only were Karen and the baby healthy, but Maddie was no longer thinking about the Dragon. She was excited and happy, and her joy did wonders for Terry's heart.

After a quick shower and a shave, Terry changed into jeans and a long sleeved blue shirt, then moved back into the bedroom and took his wedding band from off the dresser. He chuckled
when he saw Maddie still on the phone with her brother. *Good, keep talking, Tim.* Terry passed her, opened the bedroom door and went into the hall.

Though the house had gotten up long ago, the smell of coffee hung in the air like a promise of things to come. He slipped on the silver band and followed the scent to the kitchen, only to find John at the table, reading from his laptop.

John saluted Terry with his mug of java. "Good morning."

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" Terry smiled as he moved to the counter. "Maddie's on the phone with Tim right now. Karen just gave birth, and Maddie and I are driving into Syracuse to see the baby." Terry got out his smiley mug, and helped himself to some French Roast. "Where's Izzy?"

"Taking the girls into preschool." John leaned back in his chair. "That's great news, I'm happy for the O'Briens. What about your ankle?"

"I can hardly feel it. Just some stiffness." Terry pulled two bowls from the cupboard, then tugged out the cereal. "It's a girl, a healthy baby girl. Tim sounded over the moon about her."

"I would imagine. Tell Tim and Karen we said congratulations," John smiled. "Are you taking them any food? You should, if you can. If Izzy were here, that's what she would say. Check the fridge for leftovers. With the woman of the house off her feet, Tim will appreciate a readymade meal."

"Good thinking." Terry started for the fridge, but was called off by John.

"Sit down and take care of your foot-- I'll check." John strode over, opened the freezer and looked inside like a man on a mission. "Let's see what we have in here. Izumi usually has something up her sleeve." John read from a zippered bag and grinned. "Eureka-- sloppy joes. All Tim has to do is heat this up, and serve on buns. Guaranteed to make any brood happy, or at least, my brood." John looked thoughtful. "I think we have hamburger buns around here, somewhere."

As John dug around in a cupboard, Terry dumped cornflakes into a bowl and set aside the other for Maddie. "Do you ever feel overwhelmed?" Terry asked. "I mean, overwhelmed by marriage."
By the responsibility." Terry started to get up for milk, but John motioned for him to sit, and went to the fridge for him. "Sometimes," Terry sighed, "when I look at her, I feel--"

"Like you have this big responsibility that you can't possibly live up to?" John finished. He handed Terry the milk. "I think I remember once telling you something like that. I'll let you in on a secret: It gets worse when you start having kids. Much worse."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" Terry drowned the corn flakes in nonfat. "Because if it is, it's not working."

"Welcome to the club, buddy. You're just going to have to throw yourself on God's mercy like the rest of us." John looked about, went to another cupboard and came up with a bag of dinner rolls. "Not exactly hamburger buns, are they."

"Is there anything about marriage that is easy?" Terry asked.

Smiling, John opened his mouth as though ready to answer. Then he looked at Terry. "Sorry, you're on your own with that one."

With a sigh, Terry said a prayer over his flakes, then dug in. Though marriage wasn't easy, as he remembered Maddie's smile that morning, a wistful happiness took hold of Terry's heart. "They sure know how to make a morning shine, though, don't they?"

John smiled, and set the dinner rolls on the table.

Minutes later, Maddie came in with Terry's phone and her spiral notebook. She showed Terry what she'd written, or rather, what she'd tried to write. Directions to Tim's home, and the way to the hospital. When they got close to Syracuse, Tim had asked for them to phone ahead and they'd make plans to either visit with Karen first, or go to lunch first, depending on when they arrived. Terry had hoped Tim would email the directions, but Maddie had taken them down in her pen pressed-through-the-paper scrawl. If Terry strained, he could almost read them. There wasn't enough money in all of New York for Terry to tell Maddie that, and he gave her a kiss for all her trouble. As long as Maddie had gotten the addresses right, the turns and directions wouldn't be necessary. He could plug the addresses into his phone-- once he got his phone back from Maddie, that is.
She handed it over, reluctantly.

"Since your hair is dry, why don't you eat your breakfast," Terry coaxed, as he punched in Karen's hospital.

"I hear congratulations are in order," John said, handing Maddie the milk. "How's Karen doing?"

"Tim said she's worn out. I can't believe she invited us to come." Maddie sounded nervous, and Terry tried not to absorb Maddie's nerves while he was busy plotting their route. "It's so nice of Karen, especially since she must be exhausted, but Tim said Karen would really like for us to see the baby. He said Karen is determined."

Terry slid a look in John's direction. He knew what John must be thinking, for he was thinking the same thing. This was less about the baby, and more about Karen wanting to meet Maddie.

"What are you supposed to do when you visit someone in the hospital?" Maddie ignored the cereal and stared at John, then Terry. "Am I supposed to bring something? Is anything expected of me? I wish Izzy were here. She'd know what to do."

"I don't think Karen is expecting much, just to show off her new bundle and meet Tim's sister." Terry nodded to the cereal. "Try and eat."

"What time do you need to leave?" John asked.

Terry looked to Maddie.

"Tim said general visiting hours start at eight in the morning, and end at eight-thirty in the evening. Tim also wants to take us out to lunch."

"Then we need to leave in about an hour. That's enough time for you to eat breakfast, though." Terry turned back to the phone and punched in Tim's address. It looked to be an apartment. "Izzy should be back soon, and we'll ask her what to bring. Women are good about stuff like this."
"Do you think Karen will like me?" Madison stared at the milk as though it would answer her.

"Of course she will." As far as Terry was concerned, it was a done deal, and even if it wasn't, he still wanted to change the subject so Maddie would eat. "You can put your notebook away, I got all the directions I need, right here." Terry pocketed the phone as it started to ring, and pulled it back out. "If you want to bring them something, maybe we could get diapers. When you've got a baby, you go through diapers left and right."

"A man speaking from experience," John laughed.

When Terry answered his phone, and said Dick's name, Maddie started in on her breakfast.

"Dick, good morning!" Terry sat back and smiled. "Abby sent you the guest list, then. Yeah, Izzy thought it was high time I got that off to you. Thanks for being so patient about it. What? Oh, who's Tim and Karen O'Brien?" Terry grinned at the others, then told Dick about Maddie's brother. He was deep in discussion, going into the private detective discovering the Las Vegas marriage record, when the front door sounded, and Maddie bolted from the table at a wild, walking limp.

"I think Izumi's home," John said, and got up and followed after Maddie.

His mind straying into the living room, Terry kept up his story, though he was dropping important details, like the fact Tim had kids.

"He has three now," Terry said, pushing up from the table and feeling for the first time a slight tug in his ankle. He held still a moment and moved his foot. It felt good again, and he moved into the living room with the cell phone glued to his ear. "Dick, are you there?"

"I'm sorry, Terry, I'm having trouble with this connection. I thought you said he had three now."

"I did. The last one came this morning." Terry listened as Maddie excitedly told Izzy the good news.

"Three wives?"
Terry frowned into the phone. "No, three kids. His wife just had a baby."

"Oh," Dick's relief came through loud and clear, "glad to hear it, glad to hear it. Please pass my congratulations to the baby's aunt. I saw Tyler's name on the list. Is he really back?"

"Maybe." Terry smiled at Izzy. "Should we bring something for the baby?"

"A gift basket might be nice," Dick suggested. "Or an outfit with a hood on it-- you know, those things you usually see babies in when the weather's cold? What am I telling you for, you're an old hand at this. Listen, I'll let you go. I just wanted to iron out a few details, but I can do that with Abby. You have a good day, and say 'hi' to that new brother-in-law of yours."

"Thanks, Dick, I will." Terry hung up as Izzy came over and gave Terry a hug. "Tim's expecting us, and John said we should bring them food. The frozen sloppy joes in the freezer and some dinner rolls. And I was thinking maybe diapers. Dick thought a gift basket? or a baby bunting? We have to leave in about an hour," Terry warned.

"Izzy, what should we do so Karen will like me?" Maddie pursued Izzy into the kitchen, and Terry followed. "She'll like Terry, because everyone likes Terry, but what should I do to get her to like me?"

"First of all, breathe." Izzy took off her coat. "Don't pretend to be someone you're not, be yourself, and the rest will be what it will be. Food is a good idea. John, please get a freezer bag. Madison, just calm down, and we'll send you off properly. Terry, run to the store and buy those diapers, a congratulations card for the parents, some hamburger buns, a tray of fresh cinnamon rolls from the bakery-- make sure they're wrapped properly-- and Dick had a good idea. Since you're at the MegaMart anyway, see if there's something nice for a baby girl you could pick up."

Maddie tugged on Terry's sleeve. "Could I go with you?"

"Go ahead," Izzy smiled. "I'll have the freezer bag ready by the time you're back from the store."

"If you want to come, then sure, Maddie." Terry went back to the living room to sit on the couch a moment and rub his ankle. The stiffness felt better. He was about to get up, when he caught Maddie watching from the kitchen doorway. "I'm fine."
"We should call this off."

"We're going."

"Can you drive and not hurt your foot?"

It took Terry a moment to think how he usually drove. One good foot, moving back and forth. He nodded. "I can drive."

Maddie came to him, bent down, and whispered in his ear. "I'm trusting you to help me not cut, so I'll trust you to tell me if you think you're going to hurt your ankle."

"That's fair," he nodded.

"Then I'll get our coats and shoes." Maddie kissed his cheek, then went into the hall.

Terry smiled as his friends glanced into the living room. He was in loving hands, and John and Izzy knew it.

As they went back to their errand, Terry waited on the couch and took out his phone to look over the map. The route to the hospital was simple enough, though finding Tim's apartment would be a little more round about, by the look of the streets. Terry studied the map, then pocketed the phone as Maddie came back with her purse, and their things.

The kitchen door slammed shut, and Terry wondered who had just left.

"Would you get my wallet off the dresser?" Terry asked, and Maddie hurried back to their room.

As Terry put on his shoes, he listened for rain and was grateful when he heard none. "And my keys," he called as Maddie came in with his wallet. She ran back, and he checked his wallet to make sure he had his credit cards, all the things he would need for the day.

The kitchen door sounded again. "I opened the garage," John called into the living room.
"Hey, thanks."

"Better take an umbrella, just in case it's raining in Syracuse."

"Maddie?" Terry smiled as Maddie came in with his jeep keys. "An umbrella?"

She nodded, and went back as Terry put on his coat. When Maddie came walking in, she looked a bit winded, and Terry kissed her for her trouble.

He got up, called to the kitchen that they'd be back soon, then moved to open the front door for Maddie.

It seemed crazy, but as they stepped outside, Terry felt as though he were breathing different air than usual. It was the same October air that braced his lungs as it always did this time of year, but this year, it held something extra. It made him buoyant. Each inhale was like breathing in a holiday, it was a gift, something that came with a bright bow because it came with so much love. Terry felt Maddie's hand slip into his as they walked to the garage. His wedding band was only an outward symbol of what his heart could now wear all year round. He wore Maddie's love, day in, day out. He'd always tended toward the happy side, but now? now, he couldn't imagine his life without Maddie.

How had he ever managed to breathe, to suck in that next breath without her?

He helped her into the jeep, then circled around the back, climbed in behind the wheel while Maddie buckled herself in.

He started the engine, turned on the heater for Maddie, then backed out of the garage as sunlight began to spill from the clouds. It was a welcome change to the weather they'd been having, and Terry sent up his thanks as he pulled onto the main road.

As the trees and houses sped by, Maddie held her purse on her lap, and kept quiet.

"Excited?" he asked.

She nodded. "What if she doesn't like me?"
"How could she not like you? You're kind, generous--"

"Please, don't, Terry. I know what I am." Maddie hugged her purse to herself. "I'm crazy, that's what I am. I feel like I'm just learning how to walk, and Karen is normal, and having babies, and doing all the things I'm only dreaming about. I wish I was normal, Terry. I wish I could at least wait to meet Karen until after our honeymoon. I'd be more like her then."

"Why then? Nothing would be different." Terry glanced at Maddie. "You want her at the wedding, don't you?"

Maddie nodded.

"Then take it easy. If I can weather being a brother-in-law, then you can suffer through being a sister-in-law. Nothing says you have to like each other. Just get along enough to make Tim happy."

Maddie didn't look convinced.

"Look at it this way-- if it doesn't go well, Syracuse will always be an hour and a half from here."

"Is that supposed to be a bright side?"

"You're catching on," Terry smiled.

"I want to like her."

"That's probably what she's saying about you." Terry pulled into the busy MegaMart parking lot, and started to hunt for the rare spot by the entrance. "Give her a chance, Maddie. She invited us down there, so let's give her a chance, trust God, and see what happens."

Maddie fumbled with her seat belt as Terry pulled into a parking space. "I guess so."
"Why all the fuss over Tim's wife?" Terry asked, as he shut off the engine. "Besides the obvious fact she's just given birth, I'd think you'd have been more nervous about meeting Tim, than Karen." He opened his door, then looked at Maddie. "Or am I wrong?"

"Karen will whisper in Tim's ear, just like I whisper in yours." Maddie climbed out and pulled her purse strap over her shoulder. "That's the way it works, isn't it? Tim might have his own opinion about me, but Karen will have something to say about it, and Tim will be influenced by what she thinks."

Better think before answering that one. Terry got out, closed the door, and rounded the jeep to Maddie. He took her hand as they moved into the store and the doors swooshed open. "You're right," he sighed, and squeezed Maddie's hand. "Be nervous, very, very nervous."

Maddie looked up at him, and he laughed and planted a kiss on her cheek before letting go to snag a grocery cart. He let her push the cart, and smiled when she couldn't hold her scolding look.

"She'll love you, Maddie, and if she doesn't, it's her loss." Terry nodded toward the nonfood side of the store. "The diapers are this way." He hadn't helped raise triplets for nothing, and probably could've found the diaper aisle blindfolded. If the store hadn't moved the aisle since the girls had been potty trained. "Okay, they're over here." Terry stopped Maddie's cart with one hand, and with the other, tugged down a likely brand. "I prefer the kind with a wetness indicator, because newborn munchkins don't pee as much and it's hard to tell when they need to be changed. You have to keep their diapers dry, or they could get a nasty rash." Terry looked at Maddie and saw she was paying close attention. "How many newborn diaper packs should we get?" he asked.

She looked floored that he would even think to ask her.

"How about two?" she shrugged.

"We'll go with two," Terry nodded, and tugged the diapers into the cart. "If your brother complains, it's on you." When Maddie looked at him with wide eyes, he winked, and steered her toward the clothing area. "Are you having fun yet?"

"Should we have gotten more?"
"I'd say two was about right. They probably already have diapers, and babies grow fast." Terry folded his arms and nodded to the aisles of munchkin clothes. "Here we are. Izzy was probably thinking a blanket, or something along those lines, since newborns outgrow their clothes so fast, it makes your heart ache when you realize what you bought for them when they were tiny. Of course, that makes newborn clothes that much more special. Don't look at me, I can't be expected to do everything. Just make sure it's small enough for a newborn baby girl--about yay long," he held out his hands, "and go with it." Terry stepped back and watched.

Maddie pulled up the strap of her purse. "What's a sleeper? Izzy said something about a sleeper before we left."

He gestured to a clothes rack. "Make sure it's smaller, because you're shopping for a newborn."

"If I start looking around, you won't walk away, will you?"

"You won't lose me," he promised, and took out his iPhone to go over the map again. He wanted to give Maddie some breathing room, and stepped back a little to watch without adding any pressure. There was pressure, they needed to leave soon, but Terry knew the joys of shopping for a little one and wanted Maddie to enjoy being an aunt. This was it, time to step up to the plate and do her stuff. She glanced back at him and he looked down at his phone.

With a sigh, Maddie started into the baby area in earnest, and Terry followed. He prayed it would lift her spirits as it always had his.

She stopped at a display of cute dresses, and he saw her smile. Frills, lace, and all the things that Terry figured some new mothers couldn't wait to get their baby girls into. Izzy had been one of them.

"Doesn't have to be a sleeper," Terry mumbled, and scrolled the map on his screen.

She kept going, and he ambled after her. He stopped when she did, and his ankle felt a little strange. No pain, no pull, just different. Terry shifted his weight to his good foot, and the feeling went away.
Please, God, don’t let my ankle get in the way of this.

Terry looked up slightly and saw Maddie eying something. He followed her gaze to a large flat box displaying pink and white color coordinated garments. A thirty-eight piece, deluxe newborn layette gift set complete with onesies, caps, booties, and bibs. It had more, but Terry stopped counting after the keepsake box. Maddie homed in on it like a hummingbird to an irresistibly large and overwhelmingly pink flower. She pulled it off the shelf and Terry had to admire her strength. She could carry it without help.

He put his phone away as she fit the wide box trimmed with gold ribbon into the cart. The top was clear, making it easy to see the folded clothing. It had favorite aunt written all over it.

"You'd better get something for the other two girls," Terry said, as they moved out of the baby area. He held off making any suggestions, for he had nieces, he'd bought gifts for them before, and this was Maddie's chance to shine.

"Paige is eleven," Maddie said thoughtfully. She looked lost a moment, then looked to Terry. "Where do they keep spiral notebooks?"

"This way," Terry said, and headed away from the clothes.

Maddie looked like she was concentrating, and he didn't want to interrupt with questions. He stopped at the right aisle and she looked about. Notebooks, plain ones, covers with bright prints, but Maddie didn't take any of them. She sighed, and kept looking, and Terry finally glanced at the time. They needed to get going, but he held back from telling her to hurry. Further down the aisle, Maddie came to some thick hard covered journals, and she stopped. Some had muted flowers on them, others were locking journals with cute birds and clouds. Maddie picked up a locked journal, used the attached key and opened it. Terry could see it had well lined paper, a journal a teenager might cherish, but he had no idea if an eleven-year-old would even be interested. Maddie searched and found a nice ballpoint pen, and put both into the cart.

"Paige?" Terry asked, and Maddie nodded "yes." Okay, Maddie knew the girl better than he did. He waited for orders, but saw Maddie pick up another book, this one a cartoon sticker journal that included a fun, little girl pen. "Madeline?" he asked, and Maddie smiled.
"Maddycakes."

"Cute name for a munchkin," Terry smiled. He checked the time. They were now officially in a hurry, and he made a beeline to the greeting cards.

Not taking the time to read, he nabbed the nearest card with a baby on it, passed it to Maddie, then moved toward the food side of the store. They needed to get back home, then hit the road so they could reach Syracuse before lunchtime; their shopping was putting them behind schedule, not that they'd had much of a schedule to begin with.

He snagged enough hamburger buns to do the job, headed to the bakery, and got the cinnamon rolls Izzy had suggested. He felt a tug on his arm.

"What?" he asked, as they started for the checkout.

"This card is for an expectant mother."

"Then we'll get one at the hospital's gift shop." Terry looked at the long line in front of them. Ten items or less was out of the question, but the next checkout had only a few people, so he steered their cart over. The woman at the front of the line was having trouble with her coupons, so Terry checked his watch. "Stay here. I'll get another card."

"But, Terry--"

"I'll be right back. I promise." Terry sprinted off to the card aisle, nearly missing an old woman. He apologized, slowed, then picked up his pace when he thought of Maddie at the register without any way of paying for their groceries. A card, a card, any card besides the one they already had would do. He scanned the racks and found a congratulations sentiment, then hurried back to their checkout at top speed. He felt his ankle, slowed, and found Maddie timidly standing by their cart at the front of the line.

"Sorry, I'm back." Terry blew out a breath and started to put their things on the conveyor belt.
Maddie helped, and the woman at the register looked relieved to get the line going again. He added the card to the top of the stack, pulled out his wallet and saw Maddie clutching her middle in a tight hug. He shouldn't have left. His ankle smarted, and he prayed he hadn't set his ankle back with that little stunt. He should've waited, a card at the gift store would've been just fine.

As Maddie helped to place their bags into the cart, Terry almost didn't hear the voice behind him wishing them congratulations. Pink-- that meant a baby girl. A neighbor, wishing them congratulations, but not to them exactly, for the woman was quick to notice it was a gift set. Was it for anyone she knew?

Terry smiled. It was hard to keep secrets in this small town.

"It's for Maddie's brother. They just had a baby," he explained, and then as they finished at the checkout, he had to apologize that they were in a hurry and couldn't stay to talk.

"Terry, are you all right?" Maddie whispered as they left the MegaMart. "You were running, weren't you?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Are you okay? Sorry I left you back there. I shouldn't have." Terry didn't feel any easier when she hugged his arm as he pushed their cart back to the jeep. He looked at her, and she smiled.

"I didn't cut while you were gone."

"That's not what I meant. I scared you, didn't I?"

"It's okay." She hugged his arm even tighter, then held the cart still as he got out their keys. "Thanks, Terry."

"For what?"

"For letting me pick out the presents. I didn't know this could be so much fun."
Okay, she was all right. She was genuinely all right. He could breathe, and he started to notice the air around him taking on that cold holiday chill again, the kind that told him something special was happening. He loaded the groceries and presents into the back seat, then returned the cart while Maddie climbed into the jeep. His ankle wasn't exactly happy, but he'd live.

The drive home was filled with Maddie looking into the back to make sure the gifts were still there. Terry hoped the girls would like what she'd bought for them. Though Maddie was new at this, he knew Maddie, knew Maddie’s heart, and prayed her nieces would appreciate the heart that had gone into their presents.

The moment they came to a stop in front of the house, Maddie fought to get out of her seat belt. She was so excited, she hurried into the house and left Terry sitting in the jeep.

"It's okay, I'm coming. Right behind you," he laughed, and sat there a moment to check their gas. The tank was mostly full, but he would probably top it off before they drove back from Syracuse. He started to get out when Izzy and Maddie stepped from the house at a quick clip. John followed from behind with the freezer bag, and waved to Terry. Terry smiled, and stayed where he was. From his open driver's side door, he could hear the women.

"Just wait until you see it," Maddie told Izzy, and Terry reached into the back seat to pull out the box in question.

A corner wedged against the interior, and Terry worked to angle it while John opened the passenger door and watched. Terry turned, just managing to fit the box onto the passenger seat so everyone could see. "It's big," Terry said, and John whistled.

"No kidding. Here's the food." John passed Terry the bag. "There's plenty of ice in there, so the food shouldn't spoil before you reach Syracuse."

"Thanks." Terry loaded the bag into the back of the jeep, while the women admired the gift set.

Izzy smiled her approval, and hugged Maddie.

"Could you wait so I can change before we leave?" Maddie asked, and Terry nodded.
"Please make it fast, though."

Maddie smiled, and left with Izzy.

Why Maddie needed to change, was beyond Terry, but at least it gave him time to get the box into the back seat again, to get out and check the tires, make sure the jeep was ready for the long drive. John stood by and kept him company, then handed him a pen when Terry remembered they needed to sign the card.

Using a clipboard in the jeep, Terry filled in the card, then passed the pen back to John.

"You might as well sign it, too," Terry shrugged. He watched John's fluid signature, the one that always made their legal documents look official, and Terry nodded with satisfaction. "I hope Maddie hurries. We don't have all day." As Terry said those words, Maddie came from the house with Izzy. Terry shook his head. For the life of him, Maddie looked the same now, as she had a few moments ago. "Sign the card," he beckoned to the ladies, and Izzy came close with a curious stare.

"You want me to sign it?" Izzy looked unsure. "What will the O'Briens think?"

"That you're family," Terry shrugged. "Is it all right, Maddie?"

Maddie smiled, took the pen from John, and gave it to Izzy. "How do I look?"

"Great," Terry said, bending over to check a tire one more time.

"You didn't even look."

"I don't have to-- you always look good."

"If you leave now, you might make it in time for lunch," John said, as Izzy passed the pen to Maddie. "It looks like Abby's coming over. Don't stop, I'll tell her the news. Just go."

Terry waved to Abby, then watched as Maddie finish signing the card. He snagged the card off the clipboard, stuffed it into the envelope as Abby called to them.
"If you stop to talk now, you'll never leave," John told them. "Madison, tell everyone 'hi' for us, and send our congratulations to Tim and Karen." John patted Terry on the back as Terry climbed into the jeep.

The wind nearly carried away the envelope, but Terry held it tight, and handed it to Maddie as soon as she got in. Before Terry closed the driver's side door, John and Izzy came close and everyone said a prayer for safety. Abby joined them for the last part of the prayer, for Terry heard footsteps, and when the prayer was over, he opened his eyes to find Abby had been praying with them.

"Call us when you get there," Izzy requested, and though John looked as though it wasn't necessary, Terry promised they would.

"Drive safe," Abby called as Terry shut the driver's side door.

"Do I look all right?" Maddie asked again.

Terry was hard pressed for an answer besides, "sure."

Maddie opened her coat and revealed her new pink sweater. Izzy's wedding gift from Las Vegas. A very sweet touch that made Maddie look more feminine, now that she was no longer wearing his pullover. "Do I look normal?" Maddie asked.

"You look good to me," Terry smiled, and started the engine. He waved to the others, pulled onto the main road, and headed toward Syracuse.

They were coming. Maddie had changed into her best sweater, she'd picked out presents for her nieces, and now looked to be holding her breath. Terry took out his phone and handed it to Maddie. Better for her to play music, listen to Scripture, than to hold her breath for an hour and a half. She'd turn blue by the time they made it to Syracuse. His ankle thanked him for sitting, and for the fact his good foot was doing all the work, and he sat back in the driver's seat and got comfortable.

"Feel like taking a nap?" he asked, and glanced over at Maddie.
She was looking through their photos, the ones taken on the balcony in Las Vegas, and he smiled.

"Terry?"

"I'm right here."

"For our honeymoon, could we go anywhere I want?"

"Anywhere you don't need a passport. I'd need to work on that." When she didn't answer, he slid her a look and found her smiling.

"Care to share what you're thinking?" He glanced at her.

She shook her head, and kept gazing at their photo on the balcony.

"Las Vegas again?" he guessed, and when she shook her head, he stopped trying to get her to talk and just focused on driving. She seemed happy right now, or at least passably content, and he didn't want to mess with that.

Not while she was trying to distract herself from the prospect of meeting Karen and the girls.

"Maddie, look." Terry pointed up ahead. It must have been raining recently in the distance, or there was a lot of moisture in the air, for in the clouds, highlighted against the sky, hung an arching bow with bright glowing colors. Terry glanced at the road, then back at the sky. "Do you see it? That's a strong one."

"I've never seen a real rainbow before-- not in person."

Her comment punched Terry in the chest, and it took time before he was able to speak again. As the rainbow passed from view, he thought of what it must mean to be free, to not take for granted the simplest things in life. Only those who have their freedom taken away, can possibly know that feeling, but sitting next to Maddie, Terry felt he had a glimpse.
She started to play music on the smartphone, and the jeep filled with a lightness that lifted Terry's heart. Once again, he thanked God for sending her to him, for letting him be the one to watch over her. To love her, and hold her, and drive her into Syracuse to meet the rest of her family.

She had seen her first rainbow, but there would be more. Today was only the first of many rainbows to come, of that, Terry was sure.

"Oh that men would praise the LORD for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men! For He satisfieth the longing soul, and filleth the hungry soul with goodness."
~ Psalm 107:8, 9 ~

"Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God."
~ 2 Corinthians 1:3, 4 ~
"... and be not bitter against them."
~ Colossians 3:19 ~

Since the music wasn't helping as much as it had in the past, Madison focused herself on other thoughts as it played. Dread of meeting her sister-in-law was staring her in the face, and since cutting was out of the question, Madison looked for something else to take its place. Not even the wedding dress could get her mind off this. She thought of her next goal, and it wasn't the second wedding. She knew it wasn't enough to know she wanted something, she had to have a plan. Saying everything was out of the question was like saying she couldn't be with Terry at all, for he was a man, and it was just the way God had decided to make men.

A plan meant knowing her own limits, what she could accept, and what was simply out of the question, and being fair about it. It beat sitting there, not thinking about Karen, so Madison decided to make a list, the ugliest list in the entire world.

Terry flicked her a look, one that made her think he was checking to see how she was doing. "Are you sure you don't want to take a nap?" he asked.

She shook her head, hugged herself, and started with the very worst. It had always given her a great deal of pain, so it came first. What should be number two on her list wasn't hard to figure out, either. She had night terrors over blacking out, not being able to breathe, so number two on the list would be strangling. It was absolutely out of the question. Pushing aside her own shame, she concentrated on what could kill her, on what gave her the most pain, and added those to her list of things to avoid at all cost.

"That was some rainbow, wasn't it?"

She looked up. "Is there another one?"

"Not yet, I was just trying to make conversation." Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Terry slide her a look as she tapped the phone's colorful display, and found the notes app.
"If I make a note that says, 'Madison, highly personal,' will you promise not to read it until I say you can?"

"Of course. Just make sure you name it, so I know to keep out." He paused. "Should I be concerned? Are you doing all right?"

She nodded. "Just don't read this yet."

"I won't."

She didn't need him to say a thing more, for she trusted him to keep his word. With a deep breath, Madison started to type her list. It was scary to see those words, but it felt powerful, as well. Absolutely, no way, under any circumstances. She wanted to make it plain. For as long as she lived, never again. All thoughts about meeting Karen fell away as Madison found the letters that spelled each word to form her destiny.

The sound of the traffic, the motion of the road kept her from getting too lost in her thoughts. While she was dreading one thing, she felt distracted enough to face this. At least enough to make a list. No way would she ever willingly let a man do this to her-- and Madison punched out the words with an anger that had Terry glancing at her. She started to add something else, then stopped. She wouldn't put that down. It wouldn't be fair to Terry. Or herself. If she was brutally honest. No, she couldn't put that down.

Time passed, and Madison kept working on her list. This wasn't a lighthearted stringing together of words, a sentence to a line, a list any normal couple would make. It took steadiness, and the memory of Terry holding her last night to write it.

The jeep turned and Madison swayed without looking up.

There wasn't a living soul on earth she felt this close to, but Terry. She'd found shelter with him, and safety. She was safe. Safe enough to write this.

She looked at him, saw his face all thoughtful and quiet as he watched the road. She wondered what he would say. Terry was a man, but he was reasonable. He wouldn't want to hurt her.
Terry glanced at her, smiled, then looked back at the road. "What?"

"Nothing." She turned back to her list, finished the last few lines, then kept the music going, in no way ready to show him what she'd written. It'd take giant-sized, God-standing-beside-her-and-holding-her-hand kind of courage, and that, she didn't have. Not now. A voice inside her screamed to delete the note before Terry saw it, but then a calmer one took hold. She'd faced the ugliness enough to put it into words, and that was a start. It wasn't exactly falling into Terry's arms, but it was a start. If she could face writing that list, then she could certainly face Karen. Facing Terry and discussing the list with him, would be another matter.

Funny how switching her dread around made the next few hours seem not as bad.

After the music, Madison played some chapters from the New Testament, then went back to look at her note, when Terry interrupted.

"Sorry, I need the phone. We're getting close enough to Syracuse to call Tim."

"We are?" With a gulp, Madison selected something else to make sure it didn't land on her highly personal list if he needed the notes app, then turned off the app as Terry pulled to the side of the road. She handed over the phone. Time had slid past quicker than she'd thought possible, and now all she could think about was Terry not seeing what she'd written.

He wouldn't, though. Not on purpose.

Terry tapped the screen, put the phone to his ear and waited. "Hey, Tim, we're nearing Syracuse. Yeah, I was just looking at the time. Okay, that sounds good to me." Terry nodded. "I should be able to find it-- no problem. Sounds good. We'll see you then." Terry hung up, tapped the screen and studied it while Madison held her breath. "We're going to meet Tim at his place, then head out to eat before visiting Karen."

Terry's thumb worked the screen, and she leaned in to watch. A map scrolled by. She watched him zoom in. He glanced at her, saw she was watching, and smiled. She hugged herself and smiled back.
"Would you like to pray?" he asked.

She nodded. Though she didn't know what made him think to ask, she really didn't want to think about it too hard. The way she looked was probably a dead giveaway. She didn't feel at all normal right now, and it likely showed all the way from outer space. Terry unwrapped her hand from around her middle, held it, and said a quiet prayer-- nothing fancy, just a few simple words to ask for God's blessing for today's meeting.

"And Lord," Terry added, "please be with Maddie. Help her, and help me."

Madison gulped. It was as if he'd read her mind. He certainly hadn't read her note. When she opened her eyes, Terry sat still a moment before letting go of her hand.

"Are the girls coming to lunch with us?" she asked.

"Tim didn't say."

"I'll be all right, Terry. I feel fine."

He looked at her thoughtfully, then passed her the phone. "I'm going to need the map when we get closer to Tim's home, so if you would, keep it handy."

Madison nodded that she would, and Terry smiled.

The jeep started to move again, and the trees and ground swept past them while Madison tried to keep her heart from beating too hard. She hadn't lied, she did feel fine. Under the circumstances, this was as fine as she was going to get. It felt good knowing that no one but Terry could even accidentally see her note, for they had to know the passcode to open the iPhone. Still, it was comforting to be the one to hold the phone right now. She watched the scenery, the few buildings tucked behind trees, the open space of land and sky, the greenery that kept her from seeing anywhere for too far, and watched the road speed by. Part of her thanked God she wouldn't be meeting Karen just yet, and the other half, the side of her that didn't like slow torture, wanted to get it over with as soon as possible. A warm hand took hers, and she accepted it without looking away.
“Do you recognize any of this?” Terry asked.

“No, should I?”

“This is the way to the airport. We drove through here on our trip to Las Vegas.”

“We did?”

Terry pointed to an upcoming overhead sign. “That leads to the airport.”

“I don’t remember that.” Madison turned in her seat to look back as the green sign fast disappeared behind them. “I don’t remember seeing any of this.”

“It’s no big deal,” he shrugged. “You weren’t sightseeing last time. You had a lot on your mind.”

“I still do.”

Terry slanted her a look. “Would you care to talk about it?”

“Not exactly.” Madison straightened in her seat, clutched the phone and hoped he wouldn’t ask to see her highly personal note. “I’d rather talk about it later.”

“Later, huh?” Terry pursed his lips and frowned at the road. “Is this a postponing of bad news kind of later, or would you rather I not ask any questions until then?”

“It’s not bad, but I guess that depends on how you look at it.”

“So long as you’re not planning to leave me, change your name, and move to Alaska.” Terry glanced at her. “You’re not, are you?”

She shook her head.

“Then later works for me.”
She smiled at him, and he seemed content. They drove in silence for a while, then Terry cleared his throat.

"Since we have the privacy, and since you're saving your news for later, this might be a good time to talk about my work." Terry glanced at her. "Don't worry, this isn't bad. I suppose I could say it depends on how you look at it, but--" Terry blew out a breath. "It isn't bad, no matter how you look at it. John and I have a client in the wings. A big one. We've been taking time off from our last client-- something we usually do, but then--" Terry winced, and Madison wondered if Terry had found another way to look at it.

"Go on, Terry. What happened?"

"Well, I met you," Terry smiled. "John hasn't brought up the client, even though I know it has to be in the back of his mind. He hasn't been pushing work at me, so we've pretty much been doing light stuff, nothing heavy. We're far from running short on cash, so that's not a worry. This client won't wait forever though, and we have this wedding coming up." Terry scratched his forehead. "I don't know, maybe we should cut the client loose. I debated even bringing this up, because I have eyes. I can see what you and Izzy are doing, and I know it isn't easy to plan a wedding. The last thing I want to do is add pressure."

"Terry, before you hurt yourself with apologies, what do you need from me?"

He smiled. "You set the date for whenever you want. I meant it when I said that. I just need to know what sort of time frame we're looking at, so I know how to plan." Terry sounded apologetic, though Madison didn't blame him in the slightest for needing that information.

Even so, she bit her lip. She knew what she wanted, but coming on the heels of just having made her list, she felt awkward about saying it out loud. It was just a date on a calendar, but still, she was making plans he didn't know about. She unfastened her seat belt, pushed up, and whispered into his ear.

The jeep swerved into the next lane before quickly righting itself.

"Maddie!"
"You asked," she said, and put her seat belt back on.

"Does Izzy know?"

She shook her head. "You said I could set the date, remember?"

"I know, but I thought--" Terry blew out a breath. "I don't know what I thought, but it certainly wasn't that. Izzy's going to have a heart attack, and she's perfectly sound. You can't be serious." He glanced at her. "You are though, aren't you?"

"I don't know yet if it's possible. I need to see how some other things develop first." She liked the way that sounded. Cryptic, gently vague, and yet nowhere near a lie. Like she was normal and had plans.

"What things?" Terry asked.

"Please, Terry, let me handle the wedding?"

"Maddie, I hope you intend to let Izzy go on helping? It'll be too much for you alone. I know it'd be too much for me."

"Please, Terry?"

"I'm tempted to do something for your own good, but I won't." Terry groaned. "I won't. I got the ring I wanted, so I'll stand back. Do the wedding whenever you want, however you want. Just don't kill yourself in the process. That's all I ask."

"I won't, Terry."

He didn't look convinced, so the moment his hand was free, she held it, and it seemed to soothe him.

"I'll tell John to hold off on that client."

"Thanks, Terry."
Terry nodded, and sighed, leaving her to be glad she'd only told him about a date on a calendar, and nothing else.

"If Izzy says it can't be done then, I won't even try."

"Okay." At least Terry looked as though he was breathing again.

Madison looked out the window. It was either pretend calm or go crazy, and since she'd just gotten Terry breathing on his own, she decided it would be better to try for the first. Outside was looking more and more like a city-- fewer trees, more asphalt, more roads, and from their present view she could actually glimpse the sloped horizon. On her left, a broad building filled her window, followed by parking lots, then empty space with a few shrubs and the feeling that she was no longer in Three Mile Bay. There were plenty of trees like back home, but these were turning with the colors of autumn; fall had stronger hold here, and here, there were billboards, people selling you things, people in a hurry with plenty of roads to get them where they were going. And more traffic. Not bumper to bumper, but more. More than Madison had grown used to in the relatively quiet Chaumont area.

A large hotel sprang up on her right. The sky had flattened to a solid gray while the buildings kept gathering in around their lanes of the road. They went through an underpass, came out to a raised bridging view of business-like buildings with long signs, some well placed trees, and in the distance, a landscape of squares and spires.

"Do you know where we're going?" Madison asked.

"You saw me looking at the map."

"So we're not lost?"

"We are not lost."

"Would you tell me if we were?"
"I won't even dignify that with a response." Terry negotiated a wide turn on a bending overpass as a large building moved by Madison's window. "Try to enjoy yourself, Maddie, I've been here plenty of times. I'm just not as sure of the way to Tim's place."

"Then we're lost?"

He grinned. "Oh, ye of little faith."

Terry sounded confident, so Madison relaxed a little but kept praying and kept her eyes open. She had no idea how big Syracuse was, only that it was definitely bigger than back home. Another city flashed before her, one much bigger than this, and she blinked to get herself back to the present. She watched Terry. She was with him now.

"Don't worry, I've driven this way many times before." Terry tossed her an encouraging smile, and she hoped she hadn't hurt his feelings.

"If we get lost, it's all right, Terry. As long as we're together--"

"We are not lost."

As they moved to the right, Madison checked with Terry. "Is this our exit?"

"Yup."

What looked to be a massive apartment complex stood on their right, jutting into the sky, while a parking lot spread around it like a gray blanket marked with white lines.

"Can you imagine being the landlord of something like that?" Madison asked.

"The more tenants you have, the greater the responsibility," Terry said with a shake of his head. "Start the map on the phone, will you?" He waited a moment, then reached for the phone when she had it ready. Terry placed it on his knee, its non-slip case coming in handy. He tapped something, then a voice sounded and gave a turn by turn direction of where to go next.

"Turn right at..."
Daylight dimmed as they drove beneath a concrete overpass. The ornamental trees, chain fences, industrial buildings, all screamed city. The concrete got in the way of the sky, but what sky she could see, looked sad and gray. It wasn't really fair. For all she knew, it could have been just the same back home as well, but here, a gray sky felt different. Probably because it wasn't home. They turned right, and the sky opened up to solid clouds, a construction zone on one side of the jeep, and a wide building on the other. Terry slowed, and the voice spoke up again.

On and on they drove, and Madison turned from the window to the moving map on Terry's knee. The voice kept telling Terry where to go, though once in a while she couldn't hear what it said, and even Terry had to glance down to check the map.

When she looked out her window next, there were houses and trees. They weren't exactly city trees, but they didn't look spontaneously natural, either. Rain began to pelt the windshield, but not enough to make Terry turn on the wipers. The voice told them to turn, and the houses began to look more and more middle-class. Well-kept homes with tidy lawns hugged the road, and the voice told them to turn left. They passed a small church, kept going, turned right, saw more homes, and Terry kept his speed slow.

"Are we getting close?" Madison asked, expecting to see her brother in front of any one of these homes.

"Close, but not yet. Tim has an apartment, and according to the map, we're not there." Terry turned, and the homes grew slightly smaller, though they still looked very well kept with trimmed shrubs and neatly swept sidewalks. "Maddie, up ahead."

Madison looked, and saw several rows of wide buildings. They weren't handsome like Terry's complex in Chaumont, but what they lacked in looks, they made up for in volume.

"Your destination is on the left," the phone announced, and Terry cut his speed as they turned onto a narrow lane with houses on the right, and apartments on the left. He read off the building numbers out loud, though Madison had no idea which one would find Tim. Up until a few minutes ago, she hadn't even known he lived in an apartment.
"There it is-- we're here." Terry pulled their jeep in front while Madison tried to steady her hands long enough to work her seat belt.

Outside her window, a man across the street climbed out of a pickup truck and caught her eye. For a moment, he had the dark look of the Dragon. She blinked, and the man's face turned into what he really was: young, a bit cocky, and too interested in a new face in the neighborhood. She turned away. He wasn't like the Dragon at all. Thank God.

The air nipped at her nose as she got out of the jeep. It was cold here, but not as cold as in Three Mile Bay. She didn't even feel the need to zip up her coat. She hurried around to Terry, tucked herself at Terry's side, and Terry smiled.

"Ready?" Terry asked.

She nodded. "We promised Izzy to call when we got here."

Terry pulled out his phone, made a quick call home while Madison adjusted the purse strap on her shoulder. It felt as though everyone on the lane knew they were here, and were staring at them, though when she found the courage to look up from the sidewalk, she found the man had gone.

"Okay, let's go." Terry took her hand as they started up the walk to the building. "Hey, you're trembling." He squeezed her fingers and she tried to find her courage.

She wanted to say something brave, to show she was relaxed and full of confidence, but her dry mouth failed her. How she wished she could be like the people living on this lane-- normal and ordinary. It must be wonderful to not stick out like a sore thumb, to know you would blend in anywhere you went. To be able to handle whatever came up without even blinking, because you handled it all the time. To take the everyday for granted, to not have to try so hard at just breathing. Oh, she wanted to be like them. As Madison worked to keep up with Terry, she prayed for help.

"Sorry, I'll slow down." Terry read the apartment numbers, then started up a short flight of steps to the second story while Madison followed. He took her hand again and nodded to a door at the end of the walkway. "That's the place. Why don't you do the honors?"
She shook her head, and when Terry saw she was too timid, he moved over and rang the bell.

"He should be home. When I called, he said he’d be ready for us." Terry waited, reached over to try again when the door opened to a short, blonde-headed girl with a fair complexion.

"Daddy, they’re here!" The girl beamed at Madison, then Terry, then yelled the news a second time. And then stared at them and didn’t invite them in.

"Hi," Terry smiled. "I’m Uncle Terry, and this is Aunt Madison. Are you Madeline?"

The girl nodded, and was about to yell again when Tim came striding to the door.

"Please, come in. Madeline, why didn’t you show our guests inside?"

"You didn’t tell me to. You just said to tell you if they got here while you were still on the toilet."

Tim opened his mouth, sighed, and waved them in. "This is my daughter, Madeline. And this," he said, turning to the girl, "is Mr. and Mrs. Davis. Go tell your sister we have company, and we can’t wait all day to leave for the restaurant. I’m sure they’re hungry and want to eat."

"Not if you give them a snack, too, Daddy." Madeline saw the parental fear in her father’s face, and went to get her sister.

Tim’s smile was apologetic.

"Speaking of food, we have some out in the jeep," Terry offered. "It’s not much, just some frozen sloppy joes to heat up for later. We thought it might come in handy while Karen's resting."

"Thanks." Tim brightened as though he hadn’t expected it. "That’ll help out."

"We brought something for the baby," Terry added. "Could we bring it in? The hospital probably isn't the best place for gifts. It’s out in the jeep."
"Sure, thank you. That was nice of you guys." Tim looked to Madison. "Do you want me to help him?"

Madison nodded, and Tim stepped outside with Terry. She wished she could find her tongue so she could remind Terry to bring in the presents for the other two girls, as well, but she was struggling with shyness. Unlike her young niece.

"You're pretty," Madeline smiled.

"Thank you." They were the first words Madison had finally managed, but at least her tongue hadn't fallen out.

"Paige is still fixing her hair." Madeline leaned against the armrest of the couch while Madison glanced about the tiny living room. "I told Paige she was fine, but she's taking. For. Ever. You'd think her life depended on it or something. You want to see our room? I have a goldfish. Her name is Wendy because my best friend Wendy gave her to me before she moved away. Have you ever been to New Jersey?"

Not knowing what else to say, and not wanting to insult a best friend named Wendy, Madison smiled and followed.

The living room opened to a kitchen on the left, and straight ahead was a narrow walkway that led to three rooms. The middle was a bathroom; the door stood open and Madison could smell a faint whiff of why Tim had been in there. The door on Madison's left stood open as well, and before Madison could think, she'd glimpsed a large bed that filled most of the room. Half from awkwardness, half from dread of what she'd just seen, Madison hurried to look away as she realized where she was being led.

"I'll just go wait," she told Madeline, and went back to the front door. She couldn't help it if she looked odd. She couldn't go there. Things would get even odder if she went into a flashback in front of the girls.

Thankfully, Madeline just shrugged and pushed into the girls bedroom.
From what Madison had seen, the snug apartment wasn’t quite as small as the one she had in Chaumont, but it seemed to have enough room for everyone. The master bedroom had been very small, but it had been big enough for that awful bed. Madison shivered.

"Paige, you’re missing everything." Madeline’s voice carried easily from the girls’ room. "Don't you want to see what she looks like? She’s even prettier than her picture."

Suddenly self-conscious, Madison worked the zipper on her coat and pretended to be busy.

A moment later, the girls came out, and an eleven-year-old with straight red hair and arresting light blue eyes stood beside Madeline. Tall enough to come to Madison’s shoulder, yet every bit a little lady, Paige smiled shyly at Madison until Madison felt that one of them should speak.

"Should I hug you both?" Madison asked. "Would that be all right? You are my nieces."

The girls came close, and Madison gave them each a hug. Though it felt awkward, Madeline didn’t seem to notice.

"Have you seen your mom yet?" Madison asked, and Paige shook her head.

"Tim’s mostly been sleeping since he got home from the hospital," Paige sounded like she had on the phone, "but he promised we could go see Mommy and the baby after lunch. Thanks so much for coming, Aunt Madison. I really wanted to meet you." Paige looked expectantly at the front door as someone passed the living room window. The girl had neatly brushed her hair and tied it back with a ribbon that matched her burgundy dress, and Madison thought she looked very pretty. "What’s he carrying?" Paige asked.

The door opened, and Tim came in with a large, flat box, followed by Terry with the frozen food and the grocery bags.

Tim looked about and set the box on the couch.

"Clothes for the baby!" Paige cried, her face at once lighting up with delight. "Oh, Aunt Madison, thank you!" Paige went to Madison and hugged her, and Madison was glad when she could return the hug without pausing to steady herself.
Smiling, Madison looked over to find Tim staring at Paige.

"Daddy, can we open it?" Madeline asked, tugging on one end of the large box.

"Not now, Maddycakes. We have to get going." Tim showed Terry to the kitchen, then stepped back and looked at Paige again. As though he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing. Paige stood beside Madison, hand in hand, like they were good friends. Madison hoped they were.

"Where do you want the diapers?" Terry called.

"Diapers?" Tim went back, and when someone mentioned cinnamon rolls, Madeline followed.

"If I'd have known this was what big sisters were for," Tim said jokingly, as he rounded into the living room with a grocery bag of diapers, "I'd have found you long before--" he stopped, looked at Madison, and sighed. "I'll put this away." He disappeared into the master bedroom, then came back a moment later and told his girls to get their jackets. "We're taking our generous guests out to lunch."

* * * *

The busy diner suited Terry just fine, and when Paige and Madeline scooted in on either side of Maddie as they took their table, Terry simply took a seat across from them. After the food came, and Terry and Maddie had bowed their heads and said a quiet prayer over lunch, the girls moved in and took up Maddie's attention with talk of school and friends. Since Maddie seemed to be having a good time, the men were on their own.

"Thanks again," Tim said, picking up a golden french fry, "you guys didn't have to bring gifts. We didn't invite you because we expected anything."

"I know," Terry shrugged, "but it isn't every day you have a baby."

"It isn't," Tim admitted. He sat quiet a moment, then shook his head. "It was really something to hear."
"What was?" Terry took another bite of his hamburger as Paige confided in Maddie how she'd always wished her eyes weren't blue, because her hair was so red.

"But it's such a beautiful contrast," Maddie said, and Paige's face lit up with confidence.

"Did you know that?" Tim asked. "Paige is calling my sister, 'aunt.'" Tim looked at Terry as though it was significant, something to be wondered at, and the girls kept talking, oblivious to what the men were saying. "This, from someone who steadfastly refuses to call me dad. I'd like to think of this as progress, but I've been a part of this family for two years now, and to her, I'm not even 'the old man,' just 'Tim.'"

"Have you talked to her about it?" Terry asked.

"I've talked to Karen, and Karen has talked to Paige." Tim pushed a fry through a puddle of ketchup. "Karen doesn't want Paige to think I'm trying to take Bob's place in her heart, so I've learned to stay out of it."

"Bob is Paige's father?" Terry put down his burger to sip cold soda. "Paige told Maddie he passed away?"

Tim nodded. "Bob Flanagan was a volunteer firefighter for Onondaga County--" Tim stopped and looked across the table at the girls. Paige had turned quiet. Tim put down the french fry, grabbed a napkin and wiped his hands. "When everyone's done, we'll go see Mom. You'd like that, wouldn't you?" He looked at Paige, and the girl nodded. "Then finish your meal."

As Paige nibbled an onion ring, Tim turned back to Terry.

"Did you have any trouble finding our place?"

"No, it was an easy enough drive."

The question had been meant as a subject changer, for after that, Tim said no more about Paige's father. Even Madeline was quiet. The rest of the lunch passed off in relative silence until it was time to gather their jackets and coats. The girls grew eager as they told Maddie of their excitement about seeing the new baby, and Terry smiled as that excitement began to wear off on
Maddie. Instead of dreading her meeting with Karen, she looked more relaxed. A confidence was coming to Maddie's expression now that she wasn't busy focusing on whether Karen might like her, and it made Terry want to hug his newly acquired nieces.

"We never gave the girls their presents," Maddie whispered as she and Terry went out to the jeep.

"Better save it for later." Terry opened the passenger door for Maddie, and thought about what Tim had said over lunch. He sent up a prayer for the O'Briens. Tim was in over his head, but then, Terry knew so was he; their families were only one of the many reasons why both men needed God.

* * * *

Tired was an understatement, though it was true. Karen closed her eyes as Mrs. Powell left the room. She hadn't needed her neighbor's observation to know she was tired. She was feeling sick, and swollen, and nothing was going as she'd planned, but the baby was healthy. The baby's mommy was tired to the point of tears, but Connie was healthy and that's all that mattered.

Karen repeated the words to herself until she could whisper them without shedding tears. Everything would work out all right. It had to. She opened her eyes to look at the hospital bassinet parked beside her bed.

Precious, sweet, little baby. Things would be better now. Tim would have to believe her when she didn't leave him, wouldn't he? She'd given birth, so now she could prove she wasn't like Andrea. Karen grabbed a tissue and wondered if hormones were causing her to find hope where there was none, or if she had a valid reason to keep fighting. She was determined not to let go, and yet despite it all, she knew she was losing him. She was tired. Mrs. Powell had been right about that.

The fatigue of her body and her heart weighing her down, Karen turned her head on the pillow and gave herself permission to go back to sleep.

* * * *
When Karen opened her eyes, a nurse was in the room. At first she thought it was time to feed Connie again, and then she heard the nurse say Tim's name, and then Karen remembered.

Self-conscious of what she must look like, Karen touched her hair and half wished she'd thought to bring her makeup with her to the hospital. Her bag hadn't been packed to meet Tim's long-lost sister though, and besides, and she'd just been in labor. It wasn't as though she didn't have a good excuse to look the way she did. Karen remembered a photo Bob had taken of her just after giving birth to Paige; their new bundle had been an absolute joy to look at, but herself? Karen tried to forget the photo as Tim came in. Avoiding cameras were one thing, making a good impression on your husband's half-sister, was another.

"Feel like visitors?" Tim asked.

"Only two at a time, please," the nurse reminded before leaving the room. "And please keep the visits short to give mother and baby time to rest."

Tim nodded, looked back to Karen for permission, and Karen smiled that it was okay.

"This is Madison," Tim led a gracefully tall woman into the room. "Madison, this is Karen. My wife."

For a moment, all Karen could do was stare. When she felt air in her mouth, she closed it, reached a hand out to Madison, and the woman came forward and shook it with a warm smile that almost made Karen forget about her lack of makeup. "Please forgive me for staring, but you look so much like your mother. Doesn't she, Tim?"

"I know, I told her the same thing," Tim pulled out a chair from beside the wall and offered it to Madison. "If Terry doesn't mind waiting, I'll let one of the girls take my place." Tim excused himself before either of the women could say a word.

Karen wanted to thank Tim, for she craved to see the girls, and hoped Madison wouldn't mind.

"Mommy?" Paige came in and the baby started to cry.
Karen felt torn, looked at the bassinet, saw Connie was all right, and reached for her firstborn. "Honey, don't you look pretty? You're crying, too? Oh, Baby, it's all right." Karen patted the bed, let her daughter sit beside her, and hugged Paige with all her strength. With a free hand, Karen touched her newborn, and soothed Connie, until both children had been calmed, and Paige could talk without sobbing. Paige had handled last night so well-- Karen told her daughter that, and Paige sniffed and hugged her mom. Another woman in the family dealing with hormones. The thought made Karen sigh. Puberty wasn't something she looked forward to, but she couldn't hold it back anymore than she could hold back time. As their visitor quietly watched on, Karen showed Paige her new baby sister.

Paige smiled through her freshly dried tears, and when Karen coaxed her, Paige let down an index finger and Connie grabbed on. When Madison smiled, Karen took measure of her visitor.

"Do you have children?" Karen asked.

Madison shook her head. "I'd like to, though. One day."

"Would you like a large family? or maybe a small one? The more kids you have," Karen smiled, and hugged Paige, "the more energy it takes to raise them."

"Kind of like the larger the apartment complex, the more it takes to run it?" It was on odd comparison, one Karen couldn't relate to, but Madison smiled. "Terry and I haven't talked about how many, but we do want kids. I suppose we'll be happy with however many God wants us to have."

"That's a pretty answer," Karen smiled, "but I warn you that things never happen the way you think they will."

Madison nodded. "Sometimes, you pray for one thing, then get another?"

"Yes, exactly. What if you don't get everything you want?"

"Then I'll trust that God knew better than I did."
Karen stared at her. God-talk was all good and well, but it wasn’t what she had expected— not from Candace’s daughter. Despite the elegance of those long limbs, the graceful features, Madison wasn’t what Karen had expected at all. Though this woman wasn’t a pushover, she lacked cunning, that cold-blooded manipulative charm that Candace had possessed.

"How much do you remember of your mother?" Karen waited, waved Tim away as he knocked on the open door and asked if she was ready to exchange one of her visitors for someone else. "In a minute, Honey. Madison, you look just like her. I never met her, and I wouldn’t have wanted to even if I could have-- I know, it’s a terrible, horrible thing to say about anyone’s mother, let alone a mother-in-law, but in her case, it was true. Seeing you in person, talking with you, I feel like I’m meeting a little of Candace for the first time, and I know that’s silly. Just plain silly. From all Tim has told me, and from what I see of you, and from what you did for the girls last night in calming them down, you’re nothing like her. And that," Karen reached over and touched Madison’s hand, "is a huge, huge compliment. Even so, when Tim told me Paige had called you again, and the girls had talked to you, I confess, I was wary. He’d shown me your picture, and I couldn’t help comparing you to your mother. I can see now how wrong I was, and I apologize."

"It’s all right," Madison shrugged. "Momma wasn’t my favorite person in the world, either."

"That’s a crying shame." Karen grabbed a tissue and willed herself not to melt. "What we put our children through." She took one look at Paige, and felt tears. "Don’t pay any attention to me. I’m worn out, my hormones are off the charts, and I’m being silly." Madison touched Karen’s hand, and Karen grabbed it and gave it a tight squeeze. "What am I thinking? Neither of you have held the baby!"

"Take pictures," someone called into the room, and an iPhone was passed inside and handed to Madison.

Big sister went first. After everyone washed their hands, Paige carefully sat in a chair, cradled her arms, and a nurse lowered Connie to Paige. It was a moment that made Karen’s eyes damp with joy. When Madison offered to include Karen in the pictures, Karen declined, and thankfully, Madison didn’t ask why.

Then came Madison’s turn, and Paige took the phone and snapped two pictures before the phone was safely placed at Madison’s side. Karen had made sure, for Paige was known to be
clumsy, and in the past had dropped one too many things for Karen to feel good about seeing that expensive device in her daughter's hands. Karen had noticed Madison watching the phone, as well, and felt good about her own judgment.

So this gentle soul was Tim's sister. As Connie kicked her tiny feet, and Madison hugged the baby close like it was the sweetest bundle of love on earth, Karen's heart melted even more.

When the baby had been returned to the nurse, Karen asked for the smartphone and told Paige and Madison to stand back so she could get a picture of the two big sisters together. As Karen took the photo, a pang of sadness touched her heart. She couldn't remember the last time she'd ever seen Paige this happy. A memory stirred, and Karen could name a time. Paige's sixth birthday, when Bob had surprised Paige with a large wooden dollhouse. The memory was bittersweet. Karen gave the phone back to Madison and waited for her middle daughter, her cuddle-bug, to come in and give her a hug. Poor Tim. She'd been so lucky with Madeline; their Maddycakes had been small enough to accept Karen early on, but Tim and Paige had struggled.

As much as Karen didn't want to admit it, they still did.

* * * *

From what he could glean by the door, it was going well. Terry hoped they were taking pictures, for he'd already promised to email them to Tim. Though Madeline stayed close to her father, Terry could tell she was eager to see Karen and the baby, for when Paige and Maddie came out, Madeline all but bumped into Paige as Madeline headed inside. Tim went in a moment, then came out and motioned to Terry.

"I told Karen you were next," Tim nodded, and Terry pushed out of his chair and exchanged a smiling glance with Maddie.

Maddie was smiling. It was a good sign, a very good sign.

He went into the room and grinned at the girl who had climbed onto the bed and was cuddling with Karen. He noted Karen's jet black hair and realized Paige's red mane had come from Bob. The light blue eyes, however, were from Karen.
Karen extended a hand, and Terry stepped forward and shook it as gently as he could, for those blue eyes looked tired.

"Congratulations," he nodded at the bassinet. "She's beautiful."

"Thank you. Please, sit down."

Terry took the chair and smiled as baby Connie fussed a little, but didn't cry.

"I'm glad you were able to come for a visit. I've been wanting to meet both of you ever since Tim told me he'd found Madison."

"Thank you for inviting us," Terry smiled.

From all appearances, Karen was running low on energy and trying hard not to show it. Terry figured it was only a matter of time before the nurse kicked them all out. Karen looked down at the child cuddled at her side, and gave her another hug.

"Would you like to hold your sister?"

Madeline could barely contain herself as the nurse explained how to hold a newborn. A second chair was pulled out, Madeline washed her hands, then cradled her arms the way she'd been told, and the nurse transferred the baby from the bassinet to Madeline's arms. Terry noticed Karen reach for a tissue.

"Mommy, look! I'm holding her!" Madeline grinned as Terry stepped out of the room to get the phone from Maddie, then came back, and snapped some pictures. Arms full of baby, Madeline looked overwhelmed, and smiled ear to ear at the lightly fussing newborn. After a while of baby gazing, Madeline's arms grew tired, and Madeline wanted to get up and go back to her mother, so the nurse rescued Connie.

"Would you like to hold her?" Karen offered to Terry.

"May I?" His hands were already washed, he was set. The only thing he had to hold though, was his peace, for the nurse began to inform him how to cradle a newborn. Instructions were well
and good for little Madeline, but him? He might as well be told how to breathe. Terry listened politely, then smiled as the baby was lowered into his arms. He cradled her against his chest, and Connie responded with a small contended cry. "Well, hello there, munchkin." Terry felt his heart tug, and took a deep breath to keep from embarrassing himself in front of the women. He’d missed this. "Tim's right," Terry said quietly, "Connie has your eyes."

"Look at you. You've been around babies before." Karen said it with a laughing smile in her voice.

"My friend's wife, Izzy, had triplets, and I helped out." Terry sighed as Connie yawned and her tiny fists hugged her chest.

"Were they natural, or did your friend's wife use fertility treatments?"

"They were conceived naturally." Though Terry felt a bit awkward commenting on John and Izzy's intimate life, he was used to such questions. Izzy fielded that question a lot, and if she wasn't careful, John sometimes answered by saying they got the triplets by having lots and lots of-- John was never allowed to finish, for he would get a sharp elbow in the side, or a swat from Izzy that said "shut up," and then he'd have to suffer through the usual questions about what it was like to raise triplets.

"I can't imagine having three at the same time." Karen watched as Madeline went to stand beside Terry and play with Connie's hand. "I feel overwhelmed with just one baby, let alone three."

Terry didn't have to imagine. Screaming baby times three meant not just stereo, but absolute surround sound, arms able to hold only two at a time, and the mommy/daddy guilt that went with it, all the resting, and eating Izzy had to do so she could breastfeed triplets and then the pump she used in private so she could get John and Terry to help with the feeding. And the laundry-- Terry could go on and on about the laundry, but he spared Karen for she'd just given birth, and was worn out enough.

"Being a mom is hard work," he agreed.

"I wish we could put Connie in the pink dress." Madeline played with Connie's tiny fist and made a face to get her attention, though Terry knew the baby couldn't see her sister yet.
"What dress, love?" Karen sounded as though she were fighting sleep and Terry wondered if he should put the baby down and leave.

"Aunt Madison and Mr. Davis brought clothes and diapers for Connie."

"They did?"

Terry glanced at Karen. "We left them at your apartment. Along with some leftovers from back home. Maddie and I thought Tim could heat them up, and have something hot to give the girls so you would have a little more time to rest. I don't know about Tim, but John usually doesn't mind when someone wants to help out in the kitchen."

"John-- is he your friend?"

"Yeah, he's Izzy's husband, and my childhood buddy." Connie had fallen asleep against Terry's shirt, but as he spoke, the baby woke and started to cry. "Maybe we'd better return her to her bassinet."

"I think she wants her mother," the nurse smiled, gently picking up Connie, then taking her over to Karen. "I'm going to need to ask everyone to leave so mother and baby can rest."

"Thank you." Karen looked at Terry, and he sensed emotion. Flustered gratitude? Embarrassment? Some anger was there as well, but Terry sensed it wasn't directed at him. "Please, thank Madison for me?"

Terry nodded, and left the room while Madeline lingered behind. Was Karen angry with Maddie? That didn't make sense. Tim went in as Terry joined Maddie and Paige, and soon after, Karen's door closed to the sound of raised voices. Not urgent ones, but angry tones, the sound of an argument. Terry could hardly believe his ears-- Tim and Karen were fighting in the hospital. He couldn't make out the exact words, for the door was shut and the baby had started to cry, and Terry wasn't trying to eavesdrop. The voices quickly lowered, and soon after, Connie quieted. Paige stared at her mother's room, then shot a mortified look at Madison and Terry. Unless Paige wanted to explain what she thought was going on, Terry pretended he hadn't heard a thing.
"You know what I just remembered?" Terry looked at Maddie and Paige and played the idiot. "I forgot to bring the congratulations card. Sometimes, I think I'd forget my head if it wasn't attached to my shoulders." He chuckled when he got a smile from Paige. "I believe I left the card back at your apartment. Do you think someone will find it?" He smiled when Paige nodded. "That's good. I noticed the gift shop here is closed, so I'd hate to think we'd lost it." He paused. "I thought Connie looked a lot like your mom. What do you think?"

Paige started to say something, then looked over at the door as Madeline came out.

The sisters exchanged a look. Madeline shrugged, came over, and slumped into a chair.

The door closed again, and no one spoke.

"Does anyone want a breath mint?" Maddie opened her purse, and passed out white mints, though Terry noticed she didn't take one for herself. He saw her open a small bottle of acetaminophen, shake out two pills, then dry swallow them without trying to attract attention.

Terry sighed. He knew what that meant.

Several minutes later, Tim came out. He nodded to them, and pulled out his keys. "Karen's feeding the baby, and after that, she needs rest. Is everyone ready to go?" The girls got up, looked at Tim, and he put a hand on each of their shoulders as if to say everything was going to be okay. The small gesture went a long way with Madeline, for after that, she perked up and began to smile. Paige, though, kept quiet.

No one spoke as they moved through the hospital corridors on their way to the elevator. Tim kept his eyes on the floor, and more than once, Terry thought he heard Tim sigh.

They got into the elevator, someone punched the ground floor, and Maddie leaned against Terry. Terry put an arm around her, though it did little to cheer her. He had no idea what Karen and Tim had been fighting about, but Tim had come away looking as though his world was ending, and Paige, as though she had seen it coming.
Of course, as Terry headed into the cloudy overcast of a late Syracuse day, and felt the steady rain, it could have been his imagination. He could have been reading things into their expressions that hadn't been there at all.

While Terry unlocked the jeep's passenger door for Maddie, Tim jogged over, seemingly oblivious of the rain.

"I know it's early, but will you come back to the apartment for dinner? I promised Karen."

Terry nodded, and Tim looked relieved, and ran back to the minivan to let the girls inside.

The moment Terry climbed behind the wheel, Terry felt Maddie staring at him with such a helpless, questioning look, he almost forgot to start his engine so he could follow Tim back to the apartment.

"What were they fighting about?"

"I don't know. I didn't want to intrude by asking." Terry eased the jeep through the parking lot, the windshield wipers working at a decent clip since the rain was getting heavy. He kept Tim's vehicle in view and adjusted his speed. "Karen said to thank you for the baby gift, by the way."

Maddie closed her coat, put on her seat belt, then hugged herself as though she needed the comfort. Terry switched on the heater. The rain had made the air bone chillingly frigid, and it was past the heat of the day. It would only get colder. The minivan turned right at the stoplight, and Terry followed.

"She looked tired, didn't she, Terry?"

He nodded.

"I wonder how much longer it'll last."

Terry didn't ask what Maddie had meant. They both knew.
Even though Karen had wanted him to take everyone out to a nice restaurant, after he'd left Karen's hospital room, Tim had made his own plans. He had expected to heat up the sloppy joes for his guests, for it would be less expensive, but after they'd arrived home, his sister had surprised Tim with her resourcefulness.

Madison had shooed Tim from the kitchen and managed to throw together a decent meal from what she could find in the fridge and the cupboards, and all without touching the leftovers. That had meant the joes could be saved for tomorrow, for when Karen got home from the hospital. Though Tim hadn't wanted his sister to work while she was a guest in his home, he hadn't wanted Karen to work, either. And, he had wanted to save money.

All through the dinner preparations, Terry had stood by and watched, and when Madison had needed to use a knife, it had become apparent to Tim why Terry had lingered. Tim had remembered what Terry had told him about her problems, and he had watched closely as Terry helped Madison. Terry had done it without belittling her, or making her feel that she was somehow inconveniencing him because she had needed the help. Someone might lose their patience in that kind of situation, maybe yell, and make the person they were helping feel ashamed. The thought had crossed Tim's mind that it could happen, and Tim had watched Terry to see if he could catch any reaction that would give Terry away.

From the easy banter of conversation as the two had worked, Tim had concluded that if Terry was going to give himself away as someone with a quick temper, it wasn't going to happen this evening.

The food had been good— not as nice as Karen's, of course, but Madison had known how to put together a last-minute dinner. Half a dozen times during their meal, Tim had wanted to ask Madison for advice. The girls had been there, so he'd backed off, but even after Paige and Madeline had gone to the living room to watch TV, he had kept quiet.

"Tim?" He looked up from his coffee to see Madison folding a dishcloth.

"I shouldn't have let you cook dinner," he sighed.

"That's all right. I'm only glad I knew how. Is it all right if I give the girls their presents now?"
He nodded. He hadn't known there were more, though it didn't surprise him. It appeared Madison and Terry were the generous sort, especially when it came to their nieces. He and Karen didn't have much family to dote on the girls, and it was lucky that Madison wasn't playing favorites. "This one is actually my niece, and that one isn't." He held onto his mug and felt the warmth soak into his hands. He watched Terry get up, go to Madison and whisper something in her ear. Madison smiled, and Terry wrapped his arms around her. It was a gentle hug, very tender with slow motions as though Terry hadn't wanted to take her by surprise.

With the two standing there and speaking in hushed whispers, Tim looked away. He felt he was intruding.

Terry came back to the table, sat down, and poured himself another cup of coffee.

"You're welcome to stay the night," Tim offered. He smiled when Terry looked at him as though it were out of the question. "It might freeze tonight, and after the rain we've had, the roads will be slick. Of course, it isn't dark yet."

Terry quirked an eyebrow. "Is that why you invited us to dinner? To buy time?"

Tim chuckled. "I didn't think of it until now. No, dinner was Karen's idea. After what you did for the baby, she wanted a chance to say thank you properly." Tim turned the mug, felt the warmth and wished it could warm all of him, not just his hands. He wondered if he should turn up the heat, but the apartment didn't feel cold.

"It was our pleasure," Terry smiled. Terry took a sip, stared at the table, then opened his mouth as if to say something. He closed it and took another drink.

As Madison went into the living room, Tim sat back and listened to the TV.

"Do you tell your wife everything?" Tim asked suddenly. He winced when Terry looked surprised. "Sorry, just forget it."

"No, it's okay." Terry looked at his coffee as though he were giving it some thought. "I'd say it depends. If it's something I think she should know, then I tell her. If it's not important, or has
the potential to hurt her and she doesn't have the necessity to know, then I'd probably keep it from her, though I wouldn't lie."

"Would she get angry if she found out?"

"Maybe." Terry nodded slowly. "There would be that possibility, yes."

Tim leaned forward. "What if it wasn't all that important, and you simply forgot to tell her something, but she thought it WAS important. And then got angry with you for not telling her? What would you do?"

"It sounds like you have a specific instance in mind," Terry mused.

Not knowing if he should talk about this in front of Terry, Tim kept quiet.

"I'd listen to her in love," Terry answered, "and hopefully, with God's grace, we'd be able to work it out."

"With God's grace?"

Terry nodded. "And listening to her in love. I'd have to, especially if she'd just given birth and her hormones were a little," Terry paused, lowered his voice and smiled, "shall we say, a little stretched-to-the-limit?"

"Tell me about it." Tim shook his head, forgetting his previous reluctance to talk about this in front of Terry. "It wasn't that I forgot to tell her about the baby gift, it wasn't that. She already thinks I don't talk to her. I don't listen, I don't communicate, it's a wonder I even know how to sign my name." Tim sat back in his chair. "She didn't say that last part, but it's the way I feel. What does she want from me, I mean, really?"

"I don't know," Terry shrugged. "As for Maddie, I'd say most of the time she just wants to know I love her."

"What does that mean-- love?"
"You mean a definition? Well, the one I've always liked is 'God is love.' But love also suffers long, and is kind," Terry's voice quietly shut out the TV and the smell of coffee relaxed Tim, "love isn't jealous or resentful, it doesn't show off, it isn't arrogant. Love doesn't behave unseemly, it isn't selfish, it isn't easily provoked, it doesn't think evil of the other person when it has the chance to think better. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." Terry sighed, and looked at Tim. "That's what I believe love is."

Tim wished he believed that. It sounded good, but he was staring at the end of his marriage, and all Karen cared about was his lack of communication skills. It was hard not to be resentful, even bitter. Didn't she care if their family broke apart? He stirred in more cream and almost didn't notice the tap on his shoulder.

"Look what Aunt Madison gave me." It was Madeline, and Tim smiled for her sake.

"What is it?" he asked, as his daughter placed a glitter-covered book on the table beside his mug. He pushed aside the cup as she opened the cover.

"It's a journal, and it has stickers, and a place to draw secret messages, and it comes with a pen that glows in the dark. See?" Madeline started for the kitchen light switch, but Tim held her back.

"I'll take your word for it, Maddycakes. Thanks for showing me." He smiled, kissed her cheek, and watched his little girl take her journal back to the living room. He picked up his mug, and sighed. One had come in, but not the other. What had he expected? A miracle? Tim pushed out a sigh and looked at Terry. "So what do you think? You can have the master bedroom, and leave in the morning. The roads should be safer by then. That is, if you stay long enough for it to get dark." He turned when he saw Terry looking at something behind him. "Paige?" Tim set his mug down. "Do you need something?"

The girl held up some kind of book. "Do you..." she sighed, looked dejected and was about to turn back, when Tim realized what she wanted.

"I'd love to see your present. If you wouldn't mind showing me."
Paige came forward and handed him a heavy, hardbound book with birds and clouds printed on the cover. It could be locked closed, but since it was open, he flipped the cover only to find empty lined pages.

"It's a journal." Paige shrugged lightly, but Tim knew from experience that the more casual Paige's manner, the more it meant she liked something.

He handed it back to her, and nodded. "It's very nice."

Paige nodded, and started back for the living room, leaving Tim to wonder if he'd said anything wrong.

"Hey," he called after her, remembering something Terry had said. About hoping all things. Paige stopped, and looked back at him expectantly. "Mom's coming home tomorrow. She asked me to pick out something for Connie to wear from the new baby clothes we got today-- you know, something pretty your mom would like. I'm not good with things like that. Maybe you could help me out?"

"Something from Aunt Madison and Uncle Terry's box?" A smile reached the girl's eyes, and she nodded, "yes."

"Thanks, Paige." Tim watched as she went back to the others. He wouldn't win any parenting awards, but Karen couldn't call what had just happened a lack of communication. The problem with hoping all things, and bearing all things, was that it required patience. And patience, Tim had a feeling, required something more than just a mortal fear of his family breaking up. A faith which worketh by love. Tim looked at Terry and guessed Terry would probably be shocked that he knew those words, but he did. He remembered a years ago sermon he'd once heard with his grandma at the church she gave money to, but almost never attended. Tim couldn't remember the occasion, only the passage the minister had preached from: "For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love."

After listening to Terry speak of love, and seeing that love work with Madison, Tim could almost believe it.
"Do you mind?" Tim asked. "If Paige calls you uncle?" He wasn't at all surprised when Terry smiled, and shook his head. "I meant it-- you and Madison are welcome to stay the night. You could have the master bedroom. I could take the couch."

"Thanks, but we really should go before it gets dark." Terry checked the time, then pushed up from the table. "Thanks for dinner. I'll send you those pictures after we get home."

"Just drive safe." Tim scooted back his chair and got up. "Before I forget, thanks for the card." He saw Terry's smile, and wanted to ask about John and Izumi, and their family. Their names had been in the card, they were obviously like family to Terry, and Tim was curious. Though he'd met them, he didn't know much about them. Now that Tim realized Terry and Madison were leaving, Tim remembered he had also wanted to talk to his sister, ask her about their mom, and exchange memories, but now just wasn't the right time. Too much had been happening.

He showed Terry into the next room, and found the girls on the couch. Paige and Madeline were seated on either side of his sister, and they were showing her a photo album. Madison's album, to be precise. Tim felt annoyed at first, for he had wanted to be the one to show it to Madison, but he glanced at Terry, and decided to bear all things.

"That's yours," Tim said, going to stand beside the couch. "I meant to give that album to you. It has some of my dad's side of the family in there, but I have copies. No, I mean it, you keep that album. It's yours." Tim stared at the facing photo, a woman in a rocking chair, and folded his arms. "You may not want to remember all of that, but it's yours." He was about to tell her there had been more, that their grandma had burned many of her photos, but he stopped short. She didn't need to know that-- not now, if ever.

"Thank you, Tim."

He nodded, and stepped back, and as Madison closed the album, Terry gathered their coats, and the girls started to get up and say goodbye.

"When can you come back?" Paige asked.

"I don't know, but don't worry, we know where you live." Madison went over and gave Paige a hug, then gave one to Madeline. "Call whenever you want-- you have our number."
"Thank you so much for the journal." Paige sounded wholeheartedly sincere, as though she didn't mind at all showing that she meant it, and Tim felt like pulling out a camera to document the occasion. "I like that it locks."

"I thought you might, since you and Madeline share the same room. Privacy is a little hard to come by?" Madison guessed, and Paige smiled. Madison touched Paige's hair. "Don't wish you were someone else. I like this person right here." Madison gave her another hug, and Paige smiled, and wiped something from her eyes. "Tim," Madison looked at Maddycakes, then hugged her, "you were right, fair skin does run in the family."

"I told you it did." Tim watched as Terry helped Madison into her coat. "Thanks again for coming. We enjoyed having you both."

"We enjoyed coming," Terry nodded. "Don't forget, we expect you all to come and visit our bay. We'd love to have you."

"Thanks-- some day, we'll take you up on that." Tim watched as Terry handed Madison her purse, then the photo album. He noticed how Madison leaned against Terry, the brief touch of hands as Terry helped her put the album into her coat to keep it safe from the rain. Terry wrapped her arms around her middle to keep the coat closed, then kissed her forehead, and Madison leaned into Terry's shoulder like someone who didn't want to be anywhere else. Tim couldn't help but smile.

Tim pulled out an umbrella, then walked his sister and brother-in-law out to their jeep. The rain had mostly stopped, and early evening had set in. Feeling brotherly and gallant, Tim held the umbrella over Madison as Terry unlocked the jeep. Tim smiled when she moved to give him a hug.

She looked back at the apartment building, then at him. "I wish I knew what to do, Tim."

"Pray." He surprised himself with that one, but he didn't take it back. An unqualified request, one not made in the heat of an emergency.

"I will-- I promise, I will."
He swallowed, gave her a nod, and watched as she climbed into the vehicle. He took a deep breath, then shook hands with Terry. "Thank you for taking care of my sister."

"There you go again. I guess I'll have to keep waiting for that day to come when you cut it out." Terry grinned, and started around the jeep. "We'll keep in touch."

Tim hoped they would, and waved to his sister as rain began to drizzle his umbrella. Madison waved back, the jeep started, and Tim watched as it pulled away. He stood there, listened to the tiny droplets as they hit his umbrella, watched the mist as it swept past his lane, and he wondered. If people had been standing in line to get a license to parent, he would never have given one to himself. Miraculously though, he had been entrusted with a child. How had he wound up being a father, and how had he ever managed to get Karen to marry him, let alone convince her that it would be a good idea to share the responsibility in raising her daughter? He'd held his baby girl today, met her in person for the very first time, and even now, standing alone under this umbrella, he marveled at the memory. How miraculous. He was a father again. The responsibility was amazing. His own father had run out on him, and he did not want to prove he was his father's son by repeating history.

Tim watched as a bird swooped in to find shelter beneath a tree, and knew the girls would be waiting for him. He turned from the drizzling scene, and started back up the walk for home.

With a thoughtful heart, Tim went inside as the mist turned to a softly falling rain.

"Be not afraid, only believe."
~ Mark 5:36 ~

"But without faith it is impossible to please Him: for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewardez of them that diligently seek Him."
~ Hebrews 11:6 ~
Chapter Thirty-nine

Picking Up Jewels

"That ye be... followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises."
~ Hebrews 6:12 ~

Terry turned on the heater, made his way down the lane while Madison pulled the album from her coat. Mist gathered on the windshield, making Terry feel like he was driving through clouds hugging the ground. Though the neighborhood looked as if it had already tucked itself in for the night, Terry kept his speed low to avoid hitting anyone who might dart into the street. When it started to rain, he turned on the wipers.

"I can't believe he gave me this."

"That was nice of him," Terry nodded, not daring to take his eyes off the road. "Do you recognize any of the photos?"

"Kind of. I know Grandma, and Momma-- I know their faces. The places behind them seem familiar, like they're from a dream I'd forgotten about."

"Daylight's fading. Do you want me to turn on the overhead so you can see better?"

She shut the album, hugged it, and sat quiet.

The rain was growing heavier and it seemed she had a lot on her mind, but so did he. He wanted to top off their tank, make a call home before they started the drive back so Izzy wouldn't pray too hard when she saw it was raining and getting late. While night driving on wet roads didn't rank high on Terry's comfort level, he'd feel better knowing Izzy wasn't watching for them at the window. Terry passed a liquor store hanging out beside some houses, then saw a gas station up ahead, its glowing sign easily seen against the dark clouds.

"Need to use the restroom?" he asked. "Now's your chance."
Maddie shook her head, and put the album on the back seat. As though she needed a little distance between it and her, then sat back and closed her eyes.

"You did well, Maddie."

She smiled, and he hurried to take care of things so they could be on their way.

Rain pounded the hood above the station as Terry stood at the gas pump and breathed in the damp cold. Tim might be right, it could freeze later. Terry pumped the gas, got back in the jeep and found Maddie watching him.

"We'll be off in a moment." Terry pulled out his phone and called John, and wasn't at all surprised when John informed him that Izzy wanted Terry to be careful.

"And here I was, planning to drive on the wrong side of the road."

"Hey, I was just delivering the message."

"Tell Izzy careful is my middle name." Terry stuffed the gas receipt in his pocket, eager to get moving. "We've already had dinner, so if you haven't eaten, tell Izzy not to hold up on our account."

"I'll tell her."

"See you later, Buddy." Terry grinned, and hung up. "Delivering a message." Terry shook his head. "If she hadn't, John would've done it himself." Terry started to put the phone away, but Maddie reached for it, and Terry handed it over. "Do you think we'll ever be like that?" Terry asked, as he pulled away from the pump. "Know each other so well, we'll be able to finish each other's thoughts?" He glanced at Maddie, and she smiled before going to work on the phone.

A highly personal note, huh? Exactly when she planned to show him what all the secrecy was about, he had no idea, only that she'd said she would. Or at least that's what she'd implied. A question or two might clarify the when, but that would only make her nervous.

He could wait.
He turned up the heater, made his way to the Interstate, then settled back for the drive home.

The sky grew dark early, and the rain kept pouring, but visibility was good, and Terry had little trouble seeing the road. A bigger problem was dinner digesting in his stomach, and when he felt his eyes begin to grow heavy, he turned on the radio. The music made Maddie sit up a little straighter, for she had fallen asleep. She put the phone in her pocket, hugged herself in her coat, and before long, Terry had the sense she had drifted to sleep again. He adjusted the heater, and time crawled by like it always did on long drives when conversation was scarce. He was about to check the rear view mirror when a loud blast snapped his attention to the road.

He turned on his emergency flashers. That blast had come from the jeep.

"What happened?" Maddie was awake now, and so was he.

"Is your seat belt on?" Terry searched the side of the road but could find no clearing. The traffic behind them shone brilliantly in his rear view mirror, and they were getting closer. When Maddie didn't answer, he asked again, and punched off the radio to hear himself think. The jeep felt like he had the brakes on, even though he didn't, and he still couldn't see anywhere to pull over.

"Terry?"

His jaw clenched as someone leaned on their horn. It was only a two lane road, and cars were now passing them. Terry shot a prayer to Heaven and tried to maintain as much speed as possible. He prayed everyone saw his emergency flashers. Then the righthand shoulder opened to an empty strip, and his heart surged with gratitude. If he pulled close to the shrubs, there would be enough room.

"Terry?"

"We've got a flat tire. Just sit tight." Terry felt the ground bump as he left the highway. He needed to get as far away from the traffic as possible, but he needed flat ground, and the closer he got to the shrubs and trees, the more the ground leaned at a slope. He heard something swipe against Maddie's door and winced. Better the paint job, then someone getting hit by oncoming traffic,
though from the headlights, he could see the ground wasn't flat enough. He moved away, more toward the road, then shut off the engine and put on the parking brake. "Stay put. Whatever you do, stay put." Terry snapped open his seat belt. "I mean it, Maddie. Stay inside and don't move until I tell you to get out so I can jack up the jeep."

"You're not going out there, are you?"

"I am, if I'm going to change that flat tire." Terry leaned over to get the flashlight beneath his seat.

"But it's raining. And it's dark."

"I noticed." He blew out a breath when the light clicked on. All he needed were dead batteries.

"But Terry--"

"Just stay in the jeep." As Terry opened the driver's side door, rain filled his face.

"Should I call for help?"

"Why should you? You've got me, don't you?" Terry climbed out, quickly closed the door behind him, then made his way to the jeep's tailgate. He zipped his coat, thankful that at least the traffic was fairly light. He didn't need roadside assistance-- not when he had flares, and everything he needed in back. He could handle this. Besides, in this weather, it would take longer for assistance to get to them, and he didn't want to sit around and wait for the roads to ice over.

* * * *

In the passenger seat, Madison sat facing the open tailgate as Terry took things out from the back. His hair was wet, she could see his breath in the light of the passing traffic, and the rain wasn't letting up. She could pray, but she was doing that already. She could call John, but they were too far away for it to mean anything-- not while Terry was out in the wet cold with cars whizzing past him. Why weren't they slowing down? Didn't they care if they killed him?
Indignant, Madison looked about. Spotting the umbrella, she zipped her coat all the way to her chin and braced herself. Terry was on the right, so she wouldn't have to brave the side with the traffic. She'd have to be brave, but not crazy.

Cold sucked the breath from Madison as she opened her door. She reached for the umbrella, heard Terry shout something at her but kept going, closed the door, and slowly made the short distance to the rear of the jeep where he was working mostly in the dark. The flashlight was tilted into the grass. Terry adjusted the beam, but it wouldn't stay put.

Seeing her chance, Madison stopped fumbling with the umbrella and went for the flashlight.

"Get back in the jeep!" Terry's anger made her shiver, but he started working when she held the light steady. "Keep behind me."

She nodded, then realized why he'd said what he had. Their vehicle and his body would be in front of her if someone struck them. They'd be wiped out of course, but he was so wonderful, it made her want to shield him; he looked angry enough though, so she stayed where she was. The flashlight under control, she worked to free the umbrella.

"Maddie-- the light."

She held the beam still, then used her teeth to open the stubborn snap holding the umbrella shut. Using one hand, she found the release button on the handle, and the canopy sprang open. She held it over Terry, and he said something she couldn't hear. "What?" She almost screamed to compete with the sound of the traffic, and even then, Terry didn't seem to hear her. The beam bounced, and she braced herself for Terry's shout, but it didn't come. He kept working as fast as his hands could move, his breath trailing in the light.

He didn't ask for a single thing, but briskly pointed her light to here, then there, and she did her best to help. Flares glowed around them, and now that she was out here and could see better, cars were trying to stay away from their edge of the road. Or most of them were.

She hadn't known what it took to change a tire. She'd seen people do it on TV, and could guess it wasn't easy in real life, but watching Terry's shoulders as he worked, was different. It took sheer muscle, and though Terry grunted, he kept going. Nothing stopped him. Even the hardest, most
difficult thing that seemed to take the most strength didn't get in his way for long. The old wheel came off, a new one was put on, and she kept holding the flashlight and the umbrella. It didn't seem fair-- she felt she wasn't doing nearly enough, not when he was kneeling in mud and grass.

Though rain kept getting in her eyes, she held the umbrella over him at all times.

Until Terry looked up, saw the umbrella, and barked at her to cut it out.

Her teeth chattering too hard to argue, she obeyed, and just worked to hold the flashlight still. The shelter felt good. Hands growing numb, she gripped the flashlight and struggled to keep firm hold on the tugging umbrella; each gust of wind threatened to take it from her, but she focused on the light, and on keeping it steady for Terry.

"Get in the jeep," he shouted.

She shook her head.

"It's off the jack-- you can get in. I'll be with you as soon as I put the tire in the back."

They were taking the flat tire with them? Madison was too cold to ask questions, and hurried to get into the jeep. Terry took the flashlight, she climbed into the passenger seat, and he shut the door-- almost before she could get her umbrella closed.

Tossing the umbrella onto the floor, she worked to get her wet shoes off. A thump sounded as Terry did something in the back of the jeep-- she couldn't tell what. One shoe came off, then she fought with the knot on her shoelace when the other wouldn't come. She warmed the tips of her fingers in her mouth, then tried her shoelace, and the knot finally gave way. Her socks were slightly damp, so she kept them on, and though the outside of her coat was soaked, the inside liner felt dry and warm.

The tailgate slammed shut. She wished she could see what was going on. Then she saw him jog around the jeep, and she hurried to lean over and open his door for him. He jumped inside, and the jeep rocked with his weight. He tugged the door shut, sat still and puffed air.

He looked at her. "Your hair's wet."
"So's yours."

He started the engine, turned on the heater, and Madison put her hands to the vent.

"Let's get out of here." Terry pulled away from the side of the road, gained speed, and Madison felt the relief of knowing they were back with the rest of the traffic. "Are you all right?" he asked.

She nodded.

He wiped rain from his face, and she looked about for her purse. She opened it, took out a clean handkerchief, and started to dry his forehead.

"Never mind me." He tried to brush her hand away, but she came back and dried the rain from his handsome face. "Are your feet wet? Do you need to take off your shoes?" He turned on the overhead light as he drove, and she smiled at him, and patted the handkerchief over his chin. "Maddie, say something-- let me know you're all right. You're chattering like a chipmunk on caffeine."

"I'm f-fine."

Terry turned up the heater, but it was already on high.

She caught a drop of water falling from his earlobe, then sat back to warm her hands. She rubbed her toes, then held up her foot to a heat vent.

Terry glanced over, and motioned to the handkerchief on her lap. "Use that and try to dry your hair."

Though the thin material didn't hold much, it did take some of the rain out. Wringing the handkerchief, she used it again, then put her face to the vent and sighed deeply. It was a great feeling. She looked at Terry and smiled. Not as great as some other feelings she could think of, but it felt good.

The jeep sped up.
"We need to get home before you catch cold."

"I'm f-f-fine." She still couldn't get the words out very well, so she warmed her head and used the vent like a hairdryer. Closing her eyes, she took in the feeling that surrounded her.

"What are you smiling about?" Terry sounded mystified. "I just had you standing in the pouring rain, and here you are, smiling. You have little to be happy about."

"That's not true." She moved closer to the vent. "Like you said, I've got you, h-haven't I?"

Since he didn't have a comeback for that, she kept drying her hair.

When her teeth no longer chattered, and she could lean back and not have to hug herself to keep from shaking, she was free to concentrate on warming her feet. Since she didn't want to put her wet shoes back on, she pulled her knees to her chest, and perched her cold feet on the edge of the seat to keep them off the chilly floor. Though sleep tugged at her, rest would have to wait, for whenever she nodded off, a foot would slip from the seat.

A ringtone sounded, and Madison put her feet down a moment to get the phone in her pocket. The waterproof case had proved its worth today, for she pushed the slider and the phone answered as though it hadn't been through a rainstorm at all.

"I'm guessing that's from home," Terry mused, and Madison nodded that it was. "We should've been back by now. Tell them everything's all right."

"I will. Guess what, Izzy? We had a flat tire."

"Well, don't just spring it on her," Terry sighed.

"You had a what?"

"A flat, but Terry changed it while I held the flashlight, and now we're driving again. You should have seen him, Izzy. He's so strong."
"Don't tell her that." Terry looked so pained, Madison turned so she could keep going.

She told Izzy all about the tire, and just how wonderful Terry had been, then about their visit with Tim and his family, and the sweet new baby. The women stayed on the phone and chatted for quite a while, the time easily slipping by. When they finally hung up, Madison noticed the rain seemed to be getting lighter while the outside cold had deepened. Madison kept her feet up, and prayed they would reach home soon. Her legs were cramping, and the inside of her coat now felt damp.

"We passed Watertown some time back," Terry said, as though reading her mind. He must of known that came as welcome news, for he smiled, and took her hand.

"Terry, your hand is cold."

"Sorry." He started to pull away, but she held on.

"That's not what I meant. You're ice cold. Have you been warming yourself?"

"The heater's on." Terry shrugged as though it was no big deal. "We'll be home soon."

"You asked me about my feet, but I should've been asking about yours."

"Calm down. I'll dry off when we get home. I've been colder, and so have you."

Madison tried to adjust the heater vents, but the ones closest to Terry were already aimed at him, and she didn't think hers could reach him very well. She prayed nothing bad would happen. He was her responsibility. He belonged to her, she was supposed to take care of him.

After what seemed like an hour, she noticed their church pass by the window. They were getting close. She gathered her purse, got the photo album from the back, and made sure she had the umbrella. She put her shoes on and shivered at the cold reception her toes found. The skies were completely black, it was still raining, and Madison waited for that familiar sight to fill her window.
The moment she saw the comforting glow in the trees, she knew they were home. The dark outline of the house came into view as Terry pulled off the main road, and Madison thanked God for getting them home safely.

Light spilled from the house as the front door opened, but Madison was quicker than even the umbrella that hurried out to meet them. The moment the vehicle came to a stop, she opened her door and jumped out as fast as her legs could manage. She didn't bother with her umbrella, but ran to John just long enough to ask for help.

"Terry's wet, and I know he's cold. Please-- he needs to dry off as soon as possible."

"I'll put the jeep away," John nodded. He looked over as Terry jogged to open the garage door. "Get inside the house. I can handle this."

"Thanks, John." Refusing John's umbrella, Madison ran to the house.

She was out of breath, her hip ached. She wasn't used to even these short bursts of speed. She pushed inside, and stood dripping on the living room carpet as two of the triplets came down the hall and greeted her in their pajamas.

"Is your flat tire all right?" Ruthie asked. Before Madison could stop her, Ruthie hugged Madison and got the front of her PJs wet.

Lizzie waited for her turn. "I like it better when you're home."

"I like it better, too," Madison smiled, and gave Lizzie a careful hug so she wouldn't get as damp as her sister. "I hope you don't need to change, but thank you for the hugs." Madison took out the photo album and sighed with relief when it still looked dry. Tim had kept this album for her, and she hated to think of it getting damaged so soon after being given to her. She took off her shoes to make sure she wouldn't track the carpet, then, with the girls following and asking questions about the album, Madison rounded into the hallway and saw Izzy coming toward her with extra towels for the bathroom. "Thanks, Izzy. I can take those. I have to hurry-- Terry will be in soon, and I need to start the shower so it'll be ready for him."
"Do you need me for anything?" Izzy asked, waiting as Madison dumped her shoes in the bedroom before taking the towels.

Madison shook her head. "I can take care of Terry. I know how."

A smile came to Izzy, one that made Madison feel somehow important. Like she was a member of Izzy's club. Like she'd made it. Or was making it. She was taking care of her husband. She was doing something big. She was being trusted with Terry's health and happiness.

It was a happy-sober thought.

As Izzy shooed Lizzie and Ruthie away, then called off latecomer Debbie, Madison hurried into the bedroom to get Terry's things ready. She placed the album in the dresser drawer with her sweet Terri doll, then hurried out of her coat. The extra towels were set out in the bathroom, along with Terry's pajamas, and some dry socks. She started the shower, made sure the water was turned to the "H" setting, then turned it off when Terry didn't come and the water ran hot. Her wet coat went into a corner in the bathroom, along with her shoes. She gathered her pajamas, robe, and got them ready on her couch just as Terry came into the bedroom.

Finally. She was about to go find him.

"The jeep's in the garage." Terry started to take off his coat, but Madison hurried over and helped him. "I can do it, myself," he sighed. He made a face as he looked down at his muddy shoes. "I should've taken them off before I came in the house."

"Never mind that. I've got your pajamas in the bathroom, and the shower's ready for you."

Terry shook his head. "You go first."

"No, I got the bathroom ready for you." Madison got down on her knees, made him lift a foot and pulled off his shoe, then stripped off a wet sock. "You're soaked, Terry, and you're going into that hot shower."

"I could use the one in the master bath." Terry lifted his other foot. "You don't have to do that, you know. I'm perfectly able to take off my own shoes and socks." He groaned when she got up,
said nothing, and started to help him out of his sweater. Terry shut the bedroom door, then rather awkwardly let her pull it off of him. "I'll take this shower, if you take the one in the master bedroom. You can get Izzy to help you."

Madison went into the bathroom, turned on the shower, then came out and handed Terry a large fluffy towel.

"Maddie, you're not staying in those wet clothes."

"I'll change now, and take my turn after you're done."

He didn't look convinced.

Madison put her hands on her hips, and stared at Terry. "The sooner you get in there, the sooner I can take my shower."

"I still say ladies first," he mumbled, but hurried into the bathroom, and shut the door after him.

Not knowing how long he might be in there, Madison scrambled to her couch, climbed under a blanket and changed in private as fast as she could. When she came out, she covered her pink and black PJs with a robe, and tied it shut. She put on a dry coat, slipped on a dry pair of sneakers Terry had in the closet, then gathered her damp clothes, and started for the laundry room to get a basket. Her mind kept busy, her hands kept going. She would try hard to not think about being different. She would just try to keep going, to keep taking that next step. One small step wasn't anything to get excited about, but they could, and they were, beginning to add up.

She had to simply not stop. To keep moving. To not look down and realize that by making her plans, and dreaming, her toes were leaving the ground.

* * * *

What was up with Maddie? Terry wished he knew. It wasn't that he didn't appreciate the hot shower, or the chance to get into dry clothes. He hurried into his pajamas, slung his socks over
his shoulder, and started toweling off his hair as he went into the bedroom, eager for Maddie to get her shower.

He looked about, didn't see her, and rubbed the towel over his head. Something was happening with Maddie, but there was always something going on with her. It was just the way she was. This time though, it was different. Last night, when he'd held her, there was something there that had been there before, but was now more... Terry couldn't explain it. More noticeable. More something. Whatever it was, it was stronger.

A laundry basket pushed in through the bedroom door, followed by Maddie. She moved around him in the narrow walkway, and he gave her as wide a berth as he could.

And there it was. She looked up as she moved past, and his breath caught. Caught like someone was squeezing his heart and wouldn't let go. He couldn't breathe, but if he died, Terry doubted that he'd care. He was too happy. All he could see was her, all he could hear was that fast intake as she bowed her head and hurried into the bathroom.

Oh, no.

Closing his eyes, he forced himself to breathe. Nice and slow. Terry opened his eyes, and looked at the mirror over the dresser. A movie star he wasn't, but being near Maddie was like getting a huge boost of male ego. If they made pills of the stuff Maddie was feeding him, someone could make millions. If she could love him, then that had to mean something good about himself, didn't it? Self-esteem. Even when the truth was uglier than a hairless mutt. Terry turned from the mirror. He couldn't get caught up in whatever was going on with Maddie. He had to stay the course, and keep his feet firmly planted on the ground.

Just because she had his heart, didn't mean he couldn't use his mind. He was rational, he could think. Just then, Maddie came back through with the laundry basket, moved past him, and he backed into the couch to keep well out of her way.

"What about your shower?" he asked.

"I will in a moment. You should be resting your ankle."
"My ankle's fine." He watched as she gathered more clothes and added it to her basket. "You're doing laundry? Maddie, not tonight. Aren't you tired?"

"Not so tired I can't do this," she smiled.

He shook his head, went into the bathroom, and hung up his towel. It was then he noticed she'd been tidying the bathroom. She hadn't needed to, he would've done that. He'd only left the bathroom in such a mess because he'd been in a hurry to get out. FOR HER SHOWER. As long as he was here-- Terry found the hairdryer and moved to the bedroom before Maddie came back.

She was tired-- he could see she was, and instead of taking care of herself, she was doing laundry.

It annoyed him, it made him weary, it made him want to hug her.

As Terry leaned over to find the outlet behind the dresser, he noticed his ankle. Now that he thought about it, his ankle wasn't perfect. It wasn't hurting, but he hadn't exactly given it a full two days of rest. He plugged in the dryer, then blasted himself with hot air. He'd see how his ankle felt in the morning, but for now, he was just glad to be home and in dry clothes again. He ran a hand through his hair and decided it was good enough. He unplugged the dryer as Maddie came in, and groaned as she shut the bedroom door, fresh from her trip outside. Though the laundry room was close to the house, and the walkway was sheltered from the rain, she'd been helpful enough.

"You have a load in the washer?" he asked.

She nodded, her arm brushing his as she moved past him between the couches.

"When it's time, I'll put everything in the dryer."

"I can do it."

"I know you can. That's not the point." Terry followed her into the bathroom-- a move he could tell surprised her. She was about to take a shower. He gave her a you-know-me-better-than-that
kind of look, and put the hairdryer away. "I appreciate the help with the flat tire. Now let me help you with the laundry."

She bit her lip, and looked at him so sweetly, he didn't know what to say.

"Maddie?"

"Okay, Terry."

"I can finish the laundry?"

She nodded.

As he turned back to the bedroom, her words melted his heart.

"I love you, Terry."

He didn't dare look back, for he knew if he did, he would only kiss her. "I love you, too. Please, take your shower." He closed the door, and stood outside the bathroom a moment to let his heart catch up. He loved her. If he hadn't, he would've kissed her. He took a deep breath, checked the clock to have a good idea of when to go out and put their things in the dryer, then went to Maddie's purse to find his iPhone.

He sank onto his couch. The photos of the girls and Baby Connie made him smile, and he tapped, and one by one, sent them off to Tim. He leaned his head back, groaning at the relaxed muscles that had been soaked by that hot shower. It was good to be warm again, to have dry socks on his feet, and to know Maddie was safe and not holding that silly flashlight on the side of the road. Not for the first time that night, he thanked God for getting them home in one piece. He went back to the phone and flicked through pictures as rain and the sound of Maddie's shower made him feel content. His toes wiggled in their socks; never again would he take dry socks for granted.

"Uncle Terry?" A small voice called outside the closed bedroom door. "Are you in there?"
Terry smiled, hit send on one last photo, then put the phone to sleep. "I'm here. You can come in."

The door cracked open, and Debbie looked inside. She saw Terry, smiled, and came to his couch, dressed and ready for bed. "Lizzie and Ruthie missed you."

"They did?" Terry slid the phone under his couch for safe keeping, then smiled at Debbie. "And what about you? Did you miss me, too?"

The girl shook her head. "I knew you'd come back."

"Thank you for that."

"So can I come next time?" Debbie climbed onto the couch as Terry made room for her.

"I thought you said you hadn't missed me." Terry looked down at the little one, and she smiled. "Maybe a little, huh?"

Debbie nodded, and leaned her head on Terry's arm.

"Some trips I think I need to make with others--" Terry pulled his arm around the child, and Debbie yawned and looked like she was getting cozy-- "but it's good to know I'm wanted. Thank you." Terry hugged his niece, and she smiled, her eyes at half-mast. "Ready for bed?" he asked, and she nodded that she was. He smiled, remembering back to days gone by when small munchkins fell asleep here and there, and had to be carried to bed all the time. Terry got to his feet, lifted her off the couch, and smiled when she hugged his neck. "You're getting too big for this," Terry groaned, but it was more for play than anything else. The small arms about his neck told him she didn't want to be put down, and the truth was, she couldn't have weighed more than what he bench pressed. Still, the triplets were growing up. No doubt about it. Not that long ago, this one had been as small as Connie.

Not in any hurry, Terry made his way to the girls' room, and smiled at John as John tucked in Ruthie. Terry sailed Debbie to her bed, helped her to take off her slippers, her robe, then got a kiss good night.
"Sleep tight, munchkin." Terry pulled the blankets up around Debbie, put her slippers away, then saw the other two girls waiting for their turn.

"Good night, Uncle Terry." Ruthie smiled sleepily as Terry leaned over the bed and kissed her hair.

A faint smile touched Lizzie's face, but she was so tired, she was out soon after Terry tucked her in. John made sure the night-light was on, and as the men left, Izzy came in and looked over her girls.

In the hall, John whispered to Terry. "Did you let Tim know you got home okay?"

Terry nodded.

They moved away from the door and talked about their day, John speaking in the experienced hush of a father who didn't want to put his kids to bed a second time. They touched bases about their work schedule for tomorrow, what needed to get done, the client that John agreed could wait. Leaving the girls' door open a crack, Izzy came to John's side, and John slid an arm around Izzy's waist. The men talked shop until Izzy began to fade, then they parted with a quiet "see you in the morning."

The house was tucked in for the night, which was more than Terry could say for himself. He checked the time, went into the bedroom for a coat and saw Maddie sitting on her couch with a notebook on her knees, a pen busily working across the page.

He put on shoes, lifted the coat she'd been borrowing off the back of her couch, and smiled when she looked up.

"Have a good shower?" he asked.

She nodded, and as she went back to her writing, he noticed an open Bible at her side.

He was about to tell her where he was going, but didn't want to interrupt. Her hair looked damp, as though she'd been in a hurry to leave the bathroom and get to her notebook. He
sighed. At least the house felt warm so it would be harder for Maddie to catch cold. Before he went to get the laundry, he paused at the door, and looked back at his wife.

Whatever was going on with her, Terry prayed it wouldn't stop. He could either fear it, or accept it, and since he didn't understand it, he chose to trust God, and her, and accept the change he saw in Maddie.

* * * *

The tape was in the office bathroom. She would get it, after she finished. The pen kept going through the paper, but this was important. She had to get this right. And there were so many. Everywhere she looked, there were more. Like picking up jewels, great and precious and all over the place. "He [Jesus] is faithful that promised..." Hebrews 10:23; "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you." James 4:7, 8; "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." 2 Timothy 1:7--especially a sound mind-- Madison loved that verse, and underlined those words. She hadn't even touched the Psalms yet. There was a goldmine there, but she could only write so fast.

Her hand cramped, but one by one, she marshaled her troops together, tore them out of the notebook and set them on her bed like soldiers going to war. She would put the best ones first, her line of defense. She counted them out, then wrote more, making sure she would have enough for the days ahead. The words formed slowly on the paper, for she kept looking back at the printed words, then at her notebook to be sure she didn't make any mistakes. It was slow going, but she found confidence in writing them out. Staking claim to them. Her promises, her verses.

She was so taken with her writing, that it wasn't until she was ready to go find the scissors and tape, that she noticed Terry was on his couch, reading from his phone.

He looked up. "Ready to sleep?"

She shook her head, and thanked God that she could trust Terry to not read her highly personal note. Madison left the bedroom, found the things she needed from the office, and while she was there, quickly stuck a surprise into Terry's desk. She hurried back to the bedroom and shut the door. Though Terry acted like he was reading, she felt him watching her as she went back to her
couch, and began neatly trimming off the rough edges of her torn paper. She wanted them to look nice. She glanced at Terry, and he looked back at his phone.

"Sorry if I'm keeping you up."

"It's all right." Terry sounded casual, and she kept trimming paper.

She should have put this off until tomorrow, but she felt a sense of urgency. She could fail so fast it scared her.

Madison looked at the wall over her couch. She was making her stand, even though to put these up, she would have to kneel. She cut some tape, took out her first promise.

And taped it to the wall.

The second one went up, and then the third, until she had a good line of defense where she could easily see it when needed. Grabbing four more, Madison took them into the bathroom, and taped them beside the bathroom mirror.

She meant business. These were here to remind her why she wasn't going to cut. Why she was going to fight.

She went back to the bedroom, taped even more over her couch, then gathered the clippings and cleaned her bed. It was getting late, she was keeping Terry up, so she needed to hurry. She looked back at the other couch, and saw Terry trying not to read her wall.

"It's all right-- I don't mind if you read these." She swallowed as Terry got up and stood in the walkway. "Do you think they'll bother you? Do they look too messy?"

"This is fine." Terry leaned in to read, the clean scent of shampoo tugging her closer because it belonged to him.

She pulled herself away, and focused on anything but him. The clippings went into the wastebasket, the tape and scissors went on the dresser. She took off her rings, and carefully
placed them in the dish with Terry's wedding band. It was hard to get around him, for he was everywhere. When she looked back, he was still reading.

"This is good." He looked at her thoughtfully. "Tell me what you need from me. Tell me, and I'll try my hardest to be there for you."

"You are, Terry." She smiled and hugged herself. "You're always there for me."

"I mean it. Tell me what you need. I don't know what you need unless you tell me. I don't want to fail you."

"You aren't." She stepped close to him and leaned her head against his shoulder. His strong, gentle shoulder that never turned her away. He wasn't relaxing, so she stopped hugging herself, and hugged his arm instead. His face buried against her neck, and a hand gently caressed her back. Pain flashed as someone else invaded her, forcing what wasn't his. Her eyes squeezed shut. It took strength to not push away, and stay calm. Terry was holding her, a hug and nothing more. It was Terry.

His breath was slow, he kissed her cheek, then drew his hand away. She looked up at him, but he had turned and was going past her to the bathroom.

"You want the light on?" He waited, and she nodded, "yes."

The carpet, the couches, her robe. Her breath steadied.

"I finished the laundry while you were working in your notebook." As Terry came around the couch, she moved away from him to switch off the overhead light. He turned down his blankets. "I thought about offering you hot cocoa, but you were so engrossed in your notebook, I figured another time."

"Terry?"

He took off his slippers, then looked at her to ask her question.
"How much money do you want me to spend on the wedding? I mean an actual number, so I won't spend more than you want me to, and Izzy and I can start buying things."

"You could start now, but if you want a budget ceiling, I'd have to first look over the finances." Terry climbed into his bed, kept his face turned away, and Madison used the chance to take off her robe and get under her blankets. "I'll get back to you on that, tomorrow."

"Terry?"

"I'm still here." There was a smile in his voice, one that made her feel loved.

"Thanks for finishing the laundry."

"Good night, Maddie." Terry turned, and looked at her from his couch, and she met his gaze. For a long moment, they lay there and held each other with their eyes, until Terry started their nightly prayer. He prayed for Tim, and Karen, and for the girls. Terry's voice wrapped Madison with strength, a confidence that Someone greater than herself was looking out for them. He didn't speak with hesitation, but with certainty, a faith that knew its Author.

As Madison closed her eyes, the last thing she saw were the promises she'd taped to the wall above her couch.

* * * *

Even before Terry fully woke up, he could smell the scent of coffee, freshly brewed, and enticing. He groaned, turned on the couch and stuffed a pillow over his head. He wasn't interested in getting up. The room felt cold, and he was warm and snug right where he was, thank you very much. No amount of java was worth getting out of bed for-- not while he could still feel like drifting back to sleep.

But what was that, layered over the coffee? Terry tried not to inhale, even under the pillow, but he had to breathe. Bacon. Just what his waistline needed. He lifted the pillow to see the clock on the dresser. Okay, so he'd already slept in. This was torture, pure and simple.
He pulled the pillow off, sat up and blinked at the couch next to his. Empty-- which gave him a general idea of who was pulling him out of bed this cold bleak morning. He rubbed his face with both hands and noted the lack of rain on the roof. That didn't mean much. Clouds could be lurking over him right now, waiting to pounce the moment he thought the skies were clear. He pushed off the couch, slouched into the bathroom, then put on a robe on his way to the hall-- all without opening his eyes more than he had to. He'd forgotten his slippers, but until he had coffee inside of him, he didn't care.

"Morning, Uncle Terry." A happy faced munchkin greeted him in the living room, already dressed for preschool.

Terry paused. Right, this was Thursday. He was all for oversleeping, but somebody had let him get away with too much. He patted Ruthie's head and moved into the kitchen.

"Good morning," Izzy smiled from the kitchen table. She sat in her robe and slippers, not at all looking ready to drive the kids anywhere. Across from Izzy sat John, dressed for the day, and finishing off a plate of toast and bacon. "You were right, Madison," Izzy turned to the woman at the sink, "the bacon did the trick."

"Did what trick?" Terry frowned, looked about, and sighed when Maddie handed him his smiley mug.

John paused between mouthfuls. "Anyone ever tell you, you aren't exactly a morning person?"

"Who? Me?" Terry fell into a chair, pushed his elbows onto the table and cradled his mug. Some days, it was just harder to get out of bed, that's all. He sipped his java, and hoped that would do the trick.

Izzy drank from her mug, and closed her eyes as though she were enjoying her morning. "I feel like it's my birthday. Someone else is cooking breakfast, John volunteered to take the girls in to preschool, and all I had to do was get them dressed and ready to go. I've had a relatively quiet morning."

"Mommy!" Lizzie came in with a sweater pulled over her head-- one arm in, and one arm out. "Debbie says I can't wear this because it's hers, and it's not. I had the red one."
"Did not." Debbie came in, and Izzy looked at the others.

"I said relatively quiet, I didn't say it was absolute." She put down her cup, and helped Lizzie out of the sweater. "I'm sorry, Sweetheart, Debbie is right. Yours is blue. I laid it out on your bed."

"But--"

"Go put on your sweater and let your sister put on hers." Izzy gave her daughter a smile that Terry recognized all too well. It said, "I'm mom, now do as I say."

"But I wanted red."

"Lizzie, you were the one who picked that sweater out in the store. Unless Debbie wants to trade, then you're going to be fair about this, and wear what you have. I don't want to hear any complaining."

For a moment, Terry thought Lizzie would push it, but she sighed, and left the kitchen with Debbie in tow.

"When your birthday comes along," John got up from the table and kissed Izzy, "we'll try to give you a better morning than this. Girls, get ready," he called to the house. "Your ride leaves in ten minutes. Terry," John slapped Terry on the shoulder and grinned when Terry blinked at him, "Abby called. Now that Karen has had her baby, Abby and Dick want to have the engagement party the Friday after next."

"When?" Terry sat up. "Have they talked to Maddie?"

"Yup. Madison gave it the go-ahead. Abby said to call her to confirm the date when you have the chance." John finished his mug, then left the kitchen with a second call to the girls to get ready.

Curious, Terry looked at Madison as she set a plate in front of him. "Have you told Izzy what you're hoping to do?"

"I haven't even told you that."
"Have you told her the date?"

"You've set a date for the wedding?" Izzy smiled and looked at them expectantly.

As Maddie took a seat at the table, Terry bowed his head and said a quiet prayer over his toast and turkey bacon. When he opened his eyes, Maddie was twisting the edge of her sweater, or rather, his old sweater. He rather liked seeing it on her, for it made him feel closer to her, but he wondered if she tired of wearing the same few clothes every week. He didn't bring it up, remembering how hard it had been on her the last time they'd shopped for clothes.

"Do you want me to tell her?" Terry asked, and Maddie shook her head.

"I changed my mind about the date."

"Since when?"

"Since John told me Dick and Abby's plans."

"They could change the date, Maddie. They could move it up so the engagement party took place before the wedding."

She shook her head. "I don't think it was ever really possible to have the wedding so soon. It was never going to happen this Saturday."

Izzy's mouth dropped open. "You can't be serious."

"She was." Terry started in on the bacon and found himself sighing. This was good.

"I suppose it is a local wedding," Izzy stammered. "Almost all of the guests attend our church, so it's not like a lot of people will have to make unscheduled traveling plans. But still." Izzy looked as though her quiet morning had derailed and was now plowing into the countryside. "We need time to get the dress, and then there's the cake, and the food for the reception. Not to mention the flowers. And what about a wedding registry? People have been asking what to get you guys,"
and I've been telling them I'd talk to you about setting up a registry. Which I've been assuming we will, won't we?"

"Not necessarily." Terry added more marmalade to his toast. "We're not a young couple setting up house for the first time. We live here, I have my apartment and she has hers. We don't need more stuff, and if we do, we can get it ourselves. Isn't that right, Maddie?"

Maddie nodded.

"So..." Izzy paused, "are you saying you want the wedding for this weekend?"

Terry looked at Maddie. "I'm going to let my better half answer that. Whatever Maddie wants, and whatever won't collide with Dick and Abby, is fine with me. Maddie, you wanted a number? Would it be helpful if I got it to you this morning?"

Maddie nodded, and Terry picked up his plate, and moved breakfast to the office to look over his finances. He knew Maddie had an ally in Izzy. Whatever the women worked out, he wanted to make sure Maddie had the resources to carry out their plans. He could juggle some things, and set aside a decent amount, but Terry wanted to see if he could give Maddie something she wasn't expecting. In case Izzy's plans required it, or Maddie saw something extra she wanted for the wedding.

While his laptop came to life, Terry opened a desk drawer to get his Bible out for later. On top, he saw it-- a gift with a small card that read, "You are loved."

"Maddie, you sweet knucklehead." He took the present out, set it on his desk and admired the way she had gift-wrapped its long adjustable neck so not an inch of it showed. Yes, he wanted to give Maddie more, for she had already given him so much.

* * * *

"Don't tell me you haven't finished your breakfast?" John laughed as he sat down, and opened the laptop on the desk next to Terry's. "When'd you get that?" he asked, nodding to the new addition beside Terry's pencil cup.
"This morning."

"Madison?" John asked, and Terry grinned.

"What time is it?" Terry asked, then answered his own question by looking at the time in the menu bar. "Man, I'd better get this number to Maddie before she thinks I forgot about her." Terry pushed up from the desk, grabbed his unwrapped present, and went in search of his wife. He didn't have far to look, for she was at the kitchen table, writing in her notebook, and talking with Izzy. The moment he came inside, Maddie stopped. And smiled when she saw the gooseneck lamp in his hands.

"Thanks for this," Terry said, feeling as though he were giving an acceptance speech. "I'll use it wisely, and put it next to my husband of the year award, all the while praying that I become worthy of these loving distinctions."

Maddie bowed her head and giggled.

"Go ahead and laugh, but what do you want me to say? Maddie, you're spoiling me." He felt the weight of the lamp in his hands and shook his head. It wasn't heavy, but it wasn't cheap plastic, either. "It's nice, thank you. And yes, I can use it-- my other one was getting a little unreliable. But you already know that because Izzy told you, didn't she? Why am I not surprised." Terry chuckled, placed it on the table, then leaned down and gave Maddie a kiss.

The look Maddie gave him was something close to bliss, and he had to step back before he kissed her again.

"And for the reason I came-- here's your number." Terry placed some paper in front of her. "You can think of that as the ceiling to your budget. Stay below it, and you'll be good." He started to leave when she tugged his hand.

"Are you sure, Terry? This number is bigger than I thought."

He smiled. "Nothing says you have to go that high, but yes, I'm sure. How you choose to spend it on the wedding, is up to you." Terry kissed the top of her head, picked up his lamp, then left the kitchen to go start his morning. He and John would have quiet time, then get down to work. As
Terry went to the office to replace his lamp, he thanked God for his ankle. No more rest, now things could get back to normal. Terry laughed out loud. Who was he kidding? With a nutcase like him in the family, this house was never normal.

* * * *

Madison could hardly believe the number Terry had scribbled. She opened the paper again, peeked at the writing, then closed it to think. She’d talked it over with Izzy, and agreed this weekend would be too soon. If they worked hard though, they might be able to do it next week. Right now, it was too soon to tell.

After Izzy dressed, and they both had quiet time of their own, Izzy called Agatha and Abby, and the four of them settled at the table to see what could be done in so short a time. Before they started in on the wedding, Madison showed off pictures of her new baby niece, and the women enjoyed highlights of Connie, Madeline, and Paige, along with how Karen was doing. Madison had never been surrounded by so many women, talking about girl things, in her life.

As the talk turned back to the wedding, Agatha pulled an armful of wedding magazines from a large bag, and placed them on the table for everyone to look through. She’d come prepared.

They needed flowers, and Agatha knew the local florist well. If they wanted out of season flowers, or arrangements that would take too long in advance to prepare, then they would be in trouble. Next week would be out of the question.

"Would roses mean trouble?" Madison asked.

"Roses should be available all year round, but are you sure that's what you want? They can be expensive."

Madison was sure. Roses reminded her of Terry, and so long as they didn't push the wedding back, that's what she wanted to use. The cake seemed to be a big problem with the ladies, especially after Agatha opened a slick looking magazine that showed them what a reception could look like. But Madison didn't see it that way. It was simple. They were only having a small group at the house for the reception, so they wouldn't need a big cake like the one the women were talking about.
"But it's a wedding cake," Izzy reasoned, "it's supposed to be special."

"It will be. You're making it."

"But I've never made a wedding cake before."

"You said in the parking lot--"

"I know what I said," Izzy sighed, "but now is different. I'm not as sure now. Don't you want tables set up with wedding favors like Agatha suggested? Look at the magazine. Compared to that, my homemade cake will look out of place. It won't belong."

"I don't want fancy tables, or wedding favors. We can eat buffet-style in the living room. I just want enough white cake to serve to our guests."

"That simplifies things," Abby smiled.

"But what about the edible wedding favors?" Agatha asked.

"I want to have this wedding next week, not next month. Anything that gets in the way of that, has to go."

"Buffet-style?" Agatha closed her magazine and sighed. "It'd be nice if we could still do something special. Maybe a seafood pasta dish, serve it with a crusty bread and a salad, and make sure we have something fun for the kids. What do you think? With all the cutbacks you're talking about, the main problem I see will be if anyone has previous plans for the Saturday after next, and of course what you intend to use as a wedding gown."

"If you're serious about this, Madison, then we need to get out the invitations as soon as possible." Izzy looked about the table. "We don't even have a guest list."

"Yes, we do. The list for the engagement party." Abby pulled out a copy of the email she'd sent to Dick. "Just pare it down, and everyone who attends the party Friday night, can come to the wedding the next day. That should be convenient for Aunt Madison's brother and his family.
They won't have to drive up twice. We could even put them up at Uncle Terry's apartment. Aunt Madison, do you want me to run this by Uncle Terry, and see if I can't get the invitations out as soon as possible?"

"Thanks, Abby."

"You'd better wait on those invitations until we can confirm with Pastor Bill about having the church on Saturday." Agatha hunted for her purse. "I'll call our pastor, Abby, and you'll be in charge of managing the guest list, and getting out the invitations."

Abby nodded, and Agatha pulled out her phone as John came back from dropping off the girls.

The women were in earnest, plans were being set in motion, and before Madison knew it, Abby had placed an email in front of her with names Madison didn't know. All of these could go to the wedding, but a smaller number had to be invited for the reception, and it was beyond Madison to know who to invite. Madison put a circle around the few names she recognized, then whispered to Abby to let Terry figure out the rest.

"Good news-- we can have the church on the Saturday after next," Agatha confirmed, and put away her phone. "Who will be the best man? Does Terry know?"

"I don't exactly know what a best man is, except for what I've seen on TV," Madison admitted a little shyly, as she wrote the date down in her notebook with a heart on either side, "but I can't imagine Terry picking anyone but John."

"I have to agree," Agatha smiled. "And your maid or matron of honor?"

"Izzy."

Smiling, Izzy touched Madison's arm. "It'd be an honor."

"And who do you want for your bridesmaids and groomsmen?" Agatha asked.

"Couldn't we keep it small? I wouldn't mind asking Abby, and Karen, and all my nieces to be bridesmaids, and Tim, Jake, and Ricky to be groomsmen, but that would be the entire family. As
long as they come to the wedding, that's what's important. Besides, from what you showed me in the magazines, all the bridesmaids have to pay for their own clothes. Tim has enough expenses with the new baby. If I ask Abby to be a bridesmaid, it'll look odd that I don't ask Karen, and if I ask Karen, I'll feel badly that I don't ask Paige, and then Madeline will feel left out."

Abby smiled. "I vote we cut through the family awkwardness and just ask Mom."

With a half laugh at her daughter, Izzy nodded in agreement.

"That brings us to the wedding gown." Agatha opened one of her glossy magazines to an equally glossy haired woman in an over-the-top white confection, then slid the magazine toward Madison. "We have a lovely bridal boutique in Watertown."

"To show I'm a good sport," Abby grinned, "I'll go with Aunt Madison for moral support."

"Knowing you, Madison would come back with wading boots and a fly rod." Agatha tapped the magazine. "The bride is the centerpiece. You need a gown."

Madison nodded, "I know."

"Will there be a bridal shower, any parties other than the one Dick and Sara Doyle are planning?"

"No."

"Then I suggest you don't skimp on the gown. Everyone's talking about this wedding. What about the groom? A tuxedo or a suit?"

"I suppose whatever one wears, the others will have to as well." Madison thought it over. "I don't know if everyone on our guest list will have a tuxedo."

"I have a tux." Terry smiled as he walked into the kitchen, looked over the magazines on the table and let out a whistle. "I hope you ladies aren't getting carried away. I was hoping to make this a suit and tie affair."
"I believe you'll get your wish," Agatha said dryly.

"I hope you're not too disappointed." Terry gave one of his sweet lopsided grins, and Agatha looked as though she couldn't help but cave in. "We've never been the extravagant kind. We're meat and potato folk, you know that."

"And yet you own a tuxedo," Agatha smiled, and collected her magazines. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you've been listening from the next room."

"I might have heard a word or two."

"As long as this is what you both want." Agatha got to her feet, her smile warming even more. "I have the rest of the day free. If you like, we can start looking for a wedding gown this morning."

"I thought the groom wasn't supposed to see the dress until the day of the wedding?"

"I was talking to the bride."

Tossing a wink to Madison, Terry leaned against the counter and listened while Madison made plans to go shopping. It was hard to pay attention when it felt like Terry could crack a joke at any moment, but Madison got through it, and when Agatha left, Abby got up and showed Terry the guest list.

"Cutting this list down for the reception will be hard." Terry puffed his cheeks, and nodded slowly. "It'll take some time, but it's doable. When do you need it by?"

Abby folded her arms. "Tonight would be good."

"But I thought we weren't going to have it this week."

"We aren't. You're getting married the Saturday after next."

Terry looked at Madison, and Madison looked at her notebook. The wedding itself wasn't a big deal. They were already married, but Madison could think of a good reason to put the wedding off a little longer, and that reason was healing beneath her T-shirt. And that was a big deal, all in
itself. Plowing through to the end of the week would be easier than holding out and being brave for another seven days, but she could do this.

Taking the list, Terry leaned next to Maddie, and kissed her ear. "Don't do it all yourself?" he whispered, and Madison nodded. He smiled, and left for the office, and Madison went to brush her hair and put on her shoes.

They were saving a lot of money, and that meant the number Terry had given her could stay high. If she was careful about the dress. Who would've thought Terry would give her so much? Her plans now seemed more possible than ever before. How much would it cost though, and how should she go about it? And where? She would need help with that.

She would need help with a lot of things.

She had nine days, not counting the wedding day, to get ready, and be ready. It would never happen, but that was doubt speaking, and Madison fought to shut out all doubt. She had to move forward, not backward.

As she passed the office in the hall, she saw Terry at his desk, his new lamp watching while he worked.

He was worth it. She hugged herself, and went to get ready for a day of shopping.

* * * *

The bridal boutique Agatha had talked about was a pillowy showcase in white and pink pastel. Everything shouted romance, right down to the doves carved into the white framed mirrors. And those mirrors were everywhere. It was either a peacock's dream come true, or a shrinking violet's nightmare. The gauntlet ran about the room, neatly waiting on hangers for some poor unsuspecting woman to walk by. Madison fought the image, but it stuck. What women did for men.

"This is perfect," Agatha spoke with Izzy as a consultant led them to a dressing room. "With my figure, nothing looks like it does on the hanger, and now I get to help dress Madison. This is better than playing with fashion dolls."
Abby smiled at Madison.

The dressing room was a grand place. It had a long fancy couch with carved wooden legs, white statues holding vases of creamy blooms, and of course more mirrors. A chandelier hung from the center of the room, more lights lined the ceiling, and everything matched in pink and white. The only colors that didn't coordinate, were the clothes they'd brought into the store. They could take off their coats, go look at gowns, then bring back the ones they liked, and Madison could try them on here.

"While the others watch?" Madison looked about in horror, and the woman called Gloria motioned to a screen.

No door. Just a screen to change behind. A door on the changing room-- yes-- but everyone could fit into the room, so it didn't really count. This fancy place didn't have a door where she could take off her clothes in private? Madison swallowed hard, but followed the others outside to start "the hunt," as Agatha called it. Abby moved close to Madison as Izzy and Agatha went to look at gowns.

"Signal me when you want to get out of here, and I'll back you up."

"I need a dress, Abby."

"I know, but you probably won't be able to make up your mind, today."

"Oh, yes, I will." It felt like a challenge to Madison, and for the first time since stepping inside this boutique, or store, or whatever this ode to lace and pink was called, she made up her mind to come away from here with a wedding dress.

She pulled a gown down, took one look, and put it back. Abby gave her an I-told-you-so glance, but Madison kept going.

"How about this one?" Abby asked, but shook her head when she saw all the feathers. "You're making me happier than I can tell you, that Jake and I eloped."
"Thanks for helping, Abby."

"It's the least I can do." Abby pulled out another, shook her head, and the search was on.

Plunging necklines, lots of exposed skin, were all out. Despite being immodest, Madison was feeling exposed enough. Everything was meant to make a woman look as attractive as possible, and Madison kept telling herself it was for Terry.

While the other two women consulted with the consultant, Abby and Madison started gathering possibles. They worked like women on a mission, and by the time the others were ready with suggestions, Madison and Abby had carried several dresses to their room. They were ready to start, though Madison dreaded having to change behind the pink and white screen.

"This is so much fun," Agatha smiled, as the women sat down on the dressing room's couch while Madison gathered her courage. "I wish we could do this all the time."

All the time? Finding the push she'd needed, Madison grabbed the first dress and moved behind the changing screen.

She might not be normal, but she was determined, and that had to count for something.

There was a petticoat, and it was hard to put on, but she climbed into it, and came out to let someone help with the buttons in the back. One look at the mirror though, and she called off the buttons. It wasn't worth the effort. The next wasn't any better, for it made her look as though she'd decided to pull billowy white curtains off the windows, and the next she couldn't get out of fast enough. As Agatha left to find more dresses, Madison kept working through the ones she already had.

Izzy stayed and tried to help Madison make up her mind, but the gowns either made Madison feel she was placing a huge man-target on her chest, or a target on her backside. She could take her pick, and she refused to. She hated the way it made her feel, the way the material sat against her skin as she looked in the mirrors. If she could've gotten away with draping a white comforter over her jeans and T-shirt and walked down the aisle, she would have. In a heartbeat.
When Agatha came back, Madison tried on her suggestions; by the time Madison had gone through them, it was after lunch and the women were talking about a restaurant.

"But the dress--"

"We can come back after lunch." Izzy sounded tired, and Madison knew how she felt for she'd been climbing in and out of gowns until she felt dizzy in the head with decisions, but she wanted to give it a little longer.

She really didn't want to have to come back.

"What if we stay a half hour more," Abby suggested, "then we go to lunch?"

Izzy and Agatha agreed, and everyone went back to hunt dresses.

It was then Madison remembered to pray. She kicked herself for not doing that sooner, and as she and Abby paired up once more, Madison sent up a quiet prayer to find her gown before they went to lunch. In the grand scheme of things, it was a small request, but she added with courage, "something Terry would like." It was a brave thing to ask, but if she was going to look nice, and dress up like a moving target, she wanted to do it right.

Izzy found some wedding gowns with lacy long sleeves, tapped Madison on the shoulder, and the women carried three possibles back to the dressing room. Madison prayed it would be here. She wasn't trying to be picky, she really wasn't. These looked nice on the hanger, but so had many of the others.

She climbed into a white gown, adjusted the lace sleeves, then moved out from behind the screen as Izzy came around to fasten the buttons in back. Madison was already turning to go change when Abby called her to stop.

"Look in the mirror." There was hope in Abby's voice, too much hope.

Madison turned, and looked. The slender form didn't look like her, though it was her face staring back. Silk showed through lace as it ran the length of the slim gown, and gracefully formed behind her in an elegant train. Though it showed her figure, it wasn't clingy or tight. If
anything, her thin frame worked in her favor. The two layer dress-- a glossy satin with a lace overlay-- had the effect of lightly dusted snow, its faint shimmers catching the eye as Madison turned in front of the mirror. It wasn't a ball gown, with huge gathers, but the sweetheart neck covered in lace, and the lace covered shoulders and arms gave Madison refuge. She wasn't used to being pretty, to looking attractive for a man. In the old days, she would've punched one in the face, or lit herself on fire before doing something like this, but that was then. This was now.

"Aunt Madison," Abby glowed with approval, "you're a knockout."

"I am?" Madison backed away from the mirror, but Izzy came close and hugged Madison.

"It's perfect. Absolutely perfect. I can't wait to see what it looks like with the veil."

As the women fussed over the details of the dress, and what Izzy should wear, Madison thanked God, and began making secret plans for the next part of the wedding. She had a crazy number on a piece of paper, and more fight than ever before.

Madison's plans were just beginning.

"Jesus said... If thou canst believe, all things are possible to [her] that believeth."
~ Mark 9:23 ~
Chapter Forty

Don't Tell Terry

"Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her... she will do him good and not evil all the days of her life."
~ Proverbs 31:10-12 ~

In all the excitement, the ladies stopped talking about lunch and Madison found herself hunting for a matron of honor dress for Izzy. They were kept in a different part of the boutique where color splashed on the hangers. From soft purples to violent reds, they made Madison grateful she was back in her sweater and jeans and not having to face the changing screen. She had no idea what she was looking for, even though Izzy kept asking Madison for her opinion.

"What kind of dress do you want me to wear?"

"Anything you like," was the only answer Madison could think to say. "According to those magazines, you're the one who's going to have to pay for it."

Izzy laughed, and Madison smiled.

"What color are your roses going to be?" Izzy asked.

"Pink." It caused Madison a big gulp to say that, for she was standing in a very pink room.

"I think I saw a blush colored dress over there..." Agatha beelined past Madison, and Abby moved out of the way.

"Do they sell shoes in this place?" Abby asked.

"Why?"

"Because you need shoes to go with your wedding gown, and Mom will need something to go with that."
Madison turned, and saw Agatha holding a soft pink dress to Izzy. When Izzy tried it on, everyone gave their approval. It had a modest sweetheart neckline that matched Madison's gown, though this one didn't have any lace; its full pleated skirt came to the floor, while the capped sleeves flattered her neck and shoulders. These fancy terms came from their consultant, for Madison had no idea what it all meant, only that it dressed up Izzy's everyday elegance to a high shine.

After Izzy changed, they found the boutique didn't have much of a selection when it came to making your feet pretty. That meant going somewhere else, so Izzy pulled out her wallet, and plunked down some plastic.

"You aren't supposed to pay for my things," Madison whispered to Izzy.

"Don't worry. Before we left, Terry made me promise to give him all the receipts. He'll be keeping track of all this, and will pay me back."

Though it made Madison feel better, it brought up a private concern. Terry would know everything she bought. That would be a problem. Her heart sank a little more when she remembered both dresses would need a few alterations. That meant they would have to come back to this place, after all, though at least it wouldn't be to buy more clothes.

Happy over their progress, the ladies went to a tidy, garden-themed restaurant. When the others ordered soup and salad, Madison followed their example and ordered the same thing. She didn't have time to think for herself, she was too busy trying to figure out how to go about something important. While the women talked over which store to get the wedding invitations, Madison moved the salad around her plate and wondered who she could get to help her.

Izzy couldn't, because she wouldn't know about those sorts of things, and Abby... Madison didn't want to impose on her anymore than she already had. She could ask Jake, but Jake wouldn't know.

But John would.
After they had a light dessert of fruit cocktail, the women went shopping for shoes. It sounded innocent enough, until Madison found herself standing in stilts, hanging onto a shelf for dear life.

"She's going to break her neck, Mom."

"She isn't used to high heels, but she won't break her neck. Twist an ankle, maybe." Izzy sighed, and motioned for Madison to sit down. "You'd better try something easier." Izzy handed Madison a pair of white satin sandals that had straps and two inches of heel.

This was easier? Madison didn't know about that, but since she was already trying things on, she strapped on the two inches of satin sandal and got to her feet. She had to pull her baggy pants up a little so they could see the shoes. The sandals were the wrong size, so while Madison took them off, Izzy searched the shelves for the right number.

"I found it." Agatha came around the corner, and handed Madison a box of tissue paper. "They only have one pair left in your size. It's Providence."

That, or poor timing. Still, Madison strapped them on, took a step, and prepared to fight for balance.

To her surprise, she didn't have to, she could stay upright without having to grab the shelf. They looked dressy, not something she would wear at all, but they fit, and as she walked back and forth like Agatha told her to, she had to admit they were comfortable.

"They make you taller," Abby groaned. "And you were already supermodel tall."

"Then maybe I should wear sneakers."

"Oh, no, you don't." Izzy shook her head and gathered the scattered boxes. "Those shoes are just right for you. Abby, start looking for a pair in my size, would you?"

With a sigh, Madison unstrapped her new shoes, and placed them in the box for safekeeping. Shopping was scary. It meant leaving her comfort zone in a big way, spending money, making decisions about her appearance, and doing it under pressure. Even so, it was kind of fun. In a
white knuckled sort of way. She had Izzy, she knew God was there, so it wasn't like being in a car crash. Not that she'd ever been in one.

They found Izzy's shoes, then went to another store and plunged into the world of fonts and themes. Abby was planning to phone everyone herself to see if they could make the wedding, for it would shorten the time it would take to get a card back to see who was coming and who wasn't. These invitations were really keepsakes. Madison didn't know why they were there, only that Izzy felt they needed something to mark the day by, a special invitation to remind people when to come.

Though Madison was using blush pink for Izzy's dress, and the wedding roses, she didn't think Terry would like it dripping from the invitations; instead, she chose a respectable silver on white, with a monogram of the bride and groom at the top. Since the bride didn't have any parents to request the honor of anyone's presence, at Abby's suggestion, the Johannes family would do it for them. A separate card would go to those invited to the reception. Their selections made, Abby would arrange to have the invitations and cards printed as soon as she got the reception list from Terry.

"I'll handle this," Abby told them as they left the store. "Leave the guest lists and invitations to me. If you guys can handle everything else, it'll be a fair tradeoff."

Madison wasn't so sure about that, for it seemed to her that Abby had more than her fair share of the wedding to handle.

"Where to next?" Agatha asked, as they climbed into Izzy's car.

"I don't know, I'll have to ask the bride." Izzy looked in the rear view mirror at Madison. "Do you have any other shopping errands you want to get done? Now's a good time."

The car went quiet as Madison struggled to say something, anything that wouldn't sound like she had something to hide. She shrugged, hoped she was smiling, and shook her head.

"Are you sure?"

"We still have time before the big day, Mom."
"I know, but it's such a shame to waste this outing, especially since Agatha is here."

"Makeup." Madison swallowed hard, then wondered if she'd actually said that out loud. "I don't have any makeup." The other women looked at her, and for a moment, Madison wondered if someone was waving their hands behind her to make them look at her like that. "I'll need some for the wedding, won't I?"

"Yes," Izzy blinked, and seemed to come to her senses, "of course. For some reason, that was the last thing I expected to hear you say." She started the engine. "Is there anything else?"

There was, and Madison was fighting to get it out. Maybe she could ask Izzy to keep it from Terry. This was her chance to get help, and she needed it badly.

"Clothes."

"What kind of clothes?"

"Ones that fit."

Looking thoughtful, Izzy glanced in the mirror at Madison. "Are you sure you're up to this?"

Madison nodded. "I'm sure."

No one asked why she wanted this for the wedding, or what it even had to do with the wedding. They just took one look at what she was wearing, and headed to the store. A department store, not the MegaMart. She didn't know why she should be disappointed, only that she was. This place was new-- okay, she knew why-- it was unfamiliar, and it made her feel clunky. Like she was homemade in designer surroundings. This didn't have to be hard. All she wanted were clothes, and they had that, at the MegaMart.

"Where do you want to start?" Izzy asked, as they passed some mannequins that didn't have faces.
"Jeans, I guess." Madison looked about, and was grateful when no one asked her where to go. They headed off as though this was no big deal, with Abby even pulling out her phone to keep away the boredom.

Canny music scrubbed the air just enough to make things breezy and yet remind Madison that she wasn't at the MegaMart. They passed wooden shelves, racks of clothing, and Izzy stopped. She pointed to the near wall, an entrance with a sign that read, "Dressing Rooms," and Madison's heart sank. Of course, she would have to try on more clothes.

Since Madison didn't really know what her size was, or should be, she started with what looked about right, grabbed a size smaller, one larger, and went into the changing room. She was so happy-- this place had doors.

It took more time than Madison liked, but she at last found a size and brand of jeans that Izzy said fit her well. Madison had no idea what the right size would look like on her, but she did have an idea that what she'd been wearing had been too big. When she got in front of the mirror, she found these weren't tight, and she liked that she didn't feel sloppy. They really did fit her.

Next, Madison wanted a dress for the engagement party, some skirts, a few long sleeved shirts, and sweaters her size. Compared to everything else that day, she didn't have to struggle so hard to find the courage to try them on. For what she had in mind, she hoped they would do. She needed more, of course, but she said nothing about that, and let Izzy take her to find the dreaded makeup. This place had a store within a store, and a saleswoman who asked questions about what she did, and didn't do. Madison didn't understand what "exfoliate" meant, let alone if she did it or not. When Izzy answered for her, the woman left off with the exfoliation and did some sort of color test to find out which shades of makeup would look best on her.

Abby looked sympathetic and watched as foundation was added, then blush, eyeshadow, eyeliner, some awfully hard stuff to put on called mascara. Madison just could not stop blinking long enough for the woman to stroke it onto her lashes. It got on though, and with every new suggestion, a bottle or container was added to the counter. By the time the saleswoman had finished with Madison, Madison was ready to pay and get out of there before the woman told her she needed something else.
While Izzy paid for the makeup, Madison stepped away a moment to catch her breath. Feeling calmer, she went back to the mirror.

And smiled.

Did they sell perfume?

* * * *

The update from their client in Seattle made Terry's eyes bleed. He had to hand it to the guy who'd written the report-- he was obviously bucking for promotion, for he'd pulled out all the stops to show he knew what he was talking about. He did, but it didn't make it any easier to read. Terry flipped to the summary, grinned when he saw their performance numbers, then went back to endure the terminology meant to impress. This thing was killing him.

He reached for his mug, but found he'd already drained the last of the coffee.

"Do you want me to call Anderson?" John looked over his laptop at Terry, and made a face. "Is it as bad as that?"

"No, I just need to stretch." Terry pushed back from the desk with a groan. "You'd better be the one to make that call. I once made a joke about Anderson's toy poodle, and I don't think he ever forgave me."

"You didn't."

Terry shrugged. "How was I supposed to know it was a champion show dog?"

"What'd you call it?" John grinned.

"A Q-tip with legs."

"Oh, man." John shook his head and laughed. "That is no way to treat a client."
Grinning, Terry moved into the hall while John checked up on the account. Unlike Seattle, no detailed report was necessary. Anderson didn't represent a bank, just a small law firm in Los Angeles that had needed help protecting their network.

Terry stretched his legs, and went into the kitchen to fix a late lunch. He glanced at the rooster clock above the fridge. Make that a very late lunch. Aside from picking the triplets up from preschool, he and John had been working the afternoon away without taking a breather, so no wonder he was fighting to stay awake. He was starving. Terry pulled out bread, lettuce, sliced tomato, the bag of shredded cheese, only to go back for mustard and mayo. He had made three sandwiches, and was finishing up a fourth when John came looking for food.

"Almost ready," Terry said, as he slathered on the mayo. "How'd it go with Anderson?"

"Fine. There was no mention of any slight against his dog, so I guess you're in the clear." John accepted the plate from Terry, then waited while Terry put the food away. "I wonder how much longer the girls are going to be."

"I have no idea." Terry picked up his plate and headed into the living room as Debbie came down the hall with Linda, a munchkin the same age as the triplets who lived a few houses down the street. "Hey, you two, I hope you're staying out of trouble." Terry smiled as the girls nodded, and went to play with their dolls on the floor by the couch. "I'd like to call, but I don't want it to look as though I'm checking up on them."

"So you want me to?" John sat down at his desk, waited a moment to pray before he started in on a sandwich.

"If you ask, it'd be the same thing as if I had."

"No, it wouldn't. I'm not the one about to walk down the aisle. I can be as obvious as I want. I could even ask what's for dinner, and not have to wonder if the woman I love will still say 'yes' when we exchange vows."

"Daddy--" Ruthie came to John's desk and stared at her father-- "what's for lunch?"

"You've already had yours."
"But you're eating."

"If everyone wants a small snack," John sighed, "I'll get something as soon as I'm finished." John went back to his sandwich, paused, and looked up when Ruthie continued to watch. "Okay?"

Ruthie nodded, and left the office to go play with the others, and the men went back to their food, and their work, and the subject of checking up on the girls was dropped.

While Terry ate and tried to focus on the screen, he wondered how Maddie was doing. Was she all right, was picking out a wedding dress as hard for her as picking out clothes at the MegaMart? He could only imagine. Frowning, he tore off some sandwich, and focused on the update from Seattle.

He had prayed. If he was needed, Maddie had his number.

* * * *

The moment the front door sounded, Terry was out of his chair and pushing into the hall. He glanced at his watch. Nearly five. Linda's mom had come for her an hour ago, the day was getting late, and Terry had been fighting the urge to call Maddie. He rounded into the living room with John behind him, the triplets squirming their way past the men to get there first. Terry stopped when he saw the department store bags Izzy and Abby were placing on the floor.

"Where's Maddie?" Terry ignored the smiles on their faces, and was about to go outside and find his wife, when Agatha held the front door open, and Maddie came in with two more bags and a case. "There you are." Terry breathed in relief. "Are you all right? Did they walk your legs off?"

"What a thing to say." Agatha pinned Terry with a playfully serious look. "I suggest you choose your next words more carefully."

"Why? What happened?" He looked at Maddie.

Maddie bit her lip, then spoke in a quietly timid voice he almost didn't hear. "I bought makeup."
"Oh. Okay," he nodded, "you look nice. I like it."

"I washed it off."

Terry slid a look at Agatha. "You could've warned me."

"I was referring to all the work Madison has been putting into the wedding."

"All this is for the wedding?" Terry cast a look about the room as the triplets began peeking inside each and every one of the many bags.

"Did you get everything you needed?" John asked, as he stepped around the girls to give Izzy a kiss.

Maddie stood there and looked at Terry, and for some reason, he didn't move. She looked guilty, though for the life of him, Terry couldn't fathom why. She had every right to spend that money, though from the look of things, he guessed most of the wedding budget was still intact, for he'd given her a lot. Still, he couldn't understand how all this was tied to the wedding.

"Terry?"

He looked about, stepped around the munchkins and went to Maddie.

"I'm not done."

"What?" he asked, about ready to kiss her.

"I didn't get everything I needed." Maddie was serious. So serious, she was trembling.

"Hey, it's all right." He took her hand, and as she tucked into him, she carried the honeyed scent of something wonderful. He breathed it in, held his breath, and counted to ten slowly.

"Izzy said she promised to show you the receipts."

He nodded, almost not hearing her.
"Do you have to see them?"

"See what?"

"The receipts."

"I have to pay the bills." He inhaled the soft air, put his lips to Maddie’s neck and felt the warm throb of her pulse. "What are you wearing?"

"Terry, please. Couldn't you find a way?"

He just breathed. Never was torture so sweet. Something whispered in his brain, a plea, a warning that only a cold shower or a brisk walk would be able to fix. He'd been there before, as a teenager battling desire, so Terry backed away.

"Please, don't look in the bags."

"What?" He rubbed his face and tried to think.

"Terry--" she lowered one of his hands and he caught the intent look in her eyes, the quietly desperate hush of her whisper-- "please, don't look at those receipts."

"Why? What did you buy?"

"Terry, please. I'm begging you."

"Easy, Maddie." He tugged an arm around her shoulders before she hurt herself from sheer intensity. "If it's this important to you, I'll work something out with John so I can still take care of the bills without seeing exactly what you bought."

"I'm not done."

"Will the name of the store give away your secret? That will be on the bank statement."
"Maybe. It might also be true of what I'm about to do next."

"Then I guess John will have to keep an eye on things until the wedding. I doubt he'll mind--" Terry was cut off by a wild hug from Maddie, and knocked back a step. When he returned her hug, she retreated. He tried desperately not to breathe. It only made it worse.

"Thank you, Terry."

"What is that? Are you wearing perfume?"

Her eyes widening, Maddie backed away.

"Thank you for letting me help pick your wedding dress." Agatha moved past him and gave Maddie a big hug. "I had a very good time."

"Thank you for coming," Maddie smiled.

As Agatha left, Abby got ready to leave.

"Whatever else got done today, the important thing is, Aunt Madison has her wedding dress. It's a good one, Uncle Terry. I won't say more, but it's a good one. Do you have my reception list?"

"Your list? I thought I was the one getting married?"

"I'm responsible for everyone showing up. I'll also need contact information."

Terry nodded. "I'll have it to you by the end of the day."

"I'll be waiting." Abby turned and hugged Maddie. "I don't know all your plans, but if you need help, you know where to find me."

With a quick glance at Terry, Maddie bit her lip and nodded.
It made Terry think. If Madison hadn't told Abby, then Izzy and Agatha probably didn't know, either. As Terry watched Abby leave, he couldn't help but feel a little lost. It appeared she hadn't told anyone, and he wished Maddie had help with whatever it was she was doing.

"Madison, I can take care of the kitchen. Why don't you take the night off?" Izzy smiled as she took off her coat and started down the hall. "Don't forget, you and Terry have an appointment after dinner."

"Thanks," Terry called. He agreed with Izzy, he thought Maddie needed the rest.

With a sigh, Terry watched as his buddy followed after Izzy, no doubt to ask what he could not. Terry wished he knew what Maddie was up to. Her secrets were piling up, and it felt, whether it was true or not, that everyone had a better idea of what was going on than he did. He looked down at the triplets. Even the munchkins had looked inside those bags. He turned and saw Madison kneel on the floor beside a case. She tenderly zipped it open, revealing at least two tubes of lipstick, what looked to be glossy nail polish, and all kinds of makeup. Female stuff.

"Is that yours?" he asked.

She nodded.

"That's a big step for you."

"Do you think you'll like it, Terry?"

"I hope you're not doing that just for me." When she looked up at him, he shrugged. "I've always thought you were fine the way you were." As hurt touched her eyes, he gulped hard. "I mean, I guess some women could use the help, but you're naturally beautiful the way you are."

The smile she gave him, made him feel warm inside.

She rummaged in her bag, and came up with a small black compact. "It will tie my look together," she tried to explain.

He could only nod.
Madison put it back, and zipped the bag shut. "Izzy said these were the basics of what she has."

"Then I guess you're all set." Terry hoped that if Maddie didn't enjoy using that stuff, she wouldn't think there was any pressure on his part to wear it. "Do you want me to carry these shopping bags to our room? I promise not to peek."

"Would you mind if I did it myself?" She got to her feet. "I was thinking I'd take them to the office bathroom."

"I'm already staying out of there, so that's a good choice." Terry backed off. "This'll be safe in there." He took one last look around before the bags were stowed away in the Forbidden Room. Though he wasn't exactly dying of curiosity, it was getting to him. Was she going to tear apart her wedding dress, and make a new one with the contents of all these bags? Leave it to Maddie to hide yet more secrets in the office bathroom.

He left Maddie to her work, and retreated to his desk to pour over the reception list. It wouldn't be easy to concentrate-- not with Maddie going back and forth through the office with crinkling bags.

Reception, church, church, reception. As Terry ticked down the names, his eyes wandered to the woman limping to the bathroom. He looked back to the list. He would work to get this done before dinner, and afterward, they would go see Carol.

* * * *

One by one, Madison lined the bags against the wall. Her hip ached, but she kept going until everything had been safely placed in the bathroom. She wondered what Terry would say if he knew most of the day hadn't been spent on finding the perfect wedding dress. After seeing all these bags, he might believe her. Her heart bumped up a notch as she made sure the door was closed all the way. Then she picked up the bag. The bag that had cost her so dearly that day. Not in money, but in courage.

Hands trembling, she pulled out a soft blue nightshirt. The neck was ordinary, like any regular long sleeved shirt, and the front had two breast pockets that made her feel safe. But this wasn't
daywear. The nightshirt came to just above her knee, and that was where her safety ended. All afternoon. It had taken her that long to find this. It wasn't nearly what he deserved, but she needed something else besides her comfy two-piece pajamas. She pushed the nightshirt back in the bag, then looked at the matching robe.

The others hadn't understood-- not really. Izzy might've come the closest, but no one knew yet.

In a little while, that would change.

   * * * *

He watched as Izumi put away her purse and kept his thoughts to himself. To him, it had seemed like an ordinary shopping trip. So Madison had bought some clothes. Izumi had given him a run-down of what Madison had brought back, and nothing stood out of the ordinary. It sounded rather run-of-the-mill if you asked him, and Izumi had asked. That was the problem.

"Honey, I don't see the big deal." John moved to the bathroom and watched Izumi.

"She asked me to not show the receipts to Terry."

"Did she spend that much?"

"Not compared to what Terry gave her." Izumi dried her hands on the bathroom towel. "She showed me the budget Terry gave her for the wedding, and I have to tell you, I was surprised. It was like he was inviting her to buy out the store."

"It was probably encouragement to get new clothes."

"With--" Izumi lowered her voice, whispered a sum in John's ear, and John let out a whistle.

"Okay, he was trying to show his love."

"I promised to give him the receipts, John. I gave Terry my word."

"Then give them to me," John shrugged. "I'll have a talk with him, without spilling any beans."
"Would you?" Izumi went into the bedroom, took a small stack of receipts from her purse, and handed them to John. "I don't know what to do with these."

"I'll sort it out. Terry's working to get her ID, and when that happens, he can put her on his credit cards, and then they can have the sort of conversations we do." Smiling, John tugged his wife into a hug. "You aren't failing Terry, or Madison. He and I will sort this out, and you won't break any promises to either one."

"She's planning something, John. She was too shy to tell me what, but she took forever picking out that nightshirt. And it was satin."

"Well, if she is," John kissed Izumi, "that's between Madison and Terry."

Izumi nodded in agreement, smiling as she tugged out the hair clip that kept her mane from off her shoulders. "I need to start dinner before someone comes looking for me."

With a groan, John let go of her and watched as she moved to the bedroom door. All these years, and she could still break his heart. He grinned when she saw he was watching. She laughed, and went to fix dinner, leaving him with the receipts. He looked them over and started for the office. On one or two, Izumi had written, "Wedding gift from John and Izumi," making John grin and shake his head. Izumi, it seemed, was intent on sharing the expenses with Terry.

Not that John could blame her. His buddy had waited a long time to get married, and John only wished he could do more.

As John moved down the hall, adding up the notes from Izumi, he nearly bumped into someone coming from the office. He smiled at Madison, and was about to go around her, when she touched his sleeve.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Could I talk to you?"
"Sure." John looked about, moved Madison into the living room and nodded to the receipts when she noticed them. "I've been asked to talk to Terry. Don't worry, we'll work it out so he won't know what you guys bought."

"Thanks, John. Thanks so much."

He smiled, and held back from asking what the big deal was, or why her voice was all low and hushed.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I need help."

"Help with what?"

She pulled his sleeve, as though she wanted him to bend down a little, and when he did, she put a hand to his ear and started to whisper. No one would have been able to hear her, not unless they had been invisible and could have held their breath without making a sound. John was holding his, and he still had trouble hearing her.

"Let me get this right." He was stunned that she was coming to him, and not Izumi. "This will be the real deal?"

She nodded.

"And you want me to help set it up?"

She nodded again.

John raised his eyebrows, looked at the hallway, then at Madison. "He doesn't know?"

Madison shook her head.
"Why me?" John lowered his voice when she glanced urgently at the hall. "Why are you asking ME? Why not Izumi, or Abby? Or Agatha? Agatha would be perfect for this. Why don't I call her right now--"

"John, please. It's for Terry. You're his brother. You know him better than anyone."

"Yeah. Yeah, I probably do." John felt the receipts in his hand. "How much is your budget again?" He waited as Madison took a slip of paper from her pocket. When he saw Terry's handwriting, he groaned. Wow. His buddy was in love, all right. Not that he'd needed this as proof. "It's a big responsibility. I don't know. Are you sure you want me to do this? Ask Izumi-- I'm not at all romantic. I'll just ruin it for the both of you."

"Please."

Closing his eyes, John pushed out a sigh. "I'll do it on one condition."

"Name it."

"All decisions go through you." He looked at her, making absolutely sure this was clear. "This is your--" he mouthed the word "honeymoon," and she nodded that she understood. "Then okay." John swallowed hard. "I'll plan it. This is probably a big mistake, but I'll do it."

"It needs to be somewhere he'd like." Madison spoke so low, John fought to hear her. "You know where he's been, and where he hasn't." She glanced at the hallway. "All I've got are some clothes, and makeup. I don't even have boots!"

Her sober-serious look made him smile. "If this is what you really want, I'll look into--" He shut down, folded his arms as Terry strode through the living room on his way to the kitchen with a sheet of paper. He nodded to Terry as Terry paused, and looked at them.

"What's up?"

John shrugged. "Just talking."

"Is Izzy in there?"
John nodded, and Terry went through to the kitchen.

Hushing his voice, John kept his eyes on the kitchen doorway. "I'll look into this, then get back to you with some suggestions." He turned to Madison, saw her grateful nod, then hurried to his recliner before Terry came back and really asked what was going on. What in the world? How had he gotten himself into this? On the other hand... John kicked out the footrest to do some serious thinking.

If Terry could've wish for anything, this probably would've come close. All in all, he thought she'd pegged Terry pretty well. Though it wouldn't be easy to keep it from him, her plan had merit.

With a sigh, John settled back to think.

* * * *

With some help from Izzy, Terry had managed to come up with a reception list in a relatively short amount of time. He hadn't wanted to get in the way of dinner, and had tried to keep his questions at a minimum. Should we invite this person? Leave off so-and-so? He'd taken the list back to the office, and emailed Abby the contact information she'd asked for, along with the names of the fortunate, or not-so-fortunate, depending on how you looked at it, of those who would be invited to the house after the ceremony.

Then Terry hurried to get dressed for their six o'clock appointment with Carol.

"Maddie," he called to the office bathroom, "are you paying attention to the time?"

"Yes."

He wondered what she was doing in there. Wrapping more surprises? Surely, the things she'd bought that day were for herself. He sure hoped they were.

That reminded him-- Terry moved to the living room, and found John in his recliner, staring hard at the ceiling. "Am I interrupting?" Terry asked.
Smiling, John closed his footrest.

"I need to ask a favor."

"This is the day for it."

"Izzy has the receipts for today's shopping--"

"I'll handle your finances until the wedding," John nodded.

Terry frowned. "How did you know what I wanted?"

"How's the reception list coming?"

"Abby has it."

"Good. Good," John sounded far off, as though he wasn't in the room. "I'm impressed. She means business."

"Who? You mean Abby?" Terry blinked at John, as John climbed from the chair. "You aren't making much sense. But then, you look about as tired as I feel."

John gave him a woeful look. "I hope not, because you look terrible."

The men grinned.

A moment later, Izzy's call to dinner set the house in motion, and Terry went to make sure the munchkins were washing their hands.

* * * *

The evening passed without much happening, despite Terry forgetting that Carol would split their sessions. It meant he'd had to wait in the empty reception area, whittling his time away with the new Hoppin' Froogies app on his smartphone, but he hadn't minded. Maddie was
getting the help she needed, and that was all he cared about. When he could join them in the office, he didn't waste time with small talk.

He wanted to know what he could do to help Maddie when she felt the need to hurt herself.

"All those verses on the wall means she's putting up a fight, and I want to make sure I'm doing my part to help," he explained. "What can I do to help her?"

Carol nodded, and the rest of the session was spent in discussion on that very matter. When it was over, Terry came away encouraged that he was supporting Maddie. Though it was her fight, it was his as well, because they were doing this together, even though at times he felt he was walking in the dark.

That night, Terry's thoughts kept him awake long after the house had gone to bed. He watched Maddie from his couch, the way she clung to her blankets in her dreams, the small murmurs that made him wonder if he should wake her before they turned ugly. Their love meant he had to not only give her to the Lord once, but daily. He wasn't God, he couldn't watch over her twenty-four seven. He couldn't keep her heart from remembering past wounds, he couldn't heal them, he couldn't will her happy. He was just a man, and not a very good one at that. Anything good that could come from this relationship had to come from God, for there was none good but Him. All good gifts came from Him, and love was most definitely at the top. Whether it came in the form of nail prints that wiped away a lifetime of sin, or the tender heart of Maddie, all good gifts came from the same place.

This was just another day, and once more, Terry had to give her to the Lord. He could pray with Carol and Maddie, talk with them, try as hard as he humanly knew how to do everything he could, but it wasn't until he talked with God, that Terry found he could close his eyes and find sleep.

* * * *

Early Friday morning, Madison waited on the living room couch with her notebook. She was the first to get up, even before Izzy. The house sat quiet, waiting for the day to start. Madison went over some verses in her notebook, trying to memorize them word for word, until the door at the end of the hall opened and John came padding in with his laptop.
Like her, he was dressed for the day, though he looked like he could've used a little more sleep. She smiled at him, moved her feet off the couch so he could sit next to her.

"When I texted you, I said to meet me here before breakfast, not to stay up all night." He gave her a good-humored smile as he opened his laptop. "Were you able to get up without waking Terry?"

She nodded as John moved the cursor on the screen, tapped the trackpad, and brought up a website. Personal computers were new to her, but after having played with Terry's iPhone, they made a little more sense to her than before. The idea of a web browser didn't seem as foreign, though she was still thrown by the words that went with it-- URL, link, website. App, though, she had down pat. She watched as John tapped, brought up a browser, tracked the cursor to some text and tapped again.

"I looked into what we talked about last night, and this is what I came up with." John turned the laptop a little, glanced at the hall, then smiled at Madison. "You'll be too late for trout season, but there's always hookless casting, and Terry loves to practice almost as much as Abby does-- especially when it's in a place he's never been before." John grinned broadly. "Terry would love this." Photos of solitary people standing in the water in tall boots and heavy pants scrolled past Madison. "These were taken in the Catskills, near Roscoe-- which, by the way, is called 'Trout Town, USA.' And for good reason." John went on to explain how two rivers came together to make for some good fishing, but Madison didn't understand very much.

"Terry's never been there before?"

"No-- well, yes, but not for very long. We didn't have our gear with us, and it drove us bananas." John confided in an even lower whisper, "The trout were begging for it." He gave a pained look, and went on. "We've been meaning to take a trip down there for years, but haven't had the time to do the place justice. Though I'm not into fly fishing, I can appreciate its history, and the mother of all fly fishing museums is there, too." John tapped the screen. "If Terry had a dream vacation, that would be it."

Madison looked at all the trees, the rocks and water, the hands holding slacked jawed fish. It was about what she'd expected when she'd told John she wanted to go fishing with Terry.
"While this place is a good idea--" John leaned back and looked philosophical, his gray eyes flicking to the hall-- "I can see a few problems ahead. Mainly, you. By your smile, I take it when you said you wanted to go fishing, you meant you'd watch. But that still leaves us with Terry. Once he finds out what you're up to, you're about as likely to get him out there, as a cat is to volunteer for a bath."

"Why not?"

"He knows you won't have a good time." John closed his laptop. "Listen, Terry loves to fly fish-- I can't think of any other pastime he loves more, but as sure as I'm sitting here, Terry would no sooner haul you out there on your honeymoon, than I would Izumi." John folded his arms and smiled at Madison. "My wife isn't the bait and tackle type, and if you don't mind my saying so, neither are you."

Madison didn't mind. Being compared to Izzy was a compliment.

John shook his head. "Do you have any other ideas?"

"That was it."

"Well, you can't stay in Three Mile Bay." John looked about the living room. "I mean, you're welcome to, of course, but sharing your honeymoon with another couple and three little kids isn't exactly what I'd call romantic." He shot Madison a wry smile. "Not that I'm a very good judge."

"You're not giving up, are you?"

"Look, I don't know how long I'm going to be able to keep this from Izumi. Besides the fact she and I don't like to keep things from one another, she'll catch onto the fact I'm up to something pretty quick. As for Terry-- just how much of this do you want me to keep from him? Is absolutely everything a secret, or just part of it?"

"You can tell Izzy."
"All of it?"

Madison nodded. "Please ask her not to tell anyone else?"

"You got it. As for Terry?"

A door opened in the hall and Madison quickly whispered in John's ear. He nodded, smiled, and opened his laptop as Terry shuffled his way into the living room in his pajamas.

"Are you guys up already?" Terry's hair was flat on one side, and his eyes were out of whack. He moved to the recliner, slumped into the seat and yawned. "I had to use the bathroom, and when I saw the other couch was empty, I thought I'd see what was so important that you had to get up at five in the morning for."

"Actually, I think she got up earlier than that." John worked his laptop as Madison tried not to watch. John smiled, looked up at Terry a moment as he typed something. "Madison has asked me to help plan your honeymoon."

"You're kidding." Terry frowned. "You are, aren't you?"

"No--" John slanted him a look-- "I'm not."

Terry gave Madison a kind, considerate look, and kept quiet.

John grinned. "I'll remember that vote of confidence when I'm spending your money."

With a chuckle, Terry pushed up from the recliner. "I take it you've been sworn to secrecy?" He nodded when John smiled. "Fair enough. As long as I'm here, is there any coffee?"

"I'll get it." Madison went to the kitchen, got out Terry's smiley mug as Terry came to the doorway, and watched. "Thanks, Terry."

"For what?" Terry inhaled as though a burden had been lifted off of him. "You could've saved yourself some grief yesterday, and told me what all those bags were about. You were just shopping for the honeymoon." He stretched with a smile. "Whatever you and John are planning,
try to enjoy it, Maddie." He took his mug, and gave her a kiss in return. "It's okay to relax. We already agreed what to expect from each other. As long as I have my honey with me, and there's a moon, that's all that's required."

She smiled, and hugged Terry's shoulder as he sipped his coffee.

"Thanks for this, Maddie. It's just what I needed." A deep sigh rumbled through him as the scent of French roast filled the air around Madison.

In that quiet, still moment, she closed her eyes and enjoyed the simple pleasure of just being with Terry.

* * * *

The next few days were special for Madison. When Pastor Bill came to talk with them about the wedding, Madison shared with him her long wished-for desire of being baptized. Now that she was free from the Dragon, and had more courage, things that hadn't been possible before, were opening before her like an unfolding flower. Madison went down the very next Sunday, and was baptized in front of the entire congregation, with Terry quietly cheering her on from their pew. Pastor Bill made her feel so safe when he dunked her beneath the water, that by the time it was over, and she was back in dry clothes and at Terry's side, Bill had won a lifelong friend.

Then the week kicked into high gear, and wedding talk was everywhere in the house. With the exception of Tyler, who according to his mother was expected to move back to Three Mile Bay, but had yet to show up, Abby had confirmed everyone on her guest list. Things were picking up.

To Madison's surprise, Abby's boss, Dennis Beckman, would be flying out from San Diego for the wedding. Madison figured this Mr. Beckman must have been a very good friend for him to do such a thing, and that thought was confirmed when Jake moved his easel and studio in the little yellow house to make more room; it turned out Jake had offered their couch to Dennis for the weekend, and Dennis had accepted. Madison had guests coming, too-- Tim and his family would be driving in from Syracuse, and that meant getting Terry's apartment ready. The storage room was cleared out, its contents taken to a self-storage facility that Terry and John shared. Madison helped all she could with the lighter boxes, and when Terry and John put in the beds for the girls, Madison stayed away, and cleaned the kitchen downstairs.
All through the work, Madison kept praying about the honeymoon.

The next morning, John ushered her into the office and closed the door. He pulled a second chair over to his desk.

"Do you have any other ideas yet-- anything else you'd rather do?" John asked, as they sat down.

Madison shook her head. "I just want Terry to be happy."

"I was afraid you'd say that." John turned his laptop to her and pointed at the screen. "I figure the best way to make Terry happy, is to convince him that this honeymoon wasn't planned for him only. No pup tent, not even a quaint country inn with a clawfoot tub and potbelly stove. Terry will want more, if he's going to leave you to fly fish. That means we'll have to go all out on the accommodations."

"We don't have to do that." Madison frowned. "What's a potbelly stove?"

"They're pretty handy to have around in the winter, but back to this." John pointed to the screen. "This place is called The Pembroke. I've never seen it in person, but according to the reviews, it's supposed to have some of the best accommodations around. It's rustic, but sophisticated, extensive hiking trails, but with a spa to work the knots out of your muscles at the end of the day. You get the drift." John scrolled through the classy graphics. "Since the bedroom will be a problem for you, I'd recommend the two story, Monarch Suite. You'll need the space to sleep downstairs." When she looked at John, John pointed to the pictures. "Despite the grand name, it's not a huge suite. From the photo, I think there's enough room on the floor to make a bed. What do you think?"

The taste of blood in Madison's mouth made her sit straight. "What about Terry?"

"If you stay at The Pembroke, it'd be a close enough drive to Roscoe, Terry could get in some fly casting, and even take in that museum." John put an elbow on his desk, tapped a link and loaded another page. "There's information here about the local fly fishing areas near the resort-- and they're impressive-- but personally, I'd go with Roscoe."
"Then we should do it."

"Okay, then I'll see what we can get."

The uncertainty in John's statement had Madison tasting blood again. He meant it was short notice for a popular place and they might not get anything. John picked up his phone and Madison went to the kitchen to clean the stove. As she scrubbed and polished, she kept her thoughts from what was going on in the office.

Someone came to the doorway and she looked up. It was Terry. She went back to work.

"Don't hurt yourself, Maddie. That stove can't fight back, you know." Terry said it with a smile in his voice, but she didn't look up. "What's wrong? Is all this wedding stuff finally getting to you?"

"What do you mean, finally?"

"I mean, you've been under a lot of pressure. It's understandable if you need a break."

"I'm fine." She kept scrubbing, and a little while later, paused as John looked over Terry's shoulder into the kitchen.

John shook his head.

She nodded that she understood, and Terry looked around to see who she was looking at.

"What's going on?" Terry asked.

"Nothing," John sighed. He left, and Madison went back to her scrubbing.

It was disappointing, but there were other resorts, other inns. This would not stop their honeymoon.

"Do you want me to clean that for you?" Terry offered, stepping close to her. He gently put his hand over hers, and she realized she was shaking.
She leaned into Terry, and he held her. He didn't make her feel small, tell her she was doing it all wrong, or laugh at her for not being able to handle everything at the same time. He simply held her until her hands no longer shook, and she felt calmer, then he let her go and she finished the stove on her own while he made tea. She smiled at Terry. Even though these had been small things, she and Terry had worked together well.

Going into the living room, Madison snuggled on the couch with her chamomile tea while Terry went to the office. He came back a moment later, and joined her.

"John is on the phone and he waved me out." Terry crossed his ankles. He wanted to ask about the honeymoon, what John was doing-- Madison could feel it. Instead, he drank his tea and waited for the door to open.

She was doing the same thing.

On the floor by Madison's feet, Lizzie sat with a picture book and a stuffed frog. When John came out, even Lizzie looked up at him expectantly.

"Madison? Could you come into the office?" John waited as Madison got up from the couch. His face was unreadable as he showed her inside. "I need to talk to you," he whispered.

She took a seat beside John's desk, and kept her mug from spilling by drinking a little more off the top. When sweetened with stevia, chamomile was one of those things that tasted as wonderful as it smelled, and her toes curled with contentment. She was relaxed and happy, no matter what John had to tell her.

"I've been looking at other places-- but you've probably guessed that." John straightened his roly chair and sat down. "The Pembroke is one of the best, so I gave them another shot. Instead of talking with a booking agent, I tried the direct approach and called Pembroke's front desk. While I was on the phone, I was told someone might have just cancelled, and to give her a moment while she checked." John grinned. "Guess who'll be staying there, after all?"

"Me and Terry?"
"No, some couple from Michigan. Yes, you and Terry. I snapped it up the instant she said it was available."

Madison fought to not bite herself.

"This suite isn't the Monarch, it's--" John looked at his notepad-- "the Empire, and it has a loft instead of a full second story. But, hey, it's still not bad for roughing it in the Catskills, right?"

Madison nodded. "How long?"

"Five days, and five nights." John paused as that sank in. "Are you good with that? I didn't have time to run it by you, but you'd said you wanted a few days together."

She took a breath, and nodded, "yes."

"Now we can move on to more important things," John grinned. "I think I can do it on my own, but we're running short on time, and we could use some advice if you want Terry to love this. I mean, really, love this. Is it okay if I bring in an expert? if I swear her to secrecy?"

"Bring her in."

"Do you think you can spare today?" John glanced at the time. "We have a lot of work to do, and we need to get started."

"I have to check with Izzy first, but I think I can take today off."

"Then you'd better get your coat, because whether or not our expert can get away, we're going to spend more of Terry's hard-earned cash."

It took a moment for Madison to find Izzy and ask if they were having their dress alterations that day, or tomorrow. They had so much going on, it was hard to keep it all straight. When Izzy wasn't sure, Madison had to get out her notebook and look up their schedule. By the time the women had gotten everything worked out, John was waiting in the living room, talking with Terry.
"AJ and I will take good care of her," John was saying, as Madison came from the hall. "There you are. Are you squared away with Izumi?"

Nodding "yes," Madison pulled on her coat, and Terry came over and helped her. "What about Ricky?" she asked, for she'd known all along who their expert was, though it surprised her that Jake was coming.

"They're bringing him over," John said, as he checked his phone. "We should be able to get everything we need without going too far. If I think we're going to run late, Terry, I'll let you know."

"Thanks, I appreciate it." Terry zipped up Madison's coat. "Did you take your painkiller?"

She smiled, and gave Terry a hug as the front door opened and the Murphy's spilled inside. Abby's smile was larger than any picture Madison had seen of the Grand Canyon, though Jake looked more subdued. The triplets came down the hall with Izzy, and Ricky went to greet them with the toys he'd brought. The fact they were trucks and boats didn't seem to phase them, and they quickly pulled him into their play.

"Thanks for watching Ricky," Abby smiled. "Is everyone ready?"

Though Terry gave them curious looks, he kissed Madison, and let her go without asking the question she knew he was thinking. She loved him for it.

* * * *

Though Terry had some suspicions, he tried not to dwell on them. Just because Abby had looked like she was about to go Christmas shopping, didn't mean a thing. Terry knew better. Maddie didn't have a fishing license, and while she could enjoy fish, she'd never really touched one while it was still moving. No, he had to take a big picture view of things. He had to consider why Madison had enlisted John, and that didn't necessarily have to do with anything that Abby might consider Christmas. Izzy and the others had their hands full with the other aspects of the wedding, so John could have been a logical choice for hotel reservations and travel plans. It didn't matter that Terry thought his buddy was sometimes about as romantic as a roadkill skunk,
if John put his mind to it, he could put together a honeymoon that Maddie might enjoy. Terry had faith in him. Really.

And even if things were less than desirable on their honeymoon, at least Maddie had asked for help, and it had been given. For that, Terry was truly grateful.

The more Terry thought about it, the more sure he was that John wouldn't be planning anything too fun. Though Terry thought fondly of the tent and sleeping bags in the garage, he was bracing himself for room service.

* * * *

When Madison came home with John, it was a little before dinner. Terry greeted them at the door, then looked about and asked where Abby and Jake were.

"They went home. Where this little guy is going," John said, nodding to Ricky. "Get your things, your daddy said he'll have dinner ready in about ten minutes. Hot dogs," John added, when Ricky looked at him expectantly.

That put some urgency into Ricky, and the boy was soon out the door with his grandpa.

"How'd it go?" Terry asked, as Madison eased herself onto the couch. He took her coat, and she could tell he was trying hard to not ask too much. "You look worn out."

"We did so much walking, my feet hurt," she admitted.

"How's your hip?"

"It's okay. I took more painkiller in the store." Madison curled onto her side, just glad to be home again.

"Is this the last outing before the wedding?"

"I think this is the last big one. It's okay, Terry, I wanted this."
He stood over her a moment, then started for the hall with her coat and purse. When he came back, he covered her with a small blanket, and she smiled at him, and closed her eyes. They'd taken everything they'd bought to AJ's house, and now Madison could rest. All those aisles... it had been such a huge store. Madison pulled the blanket tight, and drifted off as Izzy came in and called everyone to dinner.

Madison couldn't hear her, for she was already fast asleep.

* * * *

At last, Friday dawned bright and early. The munchkins didn't have preschool today-- a mixed blessing for a house already charged with excitement. Abby and Jake were picking Dennis up at the airport this morning, and Ricky was here, doing his best to keep up with his aunts. They ran in the hall, playing games at the top of their voices and feeding off the excitement, and Terry and the others didn't have the time or the energy to shush them.

The wedding was tomorrow, and for some reason, Terry was feeling nervous. It was silly, for he'd already pledged himself to Maddie before God and man, but something in the air felt different. He'd seen it in Maddie's face over the breakfast table, and even now, as he made his way to the bathroom to brush his teeth, he had the feeling that tomorrow was going to change his life. Which didn't make sense, for he was already married. Terry wet his toothbrush, squeezed out some paste, then started in on his pearly whites when his eyes fell on the row of verses Maddie had taped beside the bathroom mirror.

She'd added a new one this morning, one that stopped Terry's heart as he read her uneven handwriting:

"A bundle of myrrh is my wellbeloved unto me; he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts." Song of Solomon 1:13

He choked on the toothpaste, spit it out, and stared into the sink. It was just a verse, a promise she had put up. To help her. As the room began to spin, Terry grabbed the hand towel and wiped the paste from his mouth. He moved to the bedroom, sat on a couch and put his head between his knees. From the corner of his vision, he saw John pass by the open bedroom door, then come back.
"Hey, you feeling all right?"

Terry lifted a hand to signal he was okay. He knew he wasn't inspiring much confidence with his head between his knees, but it wasn't entirely his doing. He didn't understand what that verse had to do with Maddie, but she had to be more careful where she put her notes. Didn't she know he had to use that bathroom, too? He refused, absolutely refused to think about what Maddie had written. It worked against everything Terry had purposed within himself.

Blowing out a breath, Terry got to his feet, squared his shoulders, and went in there to brush his teeth.

He shaved, moved into the bedroom for his clothes and found Maddie making their couches.

"Did Tim say he'd call before he left Syracuse?" Terry pulled socks from the dresser, put on his wedding band and noticed Maddie wasn't answering. "Honey? Is Tim going to call?"

Maddie nodded without looking up.

"The apartment is ready for them, right down to clean sheets on the beds. Did you and Izzy ever get around to putting any food in the fridge?"

Another quiet nod from Maddie.

"I was thinking we'd go to my place and be there to meet them when they got in. What do you think?" As Terry moved around the couch to the bathroom with his clothes, Maddie looked up at him. "Try to relax, okay? You're going to have a good time at the party. Just wait and see if you don't."

She sent him a pretty look that made his heart summersault and fall all over itself.

He went into the bathroom and shut the door. His heart raced. Forcing his mind away from the verse taped beside the mirror, Terry changed out of his pajamas. This party would be good for them. They needed to get out of the house, away from this bathroom. They needed a change of scenery, and they needed it bad.
Avoiding the mirror, he fled to the office until it was time to leave.

* * * *

He'd seen it. She was sure he had. The look on his face had told her he had. But it hadn't gone according to plan. He hadn't acted the way she thought he would. He was supposed to ask her about it, and she was supposed to give her little speech. Instead, he'd asked about Tim, talked about the party.

But nothing about Song of Solomon 1:13. And she'd picked out that verse so carefully.

Madison sank onto her couch. She'd been praying she wouldn't have to find the courage to do this another way. She was running out of time though. They were getting married tomorrow. They were already married, but that wasn't the point. Their reservations began tomorrow, and her insides shivered whenever she thought about it. She didn't know how she'd managed to make it this far, let alone found the courage to tape that verse next to the bathroom mirror. And he hadn't said a word. Not a single word.

A tear slid down her cheek and she brushed it away before someone noticed. Terry had left the bedroom door open and the kids were running around as though someone had fed them a bagful of jelly beans.

She needed to check on everything in the office bathroom one more time, just to make sure she hadn't messed up. As she passed through the office, she saw Terry trying not to watch her. He turned his chair away from the bathroom as she ducked inside. And there it was, in all it's glory. Her wedding dress. They'd had a small wedding rehearsal at the church that week-- nothing big, but enough for all the moving pieces of the ceremony to know what they were supposed to do. Madison's suitcase was mostly packed. Terry's was, too, he just didn't know it. She had to keep breathing.

She went over what she would wear for the party one more time, wondered if she would change her mind at the last minute and just wear a shirt and jeans, then left to go help Izzy get the house ready for tomorrow.
The last thing she wanted to do was sit still. Keep moving, keep praying her promises, and don't sit still.

* * * *

A few hours after lunch, Terry got a call from Tim that they were leaving Syracuse. Tim's boss had given him permission to get off from work early that day, and everyone had been loaded into the family minivan for the drive to Three Mile Bay. From the noisy sounds in the background, Tim's family was excited to come, right down to Baby Connie, and Terry was more than happy to have them.

"You have the directions to my place, so we'll meet you there."

"We'll see you." Tim's smile sounded in his voice, and when they hung up, Terry went to get Maddie.

"They're on their way," Terry called to the bathroom at a fast walk. He rounded the couch, stuck his head in the bathroom and saw Izzy working on Maddie's face. "What are you doing to her?"

"Izzy's helping me to put on my makeup." Maddie waved him back without moving her face. "I'm not ready for you to see me yet-- go away."

"You're coming with me to meet Tim though, aren't you?" Terry waited as Izzy applied eyeshadow. "Maddie?"

"I'll be there, just not right now. It's a long drive from Syracuse, so we have plenty of time."

Maddie sounded so insistent, so in control, it flustered Terry.

He sighed, left the bathroom, went to the office and plopped down at his desk while John read from his laptop. Terry figured he might as well get ready for the party, too. If they went to meet the O'Briens, and he and Maddie stayed there long enough, they would have to head straight over to Dick's place. He'd better get ready now.

Moving past the munchkins in the hall, Terry went to change into a good pair of slacks and a long sleeved shirt.
"Hold still." Izzy’s mint scented breath fanned Madison as the lip liner went on, making it hard for Madison not to smile. A little lipstick, a light blush dusted over her cheeks, then the makeup was over and Izzy began Madison's hair. "Up or down?"

"Down." Madison held still and watched in the mirror as her hair was styled into lightly tousled waves. It was more attention than her hair had ever had, and when it was over, Izzy waited for a verdict.

"Well, what do you think?"

"I like it. I look like me, only better."

"This is just a light frosting," Izzy smiled as she put Madison's makeup away. "When you have your hair done tomorrow, I'm pretty sure Maxine will have a few more tips on how to do this better. We don't have a makeup artist in Three Mile Bay, but after Maxine and I are done with you, you won't need one." Izzy's smile was confident. "We'd better hurry. Something tells me Terry is waiting."

"Izzy? Do I... do you think I look normal?"

"I'd be lying if I said you did. I think you're exceptional. That's what I think, and exceptional doesn't happen all the time. Come on, let's see how the dress looks on you."

The dark gold and light blue leaf patterned dress came to Madison's knees, the crisp, cool colors reminding her of the time between late fall and early winter. It belted around her waist in black leather, and had a sleeveless, high V-neck that complimented her figure. As Madison stood before the mirror in her makeup and new party dress, she felt strange. Like she was truly showing her butterfly wings for the very first time. Not just a picture on a T-shirt, but the real thing.
Madison put on a matching button up sweater that she kept open, put on the low heel dress pumps she'd bought to go with the outfit, picked up her new clutch handbag, then asked Izzy to look her over.

"You're ready," Izzy nodded. Only two words, and yet they gave Madison so much courage.

She hugged Izzy, then smiling, went to find Terry.

"Aunt Madison, is that you?" Ruthie sat up in the hallway as Madison picked her way through the toys and munchkins. "How did you do that?"

"Your mom helped me." Madison started for the office door, paused, took a deep breath, and stepped inside.

* * * *

It was getting late. No matter how many times Terry checked his watch, it kept getting later. He'd wanted to be there well before Tim arrived, so they needed to leave. It was hard to wait with so much going on around him, and Terry struggled to do anything but stare at the time. He skimmed a news website, and looked over at John when John cleared his throat.

"What?"

John nodded to the door.

Terry looked over, and his heart squeezed in his chest. "Maddie?"

"Do you like it?" she asked, and stepped closer. "It's new."

He nodded dumbly. It sure was.

"Well?" She looked down at her dress, the stylish purse in her hand. "I can take it back if you don't like it."
"It's... it's fine." Terry reminded himself to breathe. The room was swimming around him, but the dress, the hair, the makeup, was fine. She was confusing the daylights out of him, but the dress was fine. Not wanting to make an idiot of himself in front of John, Terry pushed out of the chair, carefully moved around Madison, and went to their room to get their coats. "You ready to leave?" he called back to the office. When she didn't answer, he went back and looked inside. "Maddie?"

She was still facing his desk, and when she turned, he saw wet pooling in her eyes.

"Oh, Maddie--" he went to her and pulled her into a hug. "Don't cry, please, don't cry. You'll ruin your mascara."

"You don't like it, anyway."

"I like it fine." He squeezed her, and tried hard to not think about how much he needed to feel her beside him. "I like you. I like everything about you. The dress is wonderful, and you look wonderful in it." He closed his eyes and steadied himself, willing himself to place her needs before his. "I love you."

"I love you, too." She sniffed, and he took out a clean handkerchief. "We need to talk, Terry."

He nodded. "Outside. We can talk in the jeep." Terry helped her into her coat, and he nodded to John. As they moved into the hall, he saw Izzy. He tried to say something, but Izzy coaxed them out, and Terry was grateful for the silence.

A strong afternoon sun burned with not a cloud in the sky as Terry walked hand in hand with Maddie out to the garage. He didn't dare let her go until he had to, and even then it was only to open the garage door. He unlocked the jeep, helped her inside, and noticed her shoes for the first time. No sneakers. She was wearing sheer pantyhose, stylish low heels, and it all put a lump in his throat.

Leaving the garage door open, he pulled away from the house and got onto the main road with no intention whatever of going to his apartment. He'd noticed Abby's truck pulling up as he left, but hadn't stopped to say "hi" to Dennis. Terry simply pointed his truck away from the house, and drove, and neither one said a word for a full ten minutes.
"Terry?"

"I'm listening."

"Did you bring your iPhone?"

He tugged it out of his pocket, and handed it to Maddie. "I'm trying, Maddie. I really am."

"Could you pull over somewhere safe?"

"What? Now?" He looked at her, and she nodded. "Why not?" he shrugged. He pulled onto a dirt road, and parked beside some trees so they couldn't be gawked at by everyone in Three Mile Bay who happened by. He turned off the engine, sat there, and stared out the window as Maddie held onto his phone. Lake Ontario glistened before them like a shimmering blanket.

"Terry, I need you to read something."

"What?" He rubbed his forehead, stopped as she handed him back his phone. "What's this?" he asked. At the top of the screen, he saw, "Madison, Highly Personal." He looked at her. "Are you sure you want me to read this?"

She was white as a sheet, and trembling like she was drying in the wind, but she nodded, "yes." She hugged herself. "It's a list-- a list of things I can't ever let happen to me again." She started to cry, and when Terry squeezed her shoulder to comfort her, she shook her head. "Don't-- please. Just read it, and put a mark beside the ones you agree to."

He had a sinking feeling about this. What was this? A list of things they could and couldn't do? He was almost afraid to look. He knew it had to have taken Maddie a lot to write this, and even more to put it into his hands. He also knew he had told her before they married that intimacy would go at her speed, not his. He had meant every word. Whatever it cost him, he would do all he could to make this relationship work.

"Do you mind if I take a walk?" He looked at her, and saw she didn't mind. "I won't go far." Terry popped open the driver's side door, and got out. The air breathed strength into him.
He prayed, then started walking.

The first item on the list brought tears to his eyes. Reading this wasn't going to be for the faint of heart. *No foreign objects.* The phone was trembling now. As his eyes ran over her words, everything blurred. He moved behind a tree so no one could see him, and wept.

* * * *

Over and over, Madison kept praying the verses she'd memorized. He loved her. She knew him, she knew Terry, there was a high likelihood he would agree to everything on that list. Even so, she didn't know what normal looked like. What if normal meant something on that list that Terry had wanted?

When the phone in her purse sounded, Madison was so tightly wound up inside, she nearly wet herself.

"Maddie?" Terry's voice cracked over the phone. "Was a mark supposed to confirm yes, if I will, or yes, if I won't?"

Squeezing her eyes shut, Madison lightly pounded her head and tried to speak each word as plainly as possible. "If you agree not to do that, then put a mark next to it."

"Okay, got it." Terry hung up, and she prayed God would help her.

A few minutes later, she saw Terry walking back to the jeep. He climbed inside, handed her the phone, and shut the door. Though his eyes were red, she could tell he still loved her.

"Please tell me you never thought I could do any of those things to you."

"I was hoping-- I knew you wouldn't."

Terry was quiet. He looked thoughtful, and she waited for the next question to come.

"Aren't you going to ask me why I made my list?"
He shook his head. "You needed to write it, just as much as you needed me to read it, so we knew where we stood. I get it." He looked at the phone. "Aren't you going to read my answers?"

"I already know you marked every one of them, so I don't need to."

He smiled. "Thanks for that. You can look, though. I added something that I thought should be there."

Curious, she scrolled to the bottom and read what Terry had added. She covered her mouth, this time unable to stop the tears from coming.

"I know what that's like, because it's happened to me. It's painful, it's degrading, and I know by reading everything else, that it's had to have happened to you." Terry's voice broke. "I will never, ever, do that to you. You have my word."

"Thank you, Terry. Thank you. This means so much to me. Thank you for understanding."

Madison locked hands with him, and gazed at her ugly list, now the most beautiful in the world.

"Could I ask you something? before we go to meet your brother?" Terry sniffed, his eyes focused on the dashboard, and not on her. "That verse you put by the bathroom mirror-- it wasn't by accident, was it."

"That's not a question."

He looked at her, and she squeezed his hand.

He nodded, his smile slipping into a brief sob before he let go and started the engine. "Okay. All right, then." She saw him wipe his eyes, heard him suck in air, as though he needed the oxygen as much as she did. "You've given me notice. From here on out, I won't feel as bad about seeing you look this pretty. In fact, with your permission, I'm going to let myself enjoy it a little." He looked at her, and she nodded emphatic, "yes!"

She hoped Terry was paying attention. If he wasn't, she would have to do this the hard way.
"Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body."

~ Hebrews 13:3 ~
Chapter Forty-one

Our Brave Romance

"Can two walk together, except they be agreed?"
~ Amos 3:3 ~

He had to think. He hadn't gotten this far in their marriage by letting his passions rule him. She was putting him on notice, but a cool mind was better than a distracted one, and he fought to remember that. Still, this was big. What had just happened between them was big, and it sucked the air out of that jeep even though he tried to keep breathing. Her timing. It unnerved him. That highly personal list, the verse to put him on notice.

All happening right before their honeymoon.

He tried to play it down, but she couldn't have done more to get his attention if she'd stood in the middle of the road and waved a big white flag. She was surrendering herself, she was trusting him to do the right thing.

His heart began to race, and he gripped the steering wheel.

He tried to force a relaxed calm into his veins, one he didn't feel but needed desperately. Wiping his eyes, he struggled back thoughts of what he'd do if he spiraled into a flashback when he was holding her close, thoughts of his own abuse, and the risk of making things worse for Maddie if he broke down when she needed him most. This came at him in rapid-fire thought, and it was all he could do to keep from pulling over and taking several deep breaths. She was counting on him so heavily.

Maybe he was wrong. Maybe the timing was just a strangely bizarre coincidence. Maybe she wasn't putting him on notice at all, and she'd been too embarrassed to tell him that he'd misread her signals. He tried to remember her face. She'd nodded that it was okay, she'd even squeezed his hand, but what if he was reading more into it than he should? After all, what did he know about women?

He was new to this.
Doubt, even a tiny margin of it, gave him anguish, but it also gave relief. He kept doubt in the back of his mind and decided that this one time, it was a healthy thing. He could be mistaken. And even if he wasn't, that didn't mean anything had to happen soon. They had already agreed about the nature of their honeymoon, and until he found out otherwise, and had agreed to it, he would assume nothing had changed. So far it hadn't, right? There. He felt better now. In a painfully agonizing sort of way that really didn't make him feel good at all. When he thought about it.

With a happy little sigh, Maddie smiled at him, and Terry's heart ran away in complete and total bliss. He groaned. It meant he had to start all over again, and remind himself of why he was doubting her timing.

And he was determined to doubt it.

As the apartment complex came into view, Terry searched the parking lot for Tim's minivan.

"I don't see them." Maddie turned and looked at Terry, and he remembered his doubt. "Your ears are turning red."

"They are?" Terry pulled into his parking space, checked the mirror as he shut off the engine. "It's nice weather we're having, isn't it? I'm glad it's not raining."

"Why are your ears doing that?"

"Maddie-- the weather."

"It's not raining," she agreed. "You're not embarrassed, are you?"

"I hope the rain stays away so it won't spoil our wedding, tomorrow. And rain won't help our wedding photos any."

"You are. You're embarrassed."

"Are we going to change the subject, or not?"
"I don't see why. I'm the one with all the problems, not you." Maddie looked out her window, as if trying to not make him any more self-conscious than she already had. "I was the one with the list. You don't have anything to be embarrassed about."

"Look, I appreciate what you're trying to do, but it's not helping. My face is growing warmer, and your brother will be here any second." Terry pushed open the driver's side door. "I need air."

He felt her watch as he climbed outside.

"You can talk to me." She leaned forward in the seat and looked at him through the still open door. "Terry? If something's bothering you, you can talk to me about anything."

"Nothing's bothering me."

"You don't have to be embarrassed. I won't tell anyone what we talked about. Why would I, when they're my problems?"

"Maddie, I'm not embarrassed." Terry looked at her and wished he could will away the heat in his face. "I'm ashamed, all right?" He paced from the jeep, watched the street for the minivan, then looked back and saw Maddie's tearful face. "I meant me, not you. I could never be ashamed of you." He moved to the jeep, reached inside and touched her hand. "I meant me. I'm ashamed of myself."

"Why?"

With a groan, he leaned against the door as wind tugged at his open coat. He looked over the parking lot, hoping the minivan would show up so he wouldn't have to answer her.

"Why, Terry?"

"Because I'm not ready." He looked back at Maddie and wished he hadn't needed to say those words, for they gave him no relief. "I'm not positive what you've got planned for our honeymoon, but if it has anything to do with that note by the bathroom mirror, then it's happening a lot sooner than I was expecting." He tried for a shrug, but couldn't pull one off.
"This whole thing is catching me by surprise. I always thought I'd be ready before you, that I had more time than this."

"Terry, what are you trying to tell me?"

He glanced away, unable to look her in the eye. "If you're going to try something during our honeymoon, I won't be ready."

"But, you're a man."

"What does that have to do with me having flashbacks?" He fought the shame, but knew he had to get this out. Maddie deserved an answer. "I need to be stronger for you, and I'm not. I wish I were." He paused. "I'm sorry it can't be now. I can't risk going into a flashback while we're together. I can't try until I'm ready, until I can handle the flashbacks on my own. You shouldn't have to deal with my abuser, at the same time you're fighting yours. You've been through enough."

"Terry--"

"I don't want to be helpless while I'm holding you, okay?" Terry shook his head. "I need to be strong for you. I need a little more time. Just give me some time, and I'll be strong."

She looked at something behind him, and he turned to see a minivan pulling into the parking lot.

A horn tooted, and Terry waved to his brother-in-law.

"I love you, Terry."

He glanced at Maddie, turned back and smiled as the minivan pulled beside their jeep.

"You are strong. You're a lot stronger than you think."
"Please, not now." Terry prepared to smile as a vehicle door sounded, then a moment later, Tim came around the minivan's hood with a great big grin. Terry stepped forward to meet him. "Glad you could make it."

"We're glad to be here," Tim shook the offered hand and didn't turn down Terry's hug. "Is that my sister?" Tim looked over the roof of the jeep as Maddie climbed out. "That's amazing."

"Don't tell me she looks like her mother."

"She does-- she really does."

Terry kept quiet as Maddie went to hug her brother, too busy thanking God that at least Maddie's heart wasn't like her mom's. That was where the likeness ended. The outside was only the wrapper for the heart, for the things that come from the mouth, come from the heart-- the heart was what was important, what Terry treasured most.

The side door of the minivan slid open, and Paige and Madeline jumped out and rushed Maddie as though they hadn't seen her in years, and not since last week. While Tim helped his wife out, Connie cried and fussed as though the entire world had forgotten about her. Which it hadn't. Tim lifted the newborn out of her carrier, delivered her to her mom, then unstrapped the carrier from the back seat while the baby's aunt marveled over how much she'd grown since they'd last seen her.

"Thank you again for the newborn clothes," Karen smiled as she cradled her baby. "We've been having such a good time dressing her in those outfits."

"We're saving the really nice dress for the wedding," Paige added excitedly. "You look so stylish, Aunt Madison."

"Thank you." Maddie looked embarrassed, and Terry couldn't help but smile.

"Do you live here?" Madeline looked at the apartment complex as Terry helped Tim unload their things.

"We live somewhere else," Maddie smiled, "but it's Terry's apartment."
"I hope that means we won't be getting in anyone's way." Tim shouldered a diaper bag. "This probably sounds crazy, but getting away for even a weekend feels like a vacation to us. I can't remember the last time we've ever done something like this."

"You aren't in the way." Terry grinned as he unlocked the apartment door. "You're family. That means even if you were, it doesn't matter." Terry showed Tim into the living room, and Karen and the girls followed.

"You have a nice place." Tim stood looking about the room while Maddie hurried inside.

"Yoo-hoo." Lauren knocked on the open door as Maddie tucked herself beside Terry.

"Hi, Lauren." Terry invited her into the apartment. "Maddie's family just arrived. Thank you for staying alert in case we weren't here to let them in."

"It was my pleasure," she smiled brightly.

"Tim, this is Lauren Moore-- a good friend, and building superintendent."

As Terry introduced the O'Briens to Lauren, he sensed Lauren was pleased to finally satisfy some of her curiosity about where Maddie had come from. She was expert at getting information out of people, a fact Tim seemed to infer from her title. He clearly looked nervous as Lauren started her line of questioning, and Terry had to smile when Maddie changed the subject the first chance she had.

"The bedrooms are upstairs," Maddie told Karen. "Terry put a crib in the master bedroom, and there's a second room for Paige and Madeline. There's a full bath at the top of the stairs. Izzy and I made sure there's lots of towels."

"Is everything all right?" Lauren lowered her voice and looked at Maddie as though it obviously wasn't, and it annoyed Terry. "Do you need someone to talk to, because if you do, you know where to find me." When Maddie stared at her, as though she had absolutely no idea of what Lauren was talking about, Lauren turned her back to the others and whispered loud enough for Terry to overhear, "Your eyes are red, and so are Terry's. Have you been crying?"
"I-- I'm fine," Maddie stammered. "We both are."

"Did you say something about a crib?" Karen asked. When Maddie nodded, Karen gave the baby to Paige. "Would you mind showing me?" Karen smiled to Maddie, then slowly followed Maddie up the steps like someone who had recently given birth.

"Are the stairs too much for her?" Terry asked Tim. "Would she prefer to sleep down here on the couch?"

"Thanks, but our apartment is on the second floor." Tim watched as Paige carried Connie upstairs with the women. "It's not like Karen can avoid them. The doctor said to just take it easy, and to not go up and down several times a day."

Lauren looked to Terry. "Something is going on. Has the wedding been called off?"

The mere suggestion made Tim's mouth drop open.

"We're fine, thank you." Terry started up the stairs with the bag from Tim's minivan. "Are you and Ralph ready for the party?"

"Yes, but--"

"We're fine," Terry called, and headed for the master bedroom. Maddie was hanging back, unable to go in, but Terry smiled at her, and stepped inside while Karen admired the crib. "Once upon a time, that was my nephew's," he said, nodding to the small bed. "I was instructed to offer it to you guys, if you had a use for it. Izzy said we have a lot of baby things no one's using right now, so she's planning to talk to you about it this weekend. She said to give you a heads-up." Terry grinned when he saw Karen's surprise. "It's all in the family." He turned, and saw Tim standing behind him with the rest of the bags. "Go ahead and make yourself at home. The party won't start until--" Terry checked his watch. "Man, it's later than I thought. Dick will be expecting us in about an hour."
"Terry-- about you and my sister? Are you sure you're all right?" Tim blew out a sigh when Terry smiled, and patted him on the shoulder. "I thought my superintendent was a handful. I'd hate to meet your landlord."

"Actually, that would be me." Terry winced at the dazed look Tim was giving him. "I know, I need to get a life. I'm working on it." Terry smiled, but he felt the awkwardness mount when Tim kept staring, as though he didn't know what to make of his sister's husband. "It's not much--not like the large spread where you guys live. I try to keep the housing affordable, the apartments maintained, and the few tenants I have happy." Terry shrugged. "It works out most of the time."

"You're probably the most remarkable person I've ever met."

Terry paused. "I don't know how to take that, so I won't," he decided, and headed for the hall. "I'm told there's food in the fridge, so help yourself. The directions to Dick's house are on the freezer door, but if we stay here long enough, you might as well follow us there."

"Lauren went home," Maddie said, as she joined Terry in the hall. "You are strong, Terry."

"Please."

"Aunt Madison?" Madeline came running up the stairs. "When can we go fishing?"

"We're not here for that," Tim said from the bedroom. "You and Paige come get your bags so you can change for the party. We're leaving soon, and I don't want to be late."

"Terry--" Maddie tugged at his sleeve, then hushed her voice as the girls passed them in the hall--"you won't make it worse for me."

He couldn't argue that, or anything else, while they were surrounded by family.

"Which bed is mine?" Paige asked, as the girls went to their room with small bags slung over their shoulders. "Can we sleep anywhere we want?"

"I get the bed by the window!"
Needing to get away, Terry headed for the stairs. Maddie turned from the girls’ open bedroom door as they passed. The girls sounded excited, as though they were on vacation and loving every minute of their adventure.

At least someone was having a good time.

"I can help you," Maddie whispered. "Our honeymoon won't be so bad if we help each other. Please, Terry." She took his hand as they went into the living room. "I can help you-- I know I can."

"So you are planning something."

She bit her lip, and he fought the urge to kiss her.

"Are you mad?"

"Of course not. I'm just mad at myself for not being ready."

"How much time do you need?" she asked.

He looked at her. They weren't having this conversation, and yet, here they were. "I don't know," he shrugged, then wanted to take the shrug back, because she was dead serious and he wasn't trying to be flippant, "however long it takes to make sure I won't have a flashback."

"You won't ever know that-- not for sure." She leaned her head on his shoulder and caressed his arm. "It's all right. I understand."

He looked at her sweet face.

"I'm scared, too," she said quietly.

He swallowed, and looked back at the stairs.

"When my heart is overwhelmed," she whispered, and kissed his shoulder.

"Mom, I can't find my brush," sounded from upstairs.

"Use mine," came the answer.
A baby started to cry, and Terry closed his eyes as Tim began soothing Connie while Karen helped the other two girls. Upstairs sounded busy, while downstairs, Terry stood with Maddie, both quiet and trying to work out what they would do. He needed to think. It seemed he'd only just gotten his brain to work, when the phone in his pocket gave an impatient sound. Today was a difficult day to get away and think.

With a sigh, Terry checked his phone as Madeline came downstairs in blue jeans and a sweater. He smiled at the girl, then answered the call from Dick. Had Tim arrived? Did they have the directions to his house? While Terry talked to his friend, Maddie and Madeline went to the couch to wait while everyone got ready.

He wasn't ready, Terry didn't feel he was, but what was he supposed to do? let Maddie get hurt? He fist a hand, tried to get through the conversation, when he saw Tim coming from the stairs with Connie cradled in his arms.

"Karen is helping Paige with her hair," Tim smiled at the couch. He looked to Terry, saw Terry was on the phone, and went to join the girls.

"It sounds like you have everything under control," Terry nodded, wishing he could say the same for himself. He thanked Dick for calling, hung up, and looked back at Maddie. Her hair. She'd done something different with her hair. Terry groaned, and pushed through to the dining area, then into the kitchen to get a glass of water.

She wasn't making this easy.

What if he went into a flashback? It could trigger one of her own and then she'd never want to try again. Had she thought about that? Had she?

He stared at the cupboard without opening it. Panic flushed through him, mixing with an eager sort of awareness that scared him. It made him feel ashamed, and yet he knew he had nothing to be ashamed about. Feelings from the past nudged their way into the present, and it took an all-out war on his part to keep from losing himself in his old room, the room where the bed creaked when it moved, and he could smell the sweat on the blankets. A time when his greatest thought wasn't what he'd get for Christmas, but when the hurt would go away.

Bypassing the cupboard, Terry turned on the kitchen faucet, splashed water on his face and tried to get his breathing under control.

"God, help me," he whispered into the sink.
The sound of footsteps made him straighten. He grabbed a towel and dried his face as someone cleared their throat.

"We're ready when you are." It was Tim.

"I'll be there in a second."

Tim was quiet, then Terry heard him leave.

A moment later, more footsteps, then Terry felt Maddie's presence at his side. He opened his eyes and saw her, concern showing in her lovely face. He tossed the towel away, then took her hand and breathed deep. He didn't say a word, and he still didn't know what he was going to do, but he felt stronger. He'd come a long way to get here, and God hadn't deserted him. God wouldn't desert him now.

"Have I told you how pretty you look?" Terry asked.

A tiny smile tugged at her mouth, so he kissed it, and she leaned into him and deepened the kiss. She usually let him do that, so it didn't surprise him at all when she was the first to pull away.

He felt dizzy, nowhere near able to think clearly.

She looked at him as though trying to see what he was thinking, and when he smiled, she bit her lip and looked shy.

"Maddie, I--"

"I'm strong, too," she whispered, and quickly left the kitchen.

He sucked in a breath, held it, then let it out slowly. Pushing away from the counter, he went after her, only to find her listening to something Karen was saying. He couldn't tell what the conversation was about, for he wasn't paying attention. His eyes were on Maddie.

Maddie bowed her head, then slid a look in Terry's direction. It was shy at first, then he saw her smile.

It was then he noticed Karen had stopped talking. He looked about, saw Karen was smiling in his general direction, then suddenly realized that everyone but the baby was smiling at him, as well. Terry looked back at Maddie. What? She pointed to her lips, then to Terry's. Still not understanding, he pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his mouth. The light pink smudge made
his face go warm. Tim grinned as he put on his coat, and no one said a word when Terry made sure he got off the rest of the lipstick.

That stuff was slightly dangerous.

Paige smiled at Terry as he stuffed the handkerchief back in his pocket.

Since everyone was putting on their coats, Terry went outside and unlocked the jeep. While no one looked, he did a quick check in the mirror. Man, if he had shown up to the party wearing Maddie’s kiss... He turned as she stepped outside, and all thoughts of embarrassment faded away.

She smiled at him, and without needing to check, he knew he had on a stupid grin.

He shook his head as he opened the passenger door for Maddie. "What have I gotten myself into? I'm not only in over my head, I'm drowning. Maddie, you're killing me."

She looked alarmed, but he just smiled, and helped her into the jeep.

As he closed her door, he caught his reflection in the window. Sure enough, an idiot stared back. She was turning him into putty, right when he needed most to think clearly.

While Tim loaded his family into the minivan, Terry locked the apartment, then passed Karen the keys. When Terry came back to the jeep, Maddie had the sun visor down and was using the mirror to put on more lipstick. She glanced at him, but he looked away.

He wasn't going to say a word.

When Tim waved to him, Terry started his engine. The sun was setting on a long day, but it wasn't over yet. As Terry backed away from the apartment, he saw Tim's minivan following at a comfortable distance, and he pulled onto the street to start the drive to Dick and Sara's house.

Maddie blotted her lips with some tissue, put the lipstick away, then closed her purse with a sigh. Deciding they needed something to fill the empty silence so neither one could talk, Terry turned on the radio. Though he wanted to talk to Maddie, he didn't trust what she'd say, or what he might say in response.

"Terry?"

He turned down the news, but left it on.

"Do you want me to change back into my old clothes?"
"No, you're making progress."

"Too much progress? Am I going too fast for you?"

He smiled. "I'll deal with it."

She offered her hand, and he took it gladly. He checked the mirror and there was Tim, his headlights shining in the fading light.

If they were going to talk, it wouldn't be about them.

"Tim and Karen seemed to be doing well together, didn't you think?" Terry asked.

"I think they're trying not to do anything to mess up our wedding," Maddie answered. "Tim and Karen don't look like they're getting much sleep, and I'm guessing it's because of the baby, and Karen told me she's having problems nursing Connie. Added to that, Paige said Tim is worried about losing his job-- he didn't actually tell her that, but Paige overheard her parents talking about it. They're under a lot of stress right now."

Terry glanced at Maddie. "How come I didn't catch all that?"

"Because you have a lot on your mind."

"I know, but I feel rather selfish that I wasn't able to pick up on any of that. I don't have any firsthand experience with nursing problems--"

"Neither do I."

"And I don't have any accounting jobs open."

"Same here."

"But the least I can do is not be so self-absorbed in my own problems, that I can't be sympathetic."

"Then you won't spend the rest of the evening thinking about how to get out of our honeymoon?" Maddie's voice brightened a little. "That's an answer to prayer, because I was getting worried."
He looked at her, then remembered the road.

She unnerved him, she really did.

* * * *

A large two story, off-white house with a circular driveway was grander than anything Madison had expected. A few tall trees greeted them as they pulled up the driveway, black lampposts lighting the way to the house. Cars were everywhere, and when she looked behind them to make sure Tim was still there, she saw two more waiting behind Tim's minivan to get in.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Madison gripped her purse as Terry backed up and came to a stop between an SUV and an expensive looking car.

"This is it." Terry shut off the engine. "I hope they don't wait too long to serve dinner, because I'm starved."

"You know someone who lives in a place like this?"

He popped open his door and cold wind swept inside. "It's only Dick and Sara Doyle," he shrugged. "You've met them before."

Even so, the Doyles weren't very well known to her, so she couldn't just brush this off like Terry was doing. She opened her door, climbed out and shivered as the air rushed up to take her breath away. The trees in back of the house rustled in the wind. She saw Tim helping Karen from the minivan, heard Connie's cries and the close sounds of car door slams as people got out of their vehicles.

"Hey, Terry! So tomorrow's the big day, is it?"

As Madison closed her door, she saw Sheriff Peterson shake Terry's hand. At Sheriff Peterson's side, stood a quiet looking woman; it was the sheriff's wife, for Madison recognized her from church. The wife was listening to her husband, and as Madison joined them, she felt the impact of the next question.
"I heard Madison's brother will be coming to the party?"

With a gulp, Madison held onto her purse and felt the patterned material to distract herself from thinking too much. The man didn't forget a thing, and she hoped he wouldn't think to also ask about the rest of her family. Maybe check and see if she hadn't left out anything else. Momma came to mind. Though she hadn't known her momma had passed away until recently, it had been a long time since Madison had counted her as family; when the sheriff had asked if she'd had any family, saying "no" had been automatic. Before she'd known about Tim or had married Terry, she hadn't had anyone. That had been the truth.

Trying not to bite her lip, she listened as Terry gave a very brief explanation of how Tim had found her using a private investigator-- without mentioning the Dragon. It wasn't easy to trust someone who came from the law. The Dragon had mistrusted the police on a constant basis, but he'd had a reason to. She didn't. Madison reminded herself of this as Terry waved Tim over.

The sheriff smiled, shook hands with Tim, and then Karen, and then that was it. No questions to do background checks, or anything. The sheriff moved on. She had a past, but now that people could see Tim, it seemed to Madison that they felt they could understand her more. She had something in common with them, for she had a brother, and that brother had a family, and what was more normal and gently sweet than to see a young family with a baby? What people couldn't explain made them uneasy. She understood that, and was grateful for the difference Tim's appearance was making. People who didn't know her very well, were relaxing around her more than they ever had in the past.

"Hey, John--" Terry grinned as John and Izzy walked up with the triplets-- "where's AJ?"

"They're here somewhere."

"Tim, Karen-- I'd like you to meet my brother, John Johannes, and his wife, Izumi." Terry smiled as the women shook hands. "Their three munchkins are Ruthie, Debbie, and Lizzie-- all aged four. And over here, Tim and Karen's new munchkin is Connie, and her sisters are Paige and Madeline-- aged eleven and six. Did I get the ages right?"

Madeline grinned and nodded.
"You have a lovely family," Karen smiled to Izzy.

"Thanks, so do you." Izzy smiled at the little one in the cute pink sleeper as the group started for the house. "What a sweetie-pie. Seeing yours, makes me miss the time when mine were small enough for newborn clothes and baby bottles."

"And middle of the night feedings, and diaper changes," John chuckled.

"You miss it, too-- admit it."

Smiling, John nodded that he did, but leaned in and whispered something that Madison just barely overheard. "We've fished our limit, Honey."

"I know." Izzy took John's arm, and they went inside to the sound of a loud greeting that Madison guessed was Dick Doyle.

Terry and Madison went next, followed by Tim and his family.

The house opened to a two story foyer with a glass window over the entryway. Dick greeted each guest by name, his handshake firm, his voice at once friendly and warm. He shook Madison's hand, invited them past some stairs and into a wide room with a high ceiling. People Madison had seen before but couldn't remember their names, chatted with each other, but as they saw Terry, and John, and Izzy, the greetings turned warm. Then people began to realize it was her, and Madison saw surprise register on their faces. Dick introduced Tim and Karen around the room while Sara changed places with Dick and met people at the door. It wasn't a large gathering, but big enough to impress Madison that Terry and AJ had a lot of friends.

"It's good to see you!" Terry clasped someone's hand, then pulled him into a hearty hug. "I heard you got in this morning. You came with Abby and Jake?"

The man nodded. "They're taking Ricky to play with the kids in the den." He motioned to Madison. "So, this is her? I'm Dennis Beckman, and it's a pleasure to meet you." He looked at Terry as he shook her hand. "And people said you'd never fall. I knew you were just waiting for the right one to come along. It only made sense."
"I wish you could've told that to everyone else." Terry smiled as someone came around and collected their coats. "It was good of you to fly out."

"And miss seeing you go down the aisle? I wouldn't have missed it for the world. Dad sends his regards, by the way. He also sent a wedding gift-- I left it at your house."

"Madison," Tim came over, his eyes wide with excitement. "Do you know who I just saw? The Answer Lady from 'Bassin' the Weeds with Dennis.' Tim leaned in for emphasis. "Abigail Murphy. I was going to ask for an autograph, but Karen was afraid I'd embarrass her, so I didn't, but I've never met someone who's been on TV before. I had no idea she was related to Jake. You should've told me."

"I guess I never thought to. It's just fishing stuff."

"But it's Bassin.'" Tim stared at Madison as though he couldn't understand why she wasn't as excited as he was. "You should've seen the episode where Dennis Beckman tested Abigail Murphy's fly casting accuracy. He lined her up against several others, and she blew them away. It even had Dennis Beckman shaking his head. She was amazing."

Terry cleared his throat and smiled at the man watching them. "Tim, I'd like you to meet Abby's boss."

"Thanks for talking up our Abby," Dennis smiled, and extended a hand to a wide-eyed Tim. "Every bit of publicity helps the show." When Tim looked too stunned to move, Dennis folded his arms and talked to Terry. "Some of the ladies will probably be tired after organizing the wedding, but when the ceremony's over, maybe John and I could find a few interested parties, and get in some fishing this weekend. Would that be all right with you?"

Madison held her breath.

"Wish I'd thought of that, myself," Terry grinned. "I'll bring it up with John, and see if we can't do that. You know we always have plenty of spare fishing gear. Just in case anyone is interested in taking advantage of the bay."

"Yeah," Tim nodded. "Count me and my girls in. Thanks."
"Not that I don't want you around, but you're forgetting something, aren't you?" Dennis nudged Terry in the arm. "From what I understand, you'll be taking off after the reception."

"I will?" Terry turned to Madison, and Madison eyed her thanks to Dennis.

"Oh, right. Abby said it was a secret."

"It still is," Madison smiled, and led Terry away from Dennis Beckman, Mr. Blabbermouth with the TV show. Madison looked for someone else they knew, someone who couldn't accidentally tell Terry where he would be going tomorrow. The kids were in the den watching television, some were playing, and most were eating cheese and crackers; in the main room, Paige stood with the women, shyly watching the few teenagers who were there, Dave Donovan especially. Everyone was sipping fancy fruit juice and eating appetizers, and looking as though they were having a good time, including newlyweds Brian and Emily Donovan. While Madison went to a long table to get a drink for herself and Terry, and debated whether or not she wanted to say "hi" to Emily while Brian was nearby, Abby shouted to someone, and Madison turned to see who had just come in.

"Tyler!"

A grinning man with a baby sling strapped to his chest rushed forward and hugged Abby.

"Well, well, would you look at that." Terry accepted the drink from Madison, then took Madison by the hand, and moved closer to the hugging friends.

"When did you get in?" Jake asked.

"A half hour ago. Mom said I'd been invited, and to get down here quick, so here I am. Jake, it's good to see you." Tyler shook hands with Jake, then clapped a hand on Jake's shoulder. "Thanks for helping me out that time while you were in San Diego. That phone call meant a lot."

Jake smiled, and looked at the baby.
"This is my son, Paul." Tyler turned and let Abby and Jake get a good look at him. "He's two months old."

"He's a precious one." Abby touched Paul's cheek and the baby looked up at her.

"Since my wife wasn't feeling well, I brought Paul with me to give her a chance to get some rest. Mom stayed home to keep her company." Tyler glanced at Jake. "I don't know how much my parents have told everyone, but I married Ava last year."

"The same Ava we talked about in the phone call?" Jake asked quietly, and Tyler nodded.

"Things got better, then worse," Tyler looked as though he didn't want to go into the details of his life, "then Dad offered me a position at the bank that I couldn't refuse. The timing was Providential. So I'm back with my parents again, and, God willing, we'll be looking for a house soon."

"I know Abby and I have enjoyed being back with her family," Jake tried to encourage. "It's good to have that support nearby. It can make things easier."

"I have a family to think about," Tyler nodded. He adjusted the sling, smiled at his son, and looked genuinely at peace. For all of his hinted-at past trouble, Tyler looked happy. Probably not as successful as he would've liked, for Madison sensed he would've rather not had to work at his father's bank, but she also sensed Tyler knew he was where God wanted him to be. And in the end, that was all that really mattered.

"Welcome back." Terry gave Tyler a big hug. "It's good to have you home."

Madison smiled. She didn't know the man, but he didn't seem to lack friends, and while they welcomed him and the baby, Madison slipped away to visit with the women. Though none of the men at the party made her feel like the Dragon had, she still felt easier, more comfortable around the women than she did the men. Madison found Karen resting her feet on a couch, deep in discussion with Izzy. The topic was breastfeeding, and Izzy was giving advice, and Karen was asking questions, and since Madison had nothing to add to the conversation, she stayed quiet, sipped her fizzy juice, and watched everyone else.
Dick was everywhere. People had stopped arriving, and he was going about the room and pulling anyone who was alone into conversation, and only leaving when he had successfully added another person into the mix so no one was left without someone else to talk to. When he reached Madison, he smiled, and soon had her talking and feeling at home. Which wasn't easy, since this big house wasn't hers, and she didn't know as many people as he did. He knew everyone.

"Thank you for this party. It's so much nicer than I thought it would be-- not that I didn't think the party wouldn't be nice. I just mean--"

"I know what you're trying to say," Dick nodded. "My wife wanted to make tonight memorable for you and Terry, and AJ. She thought she'd splurge a little." Dick looked down as Ricky came over and presented him with a handful of food.

"Grandpa, do you want some?"

"Thank you, I don't mind if I do." Dick smiled as Ricky took one of the crackers and cheese, and gave it to him. "Are you hungry? Then I'll remind the chef to not keep dinner waiting."

Ricky smiled, as though he knew something funny had just happened, and went back to the den with the other kids.

"You have a chef?" Madison asked, and Dick shook his head.

"That's my tease for Sara." He looked about and nodded to someone. "Have you met Dr. Gregory?" Dick waved a man over, and before long, Madison found herself listening to stories from the doctor's veterinary hospital. Dick had a way of drawing people into conversation that rather amazed Madison. She was too unsure of herself to be that confident. To her disappointment, the conversation and stories were cut short when Sara announced that dinner was served, and everyone started for the dining room.

A separate table had been set up for the kids, which, from the mild annoyance on Dave's face, Madison guessed was meant to include him, for there were cards showing where everyone was supposed to sit.
While Tim placed a baby carrier beside Karen's chair, Madison hung back until she spotted her name on a card, and was happy to see she was supposed to sit next to Terry. She sat down, placed her glass next to the crystal beside her plate, and waited as the dining room filled.

Terry pulled out the chair beside her, and smiled. "Having a good time?" he asked, and she nodded.

After everyone had been seated, Dick said a blessing over the food, then they all settled in to enjoy dinner. Sara chatted about tomorrow's wedding with Pastor Bill, Agatha, and Izzy across the table, while others talked of local news and recent concerns the city council had brought up. All in all, the evening passed quickly for Madison. She felt accepted among Terry's friends, she was included, she was one of them. For the first real time, she felt what it was like to be a part of a community.

When dessert had been finished, and Tyler had to get up and change Paul, and Karen had a similar need with Connie, the guests began to go home in ones and twos.

Dick and Sara saw Madison and her extended family to the foyer as coats were closed, and children were checked to make sure no one had forgotten their shoes.

"Thank you for the engagement party, and the welcome home for AJ," Terry told their hosts. "You guys didn't have to do this to get a wedding invitation out of us. You would've gotten one, anyway."

Dick laughed, and hugged Terry, then turned to Madison. When he saw she wouldn't object, he hugged her as well. "In case we don't get the chance to, tomorrow, Sara and I wish you both a long and happy marriage."

"Thank you." As Madison hugged Sara, and everyone said their good nights, Dick said something to Tim that made Madison smile:

"Welcome to the family."

Though Tim had looked a bit lost by the warm reception he'd been getting from the Doyles, he shook Dick's hand, thanked his hosts, then followed the others out to the driveway.
"I’m confused." Tim spoke in a hush when they were out of earshot of the house. "Are any of you related to the Doyles?" Tim frowned when Jake grinned. "I don't understand-- your son calls Dick, grandpa."

"In many ways, he is." Jake smiled, and waved good night as he and Abby went to their pickup with Ricky.

Terry nodded to Tim. "I'll explain it, sometime. Would you like me to show you the way back to the apartment?"

"Thanks, I can find it." Tim paused before everyone went their separate ways. "Madison? Could I ask you something? How did you find all these people?"

"I got on a bus and went as far as my money would take me." She smiled when he looked thoughtful. "I ended up where God wanted me."

"You believe that, don't you."

"I think you do, too," she smiled, as she turned to leave with Terry. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"See you," he smiled, and the group parted ways.

* * * *

It had been a good evening, one Terry was sure he’d never forget. He’d enjoyed the conversation with his friends, the pleasure of welcoming Tyler back to the neighborhood. It appeared Tyler’s parents hadn’t entirely approved of his marriage or everyone would have known about Ava. Terry couldn’t ignore that, but he knew Tyler, and until he had something that proved otherwise, Terry chose to think the best of his young friend. He took heart that Mr. Greene had offered Tyler a job at the bank, and hoped it was a sign that the family was coming together. More than ever, his prayers would be with the Greene family.
Terry breathed deep as he watched the road, the beams of light pushing into the darkness as they headed back to Three Mile Bay. The radio was off, but he felt relaxed, and in no need of something to fill the quiet between him and Maddie.

She sighed, and he glanced at her, and smiled.

"Tired?" he asked.

"I was just thinking about something John said to Izzy, today-- that they'd fished their limit."

"Oh, that." Terry checked his speed. "Izzy's doctor said it would be dangerous for her to become pregnant again, so John had a vasectomy."

"If my doctor ever said something like that, would you do the same for me?"

"In a heartbeat."

"What if we didn't have any kids?"

"You come first. Why? Have you seen a doctor-- is there something I should know about?"

"No, I was just wondering." Maddie sat quiet, then looked at him. "Would you mind if we waited before we started a family? Waited for me, I mean? I need to be stronger than I am right now before I become a mother."

"We can wait," he nodded.

"When we get home, would you do something for me without asking a lot of questions?"

"Are we still talking about the same thing, or did we just change subjects?" He shook his head, and prayed he would be able to keep up with her.

"I changed subjects. Kind of."

"Okay," he said slowly. "What do you want me to do?"
"I need you to finish packing your suitcase."

"Finish? I hadn't even known I'd started." He glanced at her. "Should I pack light, or heavy?"

"What?"

"Will we be gone a few days, a few weeks..."

"A few days."

"Then I'll pack light. Will I need to bring my sandals, or should I bring a coat?"

"I'm taking care of everything else-- I just need you to go through your underthings."

"So you're gutsy enough to go on a honeymoon, but not enough to dig around my underwear drawer?" He said it lightly, something to make her smile, but she kept staring out the window as though her thoughts weighed heavily. "I'll do it Maddie, and I won't tease you about it. I promise."

She was quiet, and for a moment, he worried that he'd hurt her feelings. "Do you know what you're going to do yet?" she asked.

"I hope you don't mean what I think you are." He sighed when she nodded. "Couldn't we hold off until you're ready to start a family? Then we'd both have more time, and I wouldn't be putting you at risk of anything. Come on, Maddie, it makes sense. You know it does."

"We can do this without my getting pregnant. We don't need more time for that."

"But I need more time so I can be with you without giving you flashbacks."

"But you don't know it will happen. You won't ever know until we try."

He stared at the road.
"Would you sleep on the living room couch, tonight?"

"Why? Are you mad at me?"

"I could never be mad at you, Terry."

"Please, don't say that. Of course you could." He sighed. Moments like this, he was tempted to wish he was someone else so he wouldn't slow her down so much. For her sake. "If you think you have a valid reason to be angry, than have at it. You don't need my permission. Okay?" When he didn't hear anything, he took a quick look at her, and she nodded, "yes." "So are you mad?"

"No."

"Then why do you want me in the living room?"

"I don't want you to see me in the morning. Agatha said it's not good for the groom to see the bride before the ceremony."

"Oh, well." Terry let himself breathe a little easier. "If you have a bad dream tonight, I'd want to be there." He shook his head. "If you want to hold with tradition, I'll compromise by not looking at you until you come down the aisle, but tonight, I'm staying put. Unless you kick me out of our room, I'm afraid that's as good as I can do."

"I can't kick you out," she smiled.

"You just keep thinking that, and we'll get along fine." He smiled back at her. He was glad they were nearing home. He felt drained, and needed sleep so he'd be awake for tomorrow.

Before Terry pulled off the main road, he checked his rear view mirror, and saw the headlights of John's minivan nearing in the distance. Terry parked in front of the house, left his engine running, then got out to unlock the front door for Maddie before he opened the garage so they could put their vehicles away for the night. A pair of headlights blinded Terry a moment as he headed for the garage. He waved to John, opened the garage and stepped back to let John pull inside.
"Hey, Terry?" John called through Izzy's open passenger window. "Don't put your jeep away. I need to get it ready for tomorrow."

When Terry only stared at him, John laughed.

"Humor me."

With a shrug, Terry went back to his jeep, turned off the engine, then went inside the house. It seemed everyone was up to something, and he was too tired to play guessing games with John. When it came to Maddie, though, it was a different story.

As Terry rounded into the bedroom, he found one of his suitcases on his couch, unzipped, and yawning open for him to get to work. Maddie wasn't wasting any time. She stood packing some folded things into another suitcase on her couch, and from a quick glance, he noted something about their trip. These bags weren't carry-ons. It meant Maddie either didn't know she'd have to check them in before they got on a plane, or, more likely, because she'd had a taste of air travel, and she had John to help her plan things, that they weren't going by plane at all.

Interesting. Terry went to his suitcase and did a quick inventory of what she'd already packed. Hey, if she wanted him to know what else needed to go in the bag, then he had to know what was already there. Jeans, shirts-- nothing that screamed any destination in particular. She could've told him they'd be staying in the area, and he would've believed her by what he saw in that suitcase. Shrugging, he went to the dresser and pulled out a week's worth of socks and underwear, some T-shirts, and went through his usual routine of packing for a business trip, though this time, it wouldn't be business. This would be strictly personal. He looked over to see what Maddie was packing, and she closed her suitcase until he went back to his own.

"In the morning, I'll need to pack some things from the bathroom," he said over his shoulder. "It'll be hard to do when I'm not supposed to see you."

"Are you sure you won't sleep in the living room?"

"I'm still going to need the bathroom."
She sighed, and he could hear her crinkling something behind his back. "We'll make it work. Somehow."

Terry wished he wasn't getting in her way. Not the bathroom, but his past. It was getting in her way, and he hated that. "Maddie?" He waited, heard the suitcase zipper as she closed her bag, then turned to face her. "I'm thinking about it, and maybe, if we're careful--"

She looked too hopeful, and he held up a hand to stop her from speaking. He saw the open door, and went to close it.

"If we're careful," he continued, "maybe we can catch any flashbacks before they get too bad. I'm not saying it will work, but I am saying I'm willing to try."

He was grateful when she didn't take his agreement lightly, as though he'd just decided he didn't care whether or not he made her worse. She hugged herself, studied the carpet, and for a second, he thought maybe she'd take back the honeymoon offer. It would've been fine with him. This was her decision, and he was letting her be the one to make it.

"What's the time you're afraid of the most?" she asked.

"When I'm holding you," Terry said quietly.

Maddie nodded. "I'm afraid it'll be like I'm with the Dragon, and I won't know it's you." When she went silent, he wondered if she needed to stop talking. "I need to be with you," she said finally, her words not soft, but decided enough that it gave her a slightly fierce appearance. She was being firm, as definite as he'd ever seen her. "The longer I wait, the harder it gets. My cuts are healed, Terry. I need to either go forward, or hurt myself, but I can't stay where I am." She swiped at her eyes, and looked as though she refused to cry. "I won't go back, I won't. I have to do this. I have to face it."

"You know you won't have to face it alone, don't you?"

She nodded. He wondered if she would accept his arms right now, but when he started to move, she came forward, and he pulled her into a tight hug. She shuddered, and he made sure he kept his arms up around her shoulders where she wouldn't flinch from the contact.
"You won't be alone, either, Terry. We can help each other."

"Our brave romance," he whispered. He kissed her hair, and stroked her shoulder. It was hard not to think of his past as a liability to their relationship.

That night, as Terry went to bed, he heard Maddie in the hall with Izzy, going over tomorrow's plans. He and Maddie had exchanged a lot of fears, a lot of concerns during their talks that day, and he refused to shut his eyes until they had given them to the Lord. They needed to pray.

When Maddie came back, and they'd had their good night kiss, Terry turned his head so she could take off her robe and get under her blankets. Then, with the bathroom door half open so the light could spill into the room, Terry prayed about their marriage.

"We're doing the best we can, Lord, and our eyes are upon Thee. If you don't help us, then this marriage won't work, and everything we do will fail. Be with us, Lord, and help us. Bless tomorrow, bless Maddie for being so brave, and cause our feet not to slide. Keep those flashbacks away-- don't let our abusers spoil what You've given us. Thank You, Lord. In Jesus' name, amen."

Maddie added her "amen," to the prayer, then turned on her couch until her back was to the room. "Good night, Terry." She sounded tired, but he sensed a nervous tingle in the air that reached across the room and danced across his heart.

Dear God, don't let this hurt her, he prayed quietly.

Terry squeezed his eyes shut, turned his back to the room, and tried not to think about tomorrow. "Good night, Maddie." Tugging the blanket over his shoulder, he prayed for sleep.

* * * *

Muffled voices, and morning sounds-- he could hear them through the closed bedroom door, and they woke Terry against his will. He couldn't smell coffee, and without it, he wasn't getting out of bed. It meant breakfast wasn't ready, and that meant he probably wasn't supposed to be awake yet. The room was still semi-dark, so after a quick glance at the clock to confirm what his body already knew, Terry rolled over and tried to go back to sleep.
He was getting married today. He glanced over at Maddie's couch and wasn't surprised to find it empty. Sleep, please. He closed his eyes, heard someone move down the hall and wondered if tonight, he would be holding Maddie.

His heart started to race, so he forced calm, punched his pillow, and tried to get comfortable.

He'd been waiting for this day, hoping it would come, but telling himself it wouldn't, for a long, long time. Probably since the day John had married Izzy.

This wasn't working. Terry sat up on the couch and stared at the darkened window. It was early--too early for him to get up, but he couldn't hold still when their morning was about to dawn. He climbed off the couch, and noticed a gift bag on the dresser with a familiar name on the tag. Dennis had said he'd dropped off a wedding gift from his father. Curious, Terry opened it and found a slab of smooth crystal etched with a lake, a man, and the graceful loops of an experienced fly caster. Beneath it, a quote from Genesis: "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea..." Smiling, Terry stood it on the dresser, and promised himself to thank Dennis' father.

Working out the cramp in his shoulder from having slept on the couch, Terry shuffled into the bathroom and tried to think of something that didn't have to do with Maddie. Not exactly a good time for that, considering what day it was. He ran through code, counted backwards from a hundred, recited the Gettysburg Address into the mirror as he shaved. All the while, he kept his eyes away from the verses, for he had to concentrate on getting through the day, and not on getting his vows wrong in front of all their friends.

That would be fun.

He closed the bathroom door, took a quick shower, then padded into the bedroom with a towel around his waist to find his clothes. He wondered if that was a good idea-- what if Maddie walked in on him. Then again, it wasn't as though they weren't about to go on their honeymoon. And, he needed to find his clothes.

He hurried, took out his best black suit, then heard someone knock on the bedroom door.

"It's me," came John's voice. "You awake?"
"I'm getting dressed."

"I hope you're not getting into your wedding clothes. It's too early."

Terry frowned, stuck the suit back into the closet and went to get some jeans.

"Can I come in?"

"Yeah." Terry barely looked up as John stepped inside, then closed the door behind him. "Where's Maddie?"

"In the kitchen with Jake-- he's putting the finishing touches on the wedding cake."

"No kidding?" Terry buttoned his jeans. "I wouldn't mind getting a look at that. I'd like to see what he can do with frosting."

"Sorry, Izzy wants me to keep you from seeing Madison until I get a green light. Right now, it's bright red." John handed Terry his smiley mug. "There's no coffee. Our morning routine has been blown out of the water, replaced by crazy, wedding chaos. You're doing good they won't allow you near Madison right now. She's in the kitchen with everyone else, and I gotta tell you, I barely got out of there with what I did."

"No coffee?" Terry took the mug and found orange juice. He looked at John, and saw he had a bowl of cereal. "What about mine?"

"Sorry, I didn't have much time before I was chased out."

Terry put the mug on the dresser, then pulled on a shirt. This wasn't how he'd imagined the start to his wedding day, but then, he'd also expected coffee.

"Are the munchkins still sleeping?"

John nodded. He crunched cereal, then pointed his spoon at Terry as though he'd just thought of something. "Your jeep's ready, but don't dig around in the back until you get where you're
going. Madison has gone to great lengths to keep this a secret, and I want to keep it that way. The tank is full, and everything's been loaded in but your bags. Well, almost everything."

"So, I'll be doing some driving?"

Instead of an answer, John smiled, and shoveled in more cereal.

"Whatever plans have been made," Terry picked up his yellow mug and gave a nod to his friend, "I just want you to know I appreciate your helping Maddie."

John smiled in return.

"Dad, is Uncle Terry in there?"

"Yup." John moved to the door, opened it, and Abby looked inside.

"Would Uncle Terry mind getting his clothes, and going to our house to wait until it's time for the ceremony? We'll need this bathroom when Maxine gets here to do our hair, and help with the makeup, and it'll be too hard to keep him from seeing Aunt Madison."

"So you're kicking him out of the house?"

"Kicking is a harsh word, but, that's about the size of it."

John looked to Terry, and shrugged. "I'll help get your things."

"What about breakfast?"

"Though we don't have corn flakes," Abby offered, "you can share Ricky's WheatyBams."

"Sounds great." Terry chuckled, and moved to the dresser to dig up his shaving kit. What a morning. Hurriedly gulping down the orange juice, he set aside the mug and went into the bathroom to grab a few things to put into the kit. Electric razor, aftershave, toothbrush. He went back to the bedroom, tossed his comb into the bag, put on his wedding ring, then went to the closet and pulled out his suit.
"Dad? Is he getting his clothes?"

Shutting the door on Abby, John came to help Terry collect his suit while Terry took out a crisp white shirt, a dark tie, and reached down for his best pair of dress shoes. After snagging socks, Terry pushed out of the bedroom with Abby and John at his heels.

"Aunt Madison is in the kitchen, so don't go in there," Abby cautioned, as Terry headed into the living room. "I think the girls are waking up. Dad, would you--"

"I'll take care of them," John nodded as they went to the front door. He handed Terry the suit he'd been carrying. "You have everything?" John asked, as Terry glanced at the kitchen to see Jake grinning in the kitchen doorway.

"Where's Ricky?" Terry asked.

"Sleeping in Mom and Dad's room."

"What time did everyone get up?" Terry asked, but he was shooed away by Abby, and if not pushed, quickly ushered out of the house and into the freezing early morning without much ceremony. And without a coat. Shivering in his T-shirt, Terry hurried across the way to AJ's house with his clothes. As he passed his jeep, the outdoor security light from the house made it easy to notice a mound of gear packed in the back. "What on earth?" He paused, looked through the rear window and saw someone had spread a dark blanket over everything. Whatever was in there, was bulky, and it took up a lot of room. Cold wind cut through his shirt, and Terry hurried on his way.

The small yellow house seemed to invite him inside as he opened the door. Jake had moved his easel and studio off to one side of the living room, and as Terry turned to close the door, Terry could hear the reason for the move stirring on the couch. A snore caught, and Dennis blinked, opened his eyes, and saw Terry.

"Is it morning?" Dennis asked.
"The sun isn't up yet, but it's threatening to." Terry looked toward the kitchen. "I was told to help myself to Ricky's WheatyBams."

Dennis grinned sleepily. "The little guy picked up the habit in San Diego, from yours truly. Least it's healthy. Is that your suit? Sweet." Dennis got up from the couch, followed Terry into the kitchen, and without being asked, started searching the cupboards for their breakfast. "I'll admit, I'm not used to going to weddings so early in the day-- when's the ceremony, again? Before noon?"

Terry nodded.

"Maybe it's because you've got a long drive ahead of you, and they don't want you arriving late at night. Hey, I found it." Grinning, Dennis held up a box with cartoon characters, passed it to Terry, then started the hunt for bowls.

"You'd better not tell me more." Draping his clothes over one end of the table, Terry helped himself to a handful of dry cereal and changed the subject. "How's business?"

"We're doing all right." Dennis plunked two bowls on the table, then went to the fridge. "I'm trying to talk Abby into doing some segments for the show. Either get a crew up here, or send her out on location. I'm still trying to work it out." Dennis shrugged. "Her face is on TV right now, but we're shooting new episodes that she's not in. I'm not eager to see what that'll do to our ratings. You heard Tim. When people think of 'Bassin' the Weeds,' they don't just think of me. They think of Abby. I've been getting that kind of feedback everywhere I go."

"Does Jake know about this?"

"Why do you think I'm sleeping on the couch?" Dennis poured milk. "No offense, but I'm not just here for your wedding. He and I are trying to convince her this will be healthy for her career."

"Will it?"

"If she doesn't stay out there-- and I mean, front and center of our audience-- then yes, it's going to hurt her." Dennis looked about, sighed, and went to get some spoons.
"How much of the time would she have to be away from Jake and Ricky?"

"I'm pretty sure we can work out a family-friendly schedule."

"Do you want me to put in a good word for you?"

"Thanks," Dennis smiled, "but if Jake and I aren't enough to swing it, then I'd rather not go any further. That TV show comes with a lot of responsibilities, and a lot of pressure, and I won't blame her if she wants to stay clear and just work the magazine and website."

"I'll certainly be praying about it." Terry picked up his bowl, his mind busy with what Dennis had just told him.

It seemed this morning was just full of surprises.

* * * *

"He's out of the house," John called, coming into the kitchen with a long specialized case under his arm. "I don't think I'll need much time."

"Let me know when you need me." Izzy watched John leave, then went back to fixing the children's breakfast. "You'd better get what you want before John's ready to go out to the jeep." She glanced at Madison. "I don't know how many trips he can safely make without Terry noticing from AJ's house."

Madison wiped her hands on a towel, took one last look at Jake as he leaned over the cake on the kitchen table, then hurried off to the bedroom. Her heart pounded out of her chest. Everyone was helping her, Terry had left, and now she could finish packing without him noticing things missing from their room. She smiled as she met John in the bedroom, busily working on Terry's fishing gear. Seeing he was in the way, John moved the long case so she could climb onto her couch and reach inside the closet.
It only took her a moment to realize she needed help. Terry had a few cloth bags, and even though she already had an idea of which one she wanted, she pulled it out, then opened it a little to show John.

"Is this it?" she asked, and John gave a nod.

"Don't forget the things that go with it, like the cuff links." John carefully laid out what Madison had been told earlier was an expensive fly rod, and placed it into the case. "And a shirt-- not a regular one. It'll be in a garment bag of its own. Do you see it?"

She nodded, and prayed Terry wouldn't suddenly walk in on them.

"Hold on, I'll get something for your clothes." John left a moment, then came back and handed her a garment bag.

She hurried to the office bathroom, knew it was growing late as she worked, then raced back to the bedroom while John placed the remainder of Terry's fishing gear back where it belonged. While Madison loaded her arms with Terry's clothes, John hefted her garment bag, lovingly picked up the case, then looked about the room to make sure they'd gotten everything.

"I need eyes to watch for Terry," John called, as he headed into the hall at a fast clip.

"I'm coming." Izzy sped to the front door in jeans and an old button-up sweater. "Maxine will be here soon."

"Did you turn off the security light?"

Izzy nodded.

"Then let's go." John pushed outside without a coat, and Madison followed after him. John glanced at Izzy, for she was keeping herself between him and the little yellow house as they moved. Izzy's small frame didn't offer them much cover, but they were running out of time. "Do you see anyone at the window?" John asked, as he opened the jeep's tailgate.
"No." Izzy rubbed her arms, her back to John and Madison. "Hurry, I'm freezing, and Madison doesn't have a sweater. Terry won't forgive us if she catches cold on her honeymoon."

"I think he'll understand." John grinned as he tenderly replaced the blanket over the mountain in the back of the jeep. "I'm telling you, I know what I want for Christmas. That case is--"

"John."

"I'm hurrying, I'm hurrying." When John took the garment bags from Madison, she glanced at the yellow house. "We're done here-- you can go back."

Izzy nodded to Madison, and the women went inside to get ready for Maxine.

* * * *

This was not happening, please God, this was not happening. Everyone was waiting for him, and he simply could not find them. Desperate, Terry dumped his shaving kit out on the couch, while Dennis stood by and watched.

"Maybe you dropped them in the bathroom."

"I've checked. I've looked everywhere, but I can't find either one. I was sure I put them in my shaving kit." Terry forced a breath, and stopped to think. "I was supposed to get my clothes..."

"You did that."

"And come here until it was time to go to the church."

"It's time," Dennis gestured to the front door where the photographer stood with a camera slung around her neck, ready to get her first snapshot of the groom going to the church to get married. This moment wasn't intended for the photo albums, so she waited outside. "Maybe you left them back at the house."

"I already checked there. I turned my dresser upside down. If they're not in the dish on my dresser, or in my shaving kit, then I haven't got a clue."
"Gentlemen," Ms. Owens stepped inside and gave one of her impossibly white smiles, "I really hate to interrupt, but you're running late, and after all the guests arrive, they'll be wondering where the groom is. I don't suppose Mr. Beckman could lend you his cuff links?"

"Yes, of course." Dennis fumbled with a sleeve, then offered his wrist to Terry to speed things along. "Man. I guess I should be grateful you aren't missing your shoes." He chuckled as Terry took the cuff links out, and Terry couldn't help laughing, then panicking a little when his fingers wouldn't work the swivel bar through his own button hole. "Here, let me," Dennis said, and he finished placing them in for Terry.

"I promised Mr. Johannes to get you there on time," Ms. Owens said, her voice coaxing them along.

"We're coming." Dennis put in Terry's boutonnière, nodded to Terry, and they headed out the door.

Terry hopped into Izzy's car-- for she didn't want him touching his jeep-- and Dennis climbed into the back, with Ms. Owens and her camera getting into the passenger seat. The time was late, but Terry could blame it on those stupid cuff links. It wasn't his fault. It probably was, but it felt better to not blame it on himself. He sped up a little, and tried to ignore the fact that Ms. Owens was now clicking away. Just what he needed. A snap-happy photographer getting in his face.

He checked his speed and slowed down despite every nerve in his body telling him to do otherwise. He prayed Maddie wasn't waiting at the alter, thinking he'd abandoned her. They were already married, so hopefully, she couldn't be too nervous.

The thought haunted him though, and he kept checking the time.

Then Terry recognized Tim's minivan up ahead, and relaxed a little in the knowledge that he wasn't the only late arrival.

As Terry pulled into the church's crowded parking lot, John came from the building in his good suit, his face the picture of relief. Terry smiled, found a spot to park, and John came around to
the driver's side, even before Terry could shut off the engine. Jake soon joined him, along with Doc Gregory, and Pat O'Shea, a local lawyer and good friend of the family.

"I couldn't find my cuff links." Terry climbed out of the car as Ms. Owens hurried outside. "Please, tell me Maddie isn't crying because I'm late." Terry straightened his suit jacket, then looked at John when he didn't answer quickly.

"She is, but not because you're late." John hesitated, and the other men smiled.

"It's her wedding." Pat slapped Terry on the back. "It's a woman's prerogative to shed a few tears."

Terry looked back at John though, and he could tell it wasn't quite what the others had assumed it was. He raised his brows to John-- a quiet question between men-- and John shook his head, saw Doc was watching, and smiled.

"We're ready when Terry is."

"Then let's get in there." Dennis slapped Terry on the back, then went inside with the others as John and Terry went over what they were supposed to do, one last time.

"Sorry we got here so late." Tim greeted them as he and his family hurried to the main entrance looking flustered, and breathless. "Your directions were good, but it was just one of those mornings when nothing went right."

"Tell me about it," Terry smiled. "Don't worry. It's not that late, so I don't think we were off by much."

"Your ring." John nudged Terry as the O'Briens went into the church, looking relieved that they hadn't held up the ceremony.

Terry took off his wedding band, then handed it over to John with a smile.

The men went around by the side door, stepped into the sanctuary, and greeted Pastor Bill. Then the three went to the altar as the church speaker filled with soft violins. This was it. Terry faced
the pews, smiled at his friends, and felt better knowing that John had his back. He could do this. No problem. Relax, he told himself, and just breathe.

Izzy came up the aisle in a light pink gown, smiled, then took her place on the left. So far, so good.

As the strains of "Here Comes the Bride" filled the church, Terry struggled to swallow. He was a grown man. He was already married to the bride, so this would be no sweat.

Then he saw her. Coming down the aisle on Tim's arm.

Tall, slender, a vision in white that shimmered as she moved. Pinned up blonde hair showed beneath a thin veil that lightly revealed a delicate face he tried to recognize as Maddie's. He felt like looking to Izzy for assurance that this woman-- this mirage floating down the aisle was his Maddie. He struggled to recognize her, started to loosen his tie, but stopped, not wanting to embarrass anyone. Including himself.

His palms were damp. He discreetly dried them on his pants, tried to find her limp to make sure it was really her, but realized this woman was taking such slow, timed steps it was hard to see any limp at all.

She came closer, her eyes met his, and he fought like crazy to swallow.

It was Maddie.

No other woman could do that to him.

She smiled, and he prayed dearly that his grin wasn't as stupid as it felt.

They turned to face Pastor Bill as the music stopped. What a moment that had been.

Terry wrestled for that much needed breath to stop the room from spinning. He stole a look. It was her. The longer he looked, the more he saw that it was really her. It was only that he'd been so unprepared. He'd always known Maddie was beautiful, but he hadn't braced himself for this. The white lace covering her dress looked so delicate, he would've been afraid to touch it, and the
thin veil covering her face made her skin softly glow. Like he was looking through a cloud, and seeing an angel, only this one was earthborn, and she was his.

He shook himself, tuned his ears to Pastor Bill, and listened as Bill spoke of the purpose of marriage, and Terry's heart sounded in agreement.

"First, marriage was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of His holy name. Secondly, it was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of contingency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body. Thirdly, marriage was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity. Into which holy estate these two persons present come now to be joined." Pastor Bill went on, and Terry listened, and the congregation hushed as he came to the questions.

"Terry Edward Davis, wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honour, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?"

Terry nodded. "I do."

"Madison Olivia Jones, wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honour, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?"

"I will." Maddie's voice sounded a bit choked, and Terry hoped she wasn't crying.

"Who gives this woman to be married to this man?"

"I do," Tim said quietly.

Pastor Bill nodded, and Tim went back to his family.
When Terry and Maddie joined hands, Terry could feel Maddie tremble. He gave her fingers a squeeze and kept his eyes on the pastor as he was asked to repeat his vows. He'd said them once before, and he'd tried to keep them every single day. As long as he had breath, he vowed he always would.

"... to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance..."

Pastor Bill nodded to John, and John passed forward Maddie's ring.

His heart full, Terry held Maddie's hand and slipped the wedding band onto her finger. He loved her. He prayed she knew that.

Then it was Maddie's turn to say her vows, and her voice sounded as though she was fighting to stay above the tears. In his heart, Terry said the words with her, walking through them so she wouldn't be alone. His ring was pressed into her hand, and with her head bowed ever so slightly, and with a smile parting her lips, Maddie placed her token not only on Terry's finger, but on his heart, as well.

"Let us pray," Pastor Bill said. "O Eternal God, Creator and Preserver of all mankind, Giver of all spiritual grace, the Author of everlasting life; send Thy blessing upon these Thy servants, this man and this woman, whom we bless in Thy name; that, as Isaac and Rebecca lived faithfully together, so these persons may surely perform and keep the vow and covenant betwixt them made, (whereof these rings given and received are tokens and pledge,) and may ever remain in perfect love and peace together, and live according to Thy laws; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

Smiling, Pastor Bill added, "Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder. Forasmuch as Terry and Madison have consented together in holy wedlock, and have witnessed the same before God and this company, and thereto have given and pledged their troth either to the other, and have declared the same by giving and receiving rings, and by joining hands; I pronounce that they be man and wife together, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."
The congregation answered, "Amen."

Pastor Bill smiled at Terry. "You may kiss your bride."

Terry turned to Maddie, lifted the light veil and didn't pause too long to take in her loveliness. Everyone was watching. He placed a kiss on her lips, looked in her eyes, and smiled. She took his hand--a firm grip, and everyone clapped their hands and cheered. They turned to face the congregation, the music started back up, and Izzy handed Maddie the flowers Terry was sure Maddie must have been carrying up the aisle. He just hadn't noticed them until now. Pink roses. Like the pink boutonnière he was wearing, and the smattering of roses in the church.

Okay, now he got it. They were matching.

Everyone stood as they started down the aisle, and Terry paused to look behind him, and saw John. John grinned, and Terry knew he would remember this day forever. Maddie tugged at his hand, and they started moving again while people wished them congratulations. Terry thanked everyone he could, knowing that most were not coming to the house for the reception. They were keeping it small, but that didn't mean he didn't appreciate each and every one of them for showing up. He waved to Lauren and Ralph, smiled to Stanley McCall, half asleep in his wheelchair beside Emily and a grinning Brian. Brian gave Terry a smile that said, "We made it," and Terry nodded in return. By God's grace, they had. Terry tried not to miss anyone on the way out, but before he realized it, they were in the sunshine, being barraged by a hail of white rose petals.

"Smile and look over here," Ms. Owens called, and Terry suddenly remembered that the photographer had been hovering during the entire ceremony.

"We're going home to take the wedding photos now," Izzy called to him from inside.

Nodding that he'd heard, Terry started for Izzy's car with Maddie in tow while people took pictures and tossed petals. Maddie was holding onto his hand like glue, and he had to admit, he wasn't willing to let go. He smiled at the people gathering to watch them leave the parking lot, then he turned to smile at Maddie. She looked breathless, so he kissed her, and they clapped and cheered, and she looked at him as though he was the only one that existed in her world.
Somewhere, deep inside him, he knew their honeymoon had already begun. He wished he could take her from here-- he didn't know where, just so long as they were alone. The photographer was waiting though, and they had the reception.

He took a deep breath, and carefully helped Maddie and her wedding veil into the car, then rounded the hood while someone pelted him in the leg with a bag of flower petals. He turned, and smiled at Ricky, while Jake gave an apologetic shrug.

"See you back at the house," John shouted, as Terry brushed rose petals from off his windshield.

"See you there," Terry called. He climbed behind the wheel, then shut the door with a puff. So much was going on, and so much was ahead, he fought to simply take one step at a time and to not think too far into the future.

As he pulled from the parking lot, Maddie sat quiet like someone saving herself for later.

Terry knew better than to talk to her now.

They could do this. They were doing this. Terry focused on the road and on breathing. He was tempted to keep on going, to not go back home, but he made up his mind to stick to their plan. Whatever that was. He didn't know what was going to happen, but then, he had a hunch neither did Maddie. The future was up for grabs, and all they could do was cooperate with God and trust Him from moment to moment.

Marriage was a starting place for the rest of their lives, and though his hands were sweating again, he couldn't think of anyone else he'd rather brave each moment with, than Mrs. Madison Davis.

Courage steadying his heart, Terry thanked God for the day they'd already had, and for the rest of the day yet to come.

"This is the day which the LORD hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it."
~ Psalm 118:24 ~
As Terry parked in front of the house, the Hopkins’ car pulled in behind them, with Agatha getting out and hurrying to open Maddie’s door before Terry even had the chance to enjoy the fact they were home. Agatha helped Maddie out of the vehicle while being careful not to hurt her veil, as John’s minivan honked to answer Terry’s wave. Everyone wore smiles, for the air held a kind of energy, the kind that came without even trying.

While Agatha held Maddie’s train off the ground and fussed over the dress, Terry stepped back to keep out of the way. He noted Agatha’s husband tried to do the same when he asked them if he could watch TV. Before Terry could give the go-ahead, Agatha sent her husband a quick nod and shooed him inside. It seemed the poor guy wasn’t needed for anything, but then, until it was time to stand in front of the camera, Terry wasn’t so sure he was needed, either. With a burst of excitement, Izzy hurried over with Ms. Owens, and Terry went to watch from a safer distance beside the minivan with John.

"Don’t get your clothes dirty," John called after the triplets as they ran to the swings beside the house. With a sigh, John smiled at Terry. "I’ll be relieved when the family pictures are over. I don’t know how long I can guarantee the girls will keep their dresses clean." John paused. "Everything okay?"

Terry nodded, looked back at the ladies as they started off for the beach with the helper Ms. Owens had brought. Though he didn’t know what they were doing, he was sure they’d call him when it was time for anything important.

"Could I ask you a question?" Terry looked at John, and John waited for him to speak.

They were alone, so Terry used this chance to ask his friend something he wanted to know, something only John could answer. "In the past, when you’ve tried to wake me from my flashbacks, how hard was it? I’m not all there when it happens, so I’m not sure."
"It wasn't a walk in the park, but it could've been worse."

"Was I ever physical?"

"You may have struck out a few times," John shrugged, "but I didn't take it personally. You didn't know who I was, and you snapped out of it before I had to fight you."

Terry swallowed hard. "If you were Maddie, do you think I could hurt you before I realized who you were?"

"I guess it could happen. By accident. You don't have rough nights like that very often though, so try not to let it scare you. If you have a bad dream, Madison can always come to us for help."

"What if I'm not asleep when it happens?"

The question made something click inside of John-- Terry could see it by the way John looked at him; a realization of what this conversation was really about. "You're only guessing that could happen, Terry. It might not."

"But what if it does? When my foster dad abused me, it sometimes triggered flashbacks of my step-father."

"Have you told Madison any of that?"

"I told her I could have them, but I didn't go into it. She knows I was abused, though. It isn't a secret." Terry felt the breeze and tried to think. "My making her flashbacks worse is one thing, but her getting me out of them, is another."

"Then tell Madison to keep a glass of water handy. Tell her if she can't snap you out of it, then to toss the water in your face, and to use her best judgement about getting away from you until you realize it's her and not someone else. Take it easy-- your flashbacks have never lasted that long to begin with, and you've never hurt anyone."

"But what if I hurt her?"
"It'd be an accident, and I'm sure Madison would understand."

As Tim's minivan pulled up, Terry turned his back to the newcomers and prayed for wisdom. "I told her I wasn't ready, but we're going through with it, anyway." Terry shook his head. "It's crazy, but the thought of facing my abuser again doesn't scare me half as much as the thought of burdening Maddie with not only her abuser, but mine, as well. Because of me, she'll have to fight even harder. And as it turns out, maybe even me."

"You don't know any of this will happen."

"You don't know it won't." Terry folded his arms. "You know enough of what it's like to wake me, so you know I can't handle it on my own. You know what I am. You can say it-- I can face the truth."

"And what do you think is the truth?"

"That I'm a coward, that I run from pain."

"You're no coward. You gave your apartment to a recovering drug addict. Two of them, if I remember right."

Terry shook his head. "Don't try to prove me wrong."

"Keep it up, Buddy, and that's exactly what I'll do. And I won't just try." John nodded to Tim as the O'Briens walked over. "Izumi's on the shore with Madison."

"Oh... okay." Tim looked to Terry, then back at John before moving his family toward the women.

"I should be able to handle this on my own," Terry reasoned.

"This is why your breakdown happened." John pushed his hands into his pockets. "You aren't afraid of the pain. If you were, you would've given up on trying to help people, long time ago."
Terry was working on a comeback, when John kept going.

"You aren't afraid of the pain, but I think in your fight to protect me, and Izumi, and the girls, whenever you tried to help someone, you kept it all to yourself. When they wept, you wept with them, and you wouldn't tell me what you were going through, because you were trying to protect your family. I appreciate that, but I think it was your downfall." John was on a roll--Terry could feel it. "You shouldered a great deal of responsibility with Victor, and Donald, and you never came to me, or any of the rest of us for help. And so you had a breakdown. You gave until you had nothing else to give. You didn't just fall apart, and start having night terrors after having gone so long without them. There was a reason. It's important you remember that."

Terry groaned. "If that's true, then all I need to do is find a way to love my neighbor as myself, without breaking myself in the process, and everything will be dandy."

"It'd be a start." John looked thoughtful. "I'd be open to starting some sort of ministry with you where we support each other, while helping others. Two are much stronger than one." He shook his head. "But that's not what I was trying to say. Accept help when it's offered, and come ask for it when you need it. Don't just gut it out."

"I haven't been making things easy for you and Izzy, have I?"

John shrugged. "I'm a father of triplets-- easy went out the window a long time ago. Just remember, you aren't a coward, trying to run from anything. Caring came with a price, and you weren't afraid of that price."

"Anything else?" Terry asked. He was listening, especially after that offer from John.

"Though you're trying to stay aware of your flashbacks, don't let them rule your life. I don't believe that time during your breakdown is a good average of what to expect in the future. It doesn't represent what you're normally like. Just look at yourself, you've already been getting better. Not exactly one-hundred-percent back to your old self, but you're married now, so of course you're different. In fact, I haven't had to come running lately, so it's safe to say your sleep has at least improved."

"It has," Terry nodded. He looked up to heaven and added, "Thank You, God."
"And thank you, Madison?" John waited, and Terry had to grin. "I've got eyes," John smiled, "I can see she makes you happy."

"I hope you won't regret your offer about starting a ministry, because I just might take you up on that. What I've been doing hasn't been working."

"Not with everyone, but this isn't a perfect world, and the outcomes we get won't necessarily be the ones we wanted. Hold on a moment-- Girls!" John waved to them, shook his head as Ruthie finished a running jump that nearly had her tumbling into the dirt, while Debbie and Lizzie stopped chasing a neighbor's cat around the swing set. John sighed, and looked back at Terry.

"What's important is what God wants, and where He puts us. We can only do our best, and learn from there. We all learn, Terry, and I learn a lot, just by being around you." John smiled.

"You've made a big difference to the people who know you best. Without a doubt, you've helped Madison, and you help your tenants when they can't make their rent on time. The elderly, the families living paycheck to paycheck-- you've made a big difference in their lives, and that hasn't gone unnoticed. Don't look so surprised. More than one has come to me and told me they weren't supposed to tell anyone, but they wanted me to know what a generous man you were, so don't think I didn't know."

"I won't argue the point any further. Right now, I just need to focus on Maddie." Terry almost ran a hand through his hair before he remembered the pictures they were about to take. "A glass of water, huh?"

John shrugged. "Do you want her, or not?"

"I want her."

"Then give her the water."

"Man." Terry blew out a breath. "That was quite a pep talk."

"Anytime you think I need it, feel free to return the favor."

"Are you going to tell Izzy about this?"
John gave him a look.

"That's what I thought."

"Don't worry, her lips will be sealed."

The mention of Izzy made Terry think of the time. He looked to the beach, saw Ms. Owens taking snapshots of Maddie's train and figured the photographer was getting creative. So long as someone out there was keeping track of the time, he didn't mind. They had to know their schedule better than he did.

AJ's red pickup came in from the main road, parked next to Tim's minivan while the triplets shouted and played from the swing set like munchkins who'd already forgotten to be careful about their clothes. When Jake let Ricky out, the boy watched from a distance, and looked content to stand with Dennis, as though not wanting to join in on all that noise; then Ruthie saw her nephew, and came and pulled him into the fun.

"Will you keep an eye on the kids, Dad?" Abby smiled when she got a nod from her father, then she and Jake went into the house-- most likely to get the reception ready, while Dennis moved to watch the photo shoot.

"Terry?" Izzy called from the distance. "We're ready for the bride and groom pictures."

"Sounds like you're up." John smiled as Terry headed for the beach. "Remember to say 'cheese.'"

"Thanks." Terry straightened his tie, glanced at Tim and Karen as they stood enjoying the expansive view of the bay. "Beautiful, isn't it?" Terry grinned when Tim nodded that it was. Terry looked over to where Maddie stood waiting for him, while Ms. Owens' assistant held a white screen that bounced light from Maddie's face. Terry inhaled deeply, then went to stand beside Maddie while the photographer gave directions. Maddie though, stood perfectly still, like a well-poised figurine.

"A little to the right, please."
Terry moved, remembered to smile, and the shutter clicked. He took Maddie’s hand, was alarmed when her fingers were ice cold, but knew there was little he could do about it now. The morning was growing late, the air cold, and the breeze was getting strong. It tugged at Maddie’s veil, and caught behind his shoulder. He looked at her as a wisp of blonde hair strayed into her eyes. She blinked, tucked her hair behind her ear, then looked at the photographer. Her hand was warming in his, but she felt stiff, as though she was stepping through the motions of what needed to be done.

"Maddie."

She looked at him—a deeply earnest gaze that he felt all the way to his soul. He squeezed her fingers, and she looked back at the camera.

"I love you," he whispered, and he saw the beginnings of a smile hover around her mouth. She kept her face on the camera and not on him, but he pressed a kiss to her fingers, and she closed her eyes for a long moment before he saw her breathe again. The photographer kept clicking away, and Terry held onto Maddie’s hand, unwilling to let her go. They walked to the dock, and looked out over the bay. It was all choreographed by Ms. Owens, but Terry got in every chance he could to catch Maddie’s eye. Each time he could make her smile, the more confident he felt that he could hold her. He could shatter her—he was well aware of that—but he also knew how very determined she was, and how that will to keep fighting was making her strong.

The call for John and Izzy came, and Terry laughed when a brave gull swooped to get into the picture. Maddie moved closer to Terry, gripped his hand, and smiled for the camera. Then it was Tim and Karen’s turn, and then AJ’s, and then the bride and groom with just the munchkins, and Paige holding her baby sister. After one more with all the family, including the Doyles, Izzy asked everyone to head inside, for guests were arriving and people were getting hungry.

The truth was, people had been hungry for a long time, but now it fit in with the schedule, or so it seemed to Terry. Sara Doyle went to the kitchen and Terry could hear the excited chatter of something going on. Terry would’ve gone in to see what the excitement was all about, but Sara told him it wasn’t time yet—whatever that meant, and she turned him away. Since the reception was being held buffet-style, people could sit where they liked, which was a good thing, for the living room soon filled when Emily and Brian arrived with Dave, then fishing buddy Vince Russo and his wife Susan from just a few houses away. When John confirmed with Terry that all
their guests were present, John moved a small table to the center of the room, while everyone parted and chatted about the wedding.

Terry was curious. What was the table about?

He was going to ask John, when Jake carried in a large cake plate with a two tiered, white wedding extravaganza, and clapping erupted on all sides of the living room. It was something to look at. The top tier was smaller than the second, and lined at its top base were what looked to be large, ornate white roses made of frosting with soft green leaves. White beading decorated the sides of both tiers, giving it a delicately professional look that puzzled Terry.

"It's amazing," Terry said with admiration, "but I thought the plan was to have a homemade cake?"

"This is," Maddie smiled. "Jake and Izzy made it."

"They made that?"

"Izzy baked the cake, and Jake did all the frosting. He piped the roses and beads."

Grinning, Terry came to get a closer look while people pulled out their phones to take snapshots before the cake was forever destroyed. "You did this, Jake? I knew you were talented-- I already knew that, but this-- where'd you learn to work frosting so it comes out looking so good?"

"From an art major in San Diego. His wife liked roses, so he alway puts them on their anniversary cake, or whenever it was her birthday. It's not that hard, once you know how."

"Maybe for you, but me?" Terry shook his head. "Not in a million years."

"I'd like to get a picture of the cake cutting," Izzy requested, "then you and Madison can change clothes."

"We're changing?"
"After you cut the cake," Izzy nodded, and Ms. Owens moved in with her camera like a hunter moving in on her prey. "We'll serve lunch after we get a few pictures."

"I don't suppose we could eat the cake first?"

Izzy smiled at his joke, handed him a silver knife, then told Maddie to stand at his side while the photographer got into position. Terry forgot about hunger the second he realized Izzy had handed him the knife, and not Maddie. It had a mostly blunt edge, but it still saddened him, especially when Izzy told Maddie to place her hand over his so they could cut the cake together. It made sense, couples might even do it by tradition, but for them, it had an unintended significance that he hoped was lost on most of their guests. Only a few people knew, so it wouldn't mean a thing to them, but Maddie's hand trembled, and Terry had to steady for both of them. As the blade sank into the cake, they had enough sense to smile, and everyone cheered.

"Feed him a bite," Susan Russo coaxed, so Maddie took some onto her fingers, and smiling, popped it into Terry's wide open mouth.

Terry grinned, and kissed Maddie by way of thanks, then everyone laughed when John pointed out the frosting on the side of Terry's mouth. Maddie licked her fingers, and looked at Izzy as Izzy ushered them into the hall. It was good cake, Terry only wished he could've had more.

"Are you packed?"

"I thought you were going to feed us?" Terry asked.

"You're running a bit late, but we will, one way or another. Are you packed?"

"I don't know." Terry looked to Maddie for confirmation.

"We're ready," Maddie nodded. "Terry, are your clothes here, or at Abby and Jake's place?"

"Here. I only brought enough for the ceremony."

"Then could I change first?"
"Go ahead." Terry stepped back as Maddie went into the bedroom. The cake was being carried away, and he could smell lunch. His stomach growled in protest, but thankfully, no one heard.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Karen asked from the couch.

"Thank you, but we've got it under control," Agatha called from the kitchen. "You just rest your feet, and take care of that sweet baby of yours."

As Jake passed Terry with the munchkins and Madeline in tow, so they could wash their hands before lunch, Terry noticed the living room looked different somehow. Then he saw them. Roses. Someone had brought the roses back from the church, and they decorated the living room in a grand way. It wasn't that he couldn't appreciate a good flower, especially when it was edible, but his senses were being overloaded. How much happiness could one man take before he just had to step back and breathe?

Terry pulled off his tie and watched the closed bedroom door. He'd kind of hoped someone would've told him more about this honeymoon by now. After all, he was supposed to drive there, wasn't he? He would at least need a general sense of where they were going if they hoped to get there before nightfall. Terry leaned against the hallway wall and couldn't help but smile. Maybe Dennis had told him too much.

"Terry, are you out there?"

"I sure am."

"Would you go away? I can't change if I know you're out there."

"I'm going." He didn't want to hold up progress, and moved back to the living room as lunch was being served. It didn't help when Tim came over and ate in front of Terry.

"How long have you known John?" Tim asked, as he loaded his fork.

"Since childhood."

"Really." Tim looked intrigued. "It must be nice to have a friend as long as that."
"It is," Terry nodded. "For as long as I can remember, we've always looked out for each other." Terry folded his arms, and thought back to his younger years. "We stuck together, too. John passed up an Ivy League education so we could attend the same school. He claimed he was saving money because he couldn't afford to bury his dad and go to an Ivy at the same time, but John had a scholarship. He could've swung it."

"Excuse me," Izzy smiled as she passed between the men, and sensing where she was heading, Terry followed to see what was going on.

"Madison," Izzy asked through the closed bedroom door, "do you need help getting out of your wedding dress?"

"Thanks, Izzy."

Knowing better than to volunteer, Terry kept his mouth shut and stepped back as Izzy went inside. At least Maddie sounded okay. He went back to the living room, checked the time, and wondered if he could just stay in his suit. He understood why Maddie couldn't travel in her wedding dress, but they could save time if he stayed in his suit and tie. Though the food looked good, he was beginning to think of ways to excuse themselves from the reception and just leave.

"I'm glad my girls will have each other," someone said out of the blue, suddenly jolting Terry from his thoughts.

He turned to find his brother-in-law behind him, with second helpings of Izzy and Agatha's handiwork. "I don't want Madeline to have the kind of childhood I had. It's good to not be alone, don't you think? Besides his excuse, do you know why he did that?"

"Did what?"

"Turned down a good college just because you couldn't get in?"

"We did go to a good college, only not the best one John had been accepted into."
The next question was plain in Tim's face--"Why?"--but Tim didn't have a chance to ask it, for half a moment later, Izzy came down the hall, and gave the nod to Terry. The nod that said,"It's okay. You can go in."

Now wasn't the time for this talk with Tim, a talk that opened a brand new can of worms. Excusing himself, Terry headed for the bedroom and hoped he hadn't misunderstood Izzy. No matter the look, Terry still knocked before turning the handle.

"Come in, Terry."

He opened the door, and saw Maddie in a pale green skirt and matching sweater, her hair still pinned up from the wedding. He sighed with contentment as she placed her coat and purse beside a suitcase on her couch. They were new clothes, and he didn't want to tell her how good they looked on her.

"Excuse me? Uncle Terry?"

He turned and found Paige politely waiting to speak to him.

"Mr. Johannes said there's a bathroom in the office?"

Terry smiled, and opened the office door for her.

He went back to the bedroom and went inside before he was noticed again. "We've got a full house out there," he said, as he shut the bedroom door. "You'd better get out there and eat before they pick the place clean."

She shook her head. "I'm not hungry."

"I probably should tell you to eat anyway, but I have to admit, I'd rather pass up lunch, myself."

She didn't say anything, but watched as he went to the closet to get some clothes.

"I was talking with John." Terry pulled out a pair of slacks, and slid a watchful look in Maddie's direction. "He's the one in this family who's mainly dealt with my flashbacks, so I talked to him."
I knew my flashbacks could get rough, but he said I've almost hit him when he's tried to wake me."

Though Maddie's brows went up, she didn't run from the room in fear, so Terry went on.

"He said I've never hurt anyone, but that you should keep a glass of water by our bed, and to splash it in my face if you can't snap me out of it." Terry paused. "You might even have to leave me alone for a bit, if you think you need to."

"Okay." She went back to her suitcase, and he waited to see if she would say more.

When she didn't, he pulled out a shirt, then watched her a little longer.

"Maddie?"

"Yes?" she asked, as she took out the scented jar candle he'd given her earlier, and rearranged it in her suitcase.

"Never mind." He picked up his clothes and headed to the bathroom. "Do you want to take your verses with us?"

"I've already packed them."

With a sigh of gratitude, Terry went into the bathroom, and shut the door.

By the time he'd changed into his slacks and shirt, and stepped back into the bedroom, he found Maddie waiting with her purse as though she had nothing left to do. He moved beside her to hang the suit in the closet, then reached in to pull out a coat. Since he couldn't find his suitcase, he assumed it had already been taken out to the jeep. He had Dennis' cufflinks in his pocket, to give back to their owner before they left, so as far as he was concerned, he was ready to go. Terry looked at Maddie, shut the closet door and thought about their conversation about waiting to have kids. He'd need to make a run to the drugstore, though it might be awkward if he happened to run into anyone he knew.

"Uncle Terry? Aunt Madison?"
Terry opened the bedroom door and let Abby inside.

"I’m afraid it’s late enough you won’t have time to eat lunch with us," Abby apologized. "Sorry our timing didn’t work out any better than this. Mom and I packed your lunch, but I know you probably wanted to eat it with us. If it makes you feel any better, we didn’t leave out any of the trimmings."

"As long as you included the trimmings," Terry smiled.

"Dad’s putting your lunch in the jeep, but Mom wants to know if Aunt Madison would like to throw her bouquet before you leave?"

"Why? The only unmarried ladies out there are all but munchkins, themselves. I doubt Tim would appreciate it if Maddie tossed her bouquet to Paige or Madeline."

"I guess you could always keep the flowers," Abby shrugged. "Nothing says you have to toss them."

"Then I’ll give them to someone special," Maddie said, picking up her bouquet.

Terry was careful to let Maddie pass without touching her. He might’ve been able to get away with more, but he didn’t want to find out. Not when they were about to leave. He went with Maddie and Abby into the living room, and when everyone saw them, even the triplets looked up from their meal, and smiled.

"Excuse me," Maddie said in a quietly brave voice. "Who here has been married for the longest time? I’d like to give them my bouquet."

"That has to be Dick and Sara," Brian grinned, and Maddie went over and presented her bouquet to the couple.

"Sorry, but we’ve only been married for fourteen years," Dick said with a shake of his head. "My first wife passed away, and while Sara is my second chance at happiness, I think there’s probably more than one couple here who’s been married longer than that."
"Seventeen years," Vince bid, and everyone laughed.

"Agatha, how about you?" Dick asked.

"Twenty-two years."

"Whoa, close," Terry grinned, and looked at John. "But not close enough. John, tell these good people how long you and Izzy have tied the knot."

"Twenty-three years."

Everyone clapped as Maddie handed her bouquet to Izzy, then gave Izzy a hug.

"Do you have any words of wisdom for the newlyweds in your midst?" Terry asked, as Brian put an arm around Emily.

"You're putting me on the spot," John laughed. "Let's see... there's never go to bed angry. Always be quick to listen, slow to speak, and when the trash is full, take it out. More points if you do it without being asked." He paused a moment. "Remember that your marriage will be stronger if you can walk in agreement. It takes time, but it's worth it. I know it's been that way with Izumi and myself. Keep talking to each other, try to keep that communication going. Take time to be affectionate. Remember you aren't the only one in this marriage, and then pray for each other. You need that support-- I know I do."

Without looking, Terry reached for Maddie's hand, and she filled it.

John turned to Terry. "I've known this guy since we were in grade school. He's been as constant as the tide, and his friendship has been something I've relied upon for most of my life." John shook his head. "Terry is one of those big-hearted people who give more than they take, and I can't think of a better way for God to give back to Terry, than to bless him with today."

"Amen," Jake said, and Abby added her agreement.
"Madison," John turned to her, "you fit into this family better than you probably know. Before you came, there was a Madison-shaped hole in our family that I hadn't realized was there until it was gone. You've filled it so completely, it's changed everyone. If you don't believe me, all you have to do is look at Terry. He's missed you dearly."

Madison looked at Terry, and Terry kissed her hand.

"You've been missing from us, and I want you to know how very glad we are that you're finally home." John came over and hugged her, and she wiped some tears from her eyes.

"I know people have a tendency to look at you guys as being a part of my family, but I want to thank you for letting us be a part of yours." John's voice broke. "May God bless Terry and Madison Davis. Long life to you both."

Unable to speak, Terry went over and crushed John in a great bear hug. His eyes were misting, and he was in danger of weeping. Even worse, he had no words to express what was in his heart. When he searched and could find nothing else, he simply said, "Thank you."

"You'd better get out of here before we make idiots of ourselves." John sniffed, and the men tried to regain their composure. "Izumi, where's that envelope?"

Izzy came forward while she dried her eyes, and passed something to John. She then went to hug and stand beside Maddie.

"What's this?" Terry asked, as John placed a large envelope in his hand.

"It's for you and Madison," John smiled. "Go ahead-- open it."

Sensing something big, Terry pulled out a short stack of paper. He read from the top sheet, only to find an address with no name, and a suite number.

"That's where you'll be staying for the next five days. I've made an itinerary-- each day has its own sheet-- but you don't have to follow it." John shrugged when Terry looked at him. "Madison asked me to help with the plans. Reservations have been made in your name where necessary, but you can always cancel."
"So you weren't kidding when you said you were planning my honeymoon."

"You thought I was kidding?" John gave a mock hurt look, and Terry grinned. "Is the last of the luggage in the jeep?"

"No, Maddie has a suitcase."

"I'll get it," John said, while Terry pulled out his phone to punch in the address.

The older kids and the munchkins had finished eating, and were ready for dessert, and Agatha, Abby, and Sara were getting plates ready, for dish noises could be heard coming from the kitchen. Beneath the din of conversation, Terry heard hushed whispers, and he glanced up from his phone to see Izzy and Maddie in one corner of the room. They looked in deep conversation, with Maddie hugging herself, and nodding to whatever Izzy was saying.

"So you'll be gone a few days?" Dick asked, as he looked over Terry's shoulder at the trail connecting home with the address John had given Terry. "Looks like you have quite a drive ahead of you."

Terry looked at his friend. "You don't know where I'm going?"

Dick shook his head. "They've kept it one big secret. Let me see your phone a moment. Wait--I know this place." A smile spread over Dick's face, and he handed the phone back to Terry.

"What?" Terry asked.

"Nothing," Dick smiled.

"What aren't you telling me?"

"Absolutely nothing you won't find out for yourself."
"I guessed as much." Terry smiled, not bothering to pull up the additional information the map offered with the address. "For Maddie's sake, I'm glad it'll be nice. Room service is a luxury, but this is a honeymoon, so why not?"

"There are other luxuries besides room service," Dick smiled, and before Terry could ask what that was supposed to mean, Dick moved off, and started talking to Dennis.

Curious, Terry was about to take a closer look at the address when John came through with Maddie's suitcase. Terry slipped the phone into his pocket, handed Dennis his cuff links, then went to get Maddie's coat, and purse.

As he stepped into the bedroom, Terry looked behind him to see a trio of munchkins tagging along.

"What's this?" Terry asked in amusement.

"Can we come with you?" Ruthie asked.

"Yeah, can we?" Debbie nodded.

"Please?" Lizzie chimed in.

Smiling at his girls, Terry got down so he could look them in their solemn little faces. "Debbie, do you remember when I told you some trips I have to make with others?"

The girl nodded.

"Well, this is one of those times. Not even your mommy and daddy are coming."

"Why not?" Ruthie asked.

"Because..." Terry rubbed his face, and silently begged anyone nearby for help.

"Because we said so," John's voice came from behind. "Now scoot, so your uncle can leave."
"Thanks." Terry smiled to his buddy, and grabbed the last of Maddie's things. He took one quick look at the bedroom while Agatha made the call to cake and ice cream. It wasn't able to get the triplets' attention, so John coaxed them to go, and after a pleading look from Lizzie that Terry answered with a hug, the girls traipsed off to get their dessert.

"Try not to let them guilt trip you," John said, as the men moved into the hall. "Izumi and I will take them somewhere they'll enjoy next week, and if we're successful, they won't even notice you're gone."

"Funny." Terry pinned the manilla envelope under his arm, closed the bedroom door, then fished the jeep keys from his pocket. "I'll call you when we get there."

"From your demeanor, I take it you didn't explore the address," John smiled. "That's an unexpected show of restraint."

"What's my demeanor have to do with it? I'm pretty sure you booked us a fancy hotel. Hey, it's what I would've done." Terry stopped John, as John was about to say something. "You don't have to ruin her surprise-- I understand. You did good, Buddy." Terry punched John in the shoulder. "I'm grateful for all the help. Maddie deserves a good time."

"Whatever you say." John stuffed his hands in his pockets. "As long as you're being such a good sport about it, maybe you could hold off reading the next day's itinerary until you need to."

"I'll play along," Terry smiled.

They went into the living room and found some starting in on cake and ice cream. Maddie stood with Izzy, all quiet and still. When Terry went over to Maddie, and helped her into her coat, Ruthie put down her plate, and came over to watch. As though she was waiting for something. Terry handed Maddie her purse, then Maddie stooped and gave the girl a hug. When the other two saw that, they came over in true Johannes triplet fashion for theirs.

"I'm coming back," Maddie told them, and Ruthie looked hopeful.

"Promise?"
"I promise."

"They're only leaving for a few days, Ruthie." John picked up his daughter, and smiled at Maddie. "It's all right. Izumi and I will keep them busy."

"Have a good time," Abby said, coming to Maddie and giving her a hug. "Don't worry about everyone. Jake and I will look after them."

Terry said goodbye to his little munchkins, hugged AJ, and Ricky, while John did his best to explain, once again, that Uncle Terry and Aunt Madison were coming back. This wasn't a business trip-- the girls knew what those looked like, and since it looked like a vacation of some sort, the triplets felt they were missing out.

"We're going fishing after they leave," John told the girls in a conspiratorial whisper, and they smiled at their daddy as though they had a secret of their own.

For one of the few times in his life, Terry wasn't eager to go fishing with the others, and he let Abby coax him and Maddie from the house without a fight. As he helped Maddie into the jeep, something caught his eye. He closed her door, went around to the back of the jeep while John followed. On the rear window, someone had added a big white decal that said "Just Married." It even gave the date.

Terry groaned. "That comes off, right?"

"Why are you asking me that? Someone else could have done it. It doesn't automatically have to be me."

"I guess I should be thankful there aren't any tin cans tied to my bumper."

"Tin cans." John winced. "I knew I'd forgotten something."

Terry laughed as he went to the driver's side. "I'd better get out of here while the getting's good."

People waved from the house, and even across the street, neighbors could be seen coming out to watch the newlyweds leave. Terry felt a little like a goldfish being watched in a bowl as he pulled
away. He checked Maddie, saw her struggling with her seat belt, but couldn't stop the jeep. Too many were watching, and with a small toot on the horn, he waved to the neighbors across the street, then swung onto the main road and made their getaway.

He checked the mirror, then let out a careful breath. They'd made it.

"Terry, my hands won't work."

"Hold on." Terry eased to the side of the road to fasten her seat belt. "Try to keep breathing, okay?"

She nodded.

It was good advice. He needed to remember that, himself. There was something else he needed to remember, as he got back onto the road, and he wondered if he shouldn't try and make that stop further away from home. Just in case someone saw him. He knew he was being crazy, for everyone knew he was married. Still, it'd be too easy for people to gossip if they saw him buying condoms.

He glanced at his knuckles, realized they were turning white, and loosened his grip on the steering wheel.

"Do you want the radio?" he asked.

"Could I have the phone?"

"I'll need it after I make a stop."

"What stop?"

He bit his tongue.

"Terry?"

"I need to run by a drugstore."
She went silent.

He tugged the phone out of his pocket, handed it to her, and soon, music filled the jeep so much she had to turn it down before their ears hurt.

"You hanging in there?" he asked, and when she didn't answer, he glanced at her. "It's just us, Maddie. No photographer, no friends, no family but you and me. There's no pressure, because no one's watching."

"We're watching each other," she said quietly.

He kept his eyes on the road. "It was a good wedding, wasn't it? Everyone had a great time, and you were beautiful. I've never..." he stopped when he saw Maddie hug herself out of the corner of his eye, and he took a deep breath. "And that cake. I've never seen a cake so decked out, in my life. It was well frosted."

A gasping laugh came from Maddie, and he tried not to smile.

"We've got the open road, and someone to share it with." Terry inhaled the air, even though it was too cold to roll down the windows. "This is what I call a good time." Maddie was watching him, all right-- he could feel it, but he tried to ignore it and kept his eyes on the road. "This is nice," he nodded, then looked in the mirror as someone honked behind them. He checked his speed. He was going the limit, but he accelerated, not wanting someone to ride his bumper for several miles. He forgot all about it when, a few minutes later, someone else honked. A man in a baseball cap waved as he passed them, and ten minutes after that, a minivan tooted its horn.

"Why are they doing that, Terry?"

"I'll give you one guess." Terry jabbed his thumb at the rear window. "John knew this was going to happen. Don't try to tell me he didn't."

"It's not so bad. Is it?"
"I guess not." Terry scooted down a little in his seat. "I wonder if that decal would work on John's minivan?"

Maddie smiled, and when a police cruiser honked as they passed and didn't pursue, even Terry had to grin. They had a long drive ahead of them though, and the honking continued to such an extent, Terry had to pull over and deal with the source of their problem. Thankfully, the decal was easy enough to remove, though he still wondered about trying it on John's minivan.

When Terry had reached enough mileage to make him more comfortable about not running into anyone he might know, he found a drugstore, and prayed he wouldn't have any trouble finding what he needed. Maddie didn't say a word as he parked the jeep.

"Do you want to be a part of this?" he asked, and she shook her head. "Okay, I'll be back soon." As he climbed out, Maddie was hugging herself, and still listening to music. She was focused on staying calm. He could get that. He could also understand they were both suffering from a rather unsubtle case of nerves, and he was relieved she didn't want to go inside the store with him. It was bad enough he had to go in there.

The drugstore doors swooshed open as he went inside, and he fought the crazy sensation that everyone knew why he was there. They were strangers-- he'd gone to some trouble to make sure they were, but even if they weren't, none of them were mind readers. They wouldn't look at him and know.

He grabbed a hand basket, meandered harmlessly and read the layout of the store. Hairspray. He dropped it into the basket, figuring it would look better if he didn't check out with only one item. He smiled at an elderly couple, edged past a display of potato chips and made a round about path to the area of the store he wanted. A few things along the way couldn't hurt to make him look like a casual shopper, and when he finally reached the area he wanted, he stopped as though he were reading cereal boxes and not what they actually were.

He felt like picking up the first product he saw and hiding it under the bag of potato chips, but he didn't have anything to be ashamed of. Marriage was right and honorable, and he was doing this for Maddie. The second box seemed like a better choice, so he placed it in the basket and went on with his shopping. After a few more minutes of loitering, he headed to the checkout-- then realized he could check himself out without anyone being the wiser. By the time he'd run
everything past the scanner, he had shelled out fifty dollars and ninety two cents for what had basically amounted to a ten-dollar box. Still, he was new at this and had needed the camouflage.

As he stalked back to the jeep with his groceries, Terry heard someone call his name. He looked over, recognized someone he knew coming toward him, but in the general direction of going toward the store, and not from it.

"Terry Davis! Didn't expect to see you in this neck of the woods!"

"Just picking up a few things," Terry smiled.

"I thought I heard you were getting married? Is that right?"

"Yeah. Today, in fact. My wife is in the jeep. We were just getting some groceries before we take off for a few days."

"Congratulations," Nick checked his phone, then edged toward the entrance. "I left Nicole with a babysitter, so I gotta run. We should get together sometime, and celebrate."

"Sure-- take care," Terry smiled as the man went on his way. Okay, almost everyone knew about his marriage. Terry hefted his bags, and finished the last few steps to the jeep. When he reached the driver's side, Maddie leaned over and unlocked the door.

"I thought you said you'd be back soon?"

"I tried to be." Terry leaned in and lifted the bags into the back seat.

"What's all that?"

"Groceries."

"I thought you only went in for one thing?"

With a sigh, Terry climbed behind the wheel, shut the door and looked at her. "Next time, you go in."
She bit her lip, then a smile teased around her mouth.

"Go ahead, and smile. It didn't cost you a thing. I just ran into an old friend out there." Terry started the engine. "Did you remember to bring any toothpaste?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I just bought a two-pack." Terry fastened his seat belt. "It's time to start the map," he announced, and Maddie passed him the phone.

She looked in the back seat and he heard the crinkle of grocery bags. "You bought pretzels?"

"If that's what you see." He made sure the map had their destination, turned the volume up all the way, then placed his phone in the cup holder. He negotiated the parking lot, found his way back to the road as Maddie opened the bag of pretzels, then noisily munched away. "How about feeding me some?" he asked. A pretzel found its way to his mouth, then he tasted salt as it passed onto his tongue. "Thanks."

The radio wasn't on, but since he needed to hear the turn by turn directions from his phone, it didn't matter. Snacking kept them busy, and they relaxed enough for Terry to start enjoying their drive. When he wanted another pretzel, all he had to do was smack his lips, and Maddie would feed him another salty twist. It helped with his hunger pangs, and to pass the time.

The afternoon was getting long, the excitement from the wedding was beginning to wear off, and after the bag of pretzels was put away, the quiet of being together started to set in. They'd spent time alone before, so Terry didn't think this was anything too new, only this time, it was.

If only he didn't feel like such a newlywed.

"Do you want to take a nap?" he asked finally, trying like mad to say something.

"I'm not tired."
"So." Terry sucked in a breath. "How about telling me what's in the back? That's quite a mountain we've got under that blanket."

"You looked under it?"

"No, I only meant, that's quite a mountain from here."

"How much longer until we get there, Terry?"

"I don't know-- look at the phone."

She didn't look.

Terry flicked her a glance. "Do you want me to speed up, or slow down?"

"I don't know. I just want this to be over."

"The drive, or the honeymoon?"

No answer.

"Maddie?"

"I'm thinking about it."

"While you're thinking, could you feed me some of those potato chips?"

"You're going to get thirsty."

"I bought fruit punch." He glanced at Maddie. "If you wanted something else, you should've told me before I went in."

She shook her head. "We're a mess, aren't we, Terry?"
"Nah, you and I are just getting started." Terry watched the back of the semi truck in front of them and adjusted his speed. "We're not doing as bad as you might think."

"What do you like about me that isn't messed up?" She was smiling now-- he could hear it in her voice.

"Let's see--" he thought out loud. "There's so much to choose from, I can't make up my mind. There's your sense of decency, and your willingness to trust after so much evil." He watched as the semi took the next exit. "The fact you haven't taken the easy way out after all these years. There's a lot to love about you, Maddie."

He heard a snifflle, and stopped talking.

"What do you like about the way I look?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I hadn't noticed."

"Terry--" she prodded his side, and he smiled-- "I'm serious."

"Your eyes. When the light is just right, I love the way they change color with your mood. Sometimes they're blue, and other times, they're as stormy as the bay in winter."

"Is that what you love best about my face?"

When he didn't answer right away, she pushed at his side.

"Honestly? I love your mouth even more. I love it when you talk to me, and I love..." He didn't finish.

"You like my kisses?"

"No, I love them."

She hugged herself, and went quiet.
He’d made a mistake speaking so bluntly, so much from the heart. But she’d asked.

"Terry?" He could hear the gulp in her voice. "Could you speed up a little?"

He gave a small nod, and tried not to show any emotion. Especially when he sensed Maddie going into a kind of lockdown. She didn't speak, she didn't look at him, but stared straight ahead while she hugged herself with both arms. If he didn't have to stay behind the wheel, he would've hugged her, soothed her somehow, but he had a feeling she wouldn't have heard him. If he didn't know any better, he would have said she was clutching up, going into a flashback, but every so often, when he glanced at her, he would see her blinking at the road ahead of them, her face still very much in the present.

For the next few hours, they sat in silence while Terry followed the phone's directions. He was now wishing he'd looked into where they were going, instead of leaving everything to surprise. Of course, John knew, and Terry didn't want to ruin anything for Maddie, but the last thing he wanted to do was wind up in the wrong place. He'd drove through here before, but as someone passing through, not as someone intending to stay. The sun was close to setting, and they weren't at their destination yet. He glanced at Maddie to see if he could glean any information from her expression, but she gave none. Except for the very real impression she gave of never having been this way before.

No big surprise there.

As he kept following the map, the Catskill Mountains swallowed the sun whole, then began to wipe the sky of light.

"Turn left..." the phone announced, as trees lined the dimming horizon.

He turned, kept following the road, until he was told his destination would be on the right.

"Terry, I don't feel good."

"Hold on, we're almost there." He passed black ornamental gates, pulled to a stop, then turned on the overhead light to read the printout John had given him. "I need to check in. Will you be all right if I leave you in the jeep?"
She nodded and hugged herself, and Terry prayed she would be okay. He located the building he needed by the fancy sign out front, and found a place to park.

"Did you bring your phone?" he asked, and nodded when he saw her hold up her purse. "If you need me, call, but I'll try not to take too long. Just stay put, and I'll come get you, okay? Just keep breathing, Maddie. I love you. Don't forget that."

"I love you, too."

He unsnapped his seat belt, took the phone from the cup holder, then popped open his door. If she'd been feeling better, he would've taken her with him, but maybe this was for the best. She could calm down better out here, than while he was busy filling out paperwork. He'd go with that hope, and gave Maddie a smile as he walked away.

He loved her. Oh, how he loved her.

* * * *

She wouldn't die. Even though it felt like she would, she knew she would not die. She'd been through this before. She'd survived it by crawling inside herself, by hiding from the shame, the hurt, and the pleasure, and then punishing herself for feeling as much as she had later on. She was dead to it now, she had to be. Maybe it wouldn't mean anything at all, and she'd be like a tree hollowed out by heart-rot. That would be good, wouldn't it? Then she wouldn't need to cut.

If she didn't let Terry touch her though, she knew she'd cut anyway; but God didn't want her to, so she'd have to fight. No matter what, she couldn't hurt herself. She couldn't deal with it like she used to-- she couldn't take her old escape. She could, of course, but she'd have to not take it. To choose another way, even though habit was so strong she could taste it.

She would not cut, no matter what happened tonight. Madison didn't know if she actually believed that, but she knew she had to turn herself to flint, make herself as hard as stone so she would not be moved.
"God, help me. Please, help me!" She gripped her arm until it hurt, then gripped the seat and stared hard at the dashboard, the light glinting off the textured surface from the outdoor lamp in the parking area. She wished she could climb into the tiny crevices, and not be found. But then she’d be no better than she was before—invisible, chained, and forgotten. She didn't want that. She wanted to claim her place in the world, and that meant claiming her place with Terry.

She found her purse again, opened it and searched it by the light from the parking lamp. She had to find them, and she had to find them NOW. She found the paper, pulled them out and tried to make her hands hold still. They shook so much she couldn't read her own handwriting. Overwhelmed... She needed to remember that verse, but couldn't.

Someone came to her window, and she jumped.

"Maddie?" The door unlocked, and it opened to Terry. His warm touch steadied her hands. "Are you okay?"

"I-- I can't remember the cry."

"'From the end of the earth,'" he led her through the verse in a hushed voice, then kissed her forehead. "We're checked in."

She didn't ask any questions, just let him help her from the jeep while she focused on her battle cry. She'd worked so hard to memorize her verses, but right now, it all came down to a few lines of strength. The moon cast its light on her, showing wide buildings that looked liked a country club she'd once seen on TV. Only these had cobblestone walkways with carefully placed scenic trees, a lawn with small animal statues that looked like something out of a dream.

"Someone is waiting to show us our suite."

She nodded, squeezed Terry's hand as he led her over the smooth stones to another building. The door stood open, and they stepped into a tall room with stairs on one side. A man stood near a fireplace, and smiled when Terry introduced her.

"I hope you'll enjoy your visit at The Pembroke. You'll be staying in our Empire Suite, which has some of the finest accommodations our resort has to offer. The bedroom and bathroom are in
the loft, but when this suite was booked, I understood you preferred to camp out on the floor. To accommodate this, we've removed some of the furniture to ensure there's enough room for a comfortable stay. Will this floor be all right?"

"Yes, thank you." Madison didn't know what else to say. John had been very thoughtful, and so had this man.

"If you need anything, or have any concerns, please call the main desk and we'll be happy to accommodate in whatever way we can." The man gave Terry some keys, shook their hands, and when Terry started to tip him, he turned it down.

"That's not necessary. I'm the owner." He smiled, and left the suite to Terry and Madison.

She looked about the room and saw the couch was against one wall with a large flat paneled TV on the other. A fireplace was at one end of the room, with some small pieces of furniture lining the walls, but for the most part, the center of the suite had been left empty. Thick curtains were drawn over the windows, a milky white lamp stood on an end table beside the couch. There was an overhead light, but it stayed off, giving the suite a more intimate feel. It wasn't fancy in a Las Vegas way, but it felt inviting, like somewhere she could retreat to and find refuge. It felt like a home, and she liked that. Terry pressed a button on a remote, and as the fireplace came to life, she felt herself glow like those flames.

"Terry? Would you unlock the back of the jeep?"

"So you're letting me see what the mountain is made of?" He grinned as they went outside.

The moon followed them across the parking area where their jeep sat waiting for them. Terry unlocked the tailgate, but she opened the back herself.

"You'd better let everyone know we made it here okay." She lifted the blanket just enough to get what she needed. The sleeping mat was bigger than what she'd remembered, but it wasn't heavy, and she had no trouble at all carrying it into the suite. She noticed Terry had turned quiet. He didn't say a word as he followed her inside, watched as she unrolled the mat on the floor, and didn't even comment at the way the mat inflated on its own. It was a sleeping mat people used
for camping, only this one was wide enough for two. He followed her back out to the jeep, watched as she started to pull out bedding, then took some in, himself.

Pillows, and lots of blankets, all went into the suite. Then Madison shoved out their suitcases, and Terry asked her to step aside before she had a chance to struggle with their heft, and easily carried them inside. She lifted out Terry's garment bags, saw Terry's face when he came back and saw them.

"What's up with that?" he asked. "Why'd you bring it?"

When she bit her lip, he shook his head, and carried the bags into the suite. If it had been possible, she would've left his garment bags in the jeep, but she didn't want his clothes to get wrinkled. Everything else, though, he didn't need to know about, and after lifting out their packed lunch, she closed the tailgate just as he was returning.

"What was the rest of that stuff under the blanket?"

"It isn't time to show you, yet."

"What do you mean? We're here, I've seen the resort, I've been impressed that you and John didn't go out and book the first thing to cross your radar, so now I get to see what else is under the blanket, right? I know there's more. Granted, most of it was bedding, but I saw enough to know there was more."

"Please, Terry."

"This woman and her secrets." He smiled, took the food, the bags from the drugstore, and walked her back to the suite. "It's a good thing for you, I'm in love."

"Why?"

"Because if I wasn't--" Terry closed the suite door with his foot--"I'd do something rash, like tickle your feet until you told me everything. Or," he grinned as he locked the door for the night, "sing off-key until your eyes teared. Which fortunately for me, isn't that hard to do."
She smiled. "I don't think you could get information out of me, Terry. I'm too determined."

"You are, huh?" He opened his mouth, as though about to say something, but closed it and just looked at her, his face both playful and tender.

Unable to look at him and not do something about it, she turned to the stack of blankets and pulled out the thickest comforter. Unfolding it over the mat, she proceeded to make a bed. She took off her coat, went back to work while Terry leaned against the arm of the couch and watched.

"Did you call home?" she asked finally.

"I forgot."

When Terry took out his phone, Madison hurried to get as much done as she could before he hung up and started watching her again. Two pillows. One for her, and one for Terry. Madison gulped when she saw them side by side, but it was where they belonged. She got to her feet, spread a sheet over the bed, then a comforter, then a second, for it would be really cold tonight. Izzy had already looked at the forecast.

By the time Madison finished, she looked over to see Terry pretending to watch the fireplace. She knew it was pretend, for she'd caught his gaze sliding away from her as she'd turned in his direction.

"Well." After what seemed like an eternity, Terry studied the room from where he sat. "It's a nice place. Upscale, and yet still laid back. I like it."

She nodded.

He rubbed his hand on his knee and kept looking at everything in the room but her and the bed. "It's a nice place," he said again.

She tried to find something to say, but nothing came.

"So," his eyes met hers, "I guess it's getting close to bedtime. What do you think?"
She nodded.

He looked at the stairs. "The bathroom's up there. Do you want to use it first, or should I?"

"I have to find my clothes--" Madison looked about, only to see her suitcase by the door. A crazy thought danced through her that she could still take her bag and leave. She lingered with that thought until she realized Terry was talking to her.

"Should I change first?"

Her eyes traveled back to Terry, and she nodded, "yes."

He took a deep breath that even she could hear, pushed away from the couch, and went to his suitcase. As he pulled out his pajamas, she was glad that at least they reminded her of home. It helped her to relax a little. She watched as he moved up the staircase to the loft, and hoped it wouldn't be too hard for her to use the bathroom. The bedroom was up there, too, and she supposed it would be a little like going through John and Izzy's master bedroom with her eyes shut. She could do that.

Feeling more at home, Madison moved to her suitcase, opened it, and found her new nightshirt and matching robe. She took out her prescription pain ointment, for her primary physician--Dr. Nelson--had mentioned that if Madison ever became sexually active again, to use it before intercourse. Madison didn't know yet if being with Terry would definitely cause pain, but she wasn't taking any chances. She stuffed the tube of ointment into her pocket, took out her bottle of acetaminophen, and dry swallowed two pills. She, and Izzy, and even Carol had gone over everything they could think of to make this work. And there was always the phone if she needed more help.

Closing the suitcase, Madison went to the freezer bag to search through their packed lunch. She'd talked to Izzy before leaving, so she knew the cups were in there. Then she spotted a small stack beside the silverware, and slid one off. She closed the freezer bag, then wrapped the plastic cup in her nightshirt, and went to the couch to wait her turn for the bathroom. She would've been willing to wait a long time, but Terry soon came down the stairs in his green pajamas and gave her the nod.
So much for being willing to wait.

"The bathroom's in the bedroom," he cautioned. "I'll have to walk you through."

She took his hand when he offered it, and he gave her fingers a gentle squeeze as they moved up the steps. He told her when to close her eyes, and a few steps later, the carpet turned to tile beneath her shoes.

"You're here," he said, and let go of her hand. "I'll wait outside the door until you're ready to go back." He shut the door for her, and she found herself in a great big bathroom with a fancy looking bathtub.

She turned to find a large mirror, and a pale face staring back at her. Despite all the makeup, she still looked washed out. Like she was on a tall mountaintop looking down. She closed her eyes, and started to change her clothes. The wind was tugging at her to fall, the mountain was awfully steep, and there didn't seem anywhere else to go but up.

She had butterfly wings, so it was time to use them.

It was time to fly.

Madison changed, used the ointment, fastened the last of the buttons on her nightshirt, then looked at herself in the mirror. The soft blue material deepened her eyes, so she supposed that was all right. So long as she didn't look worse. She reached for the robe, but stopped. She would go as she was. Izzy had said to wash off the makeup before going to bed, so Madison washed her face, then freshened up her hair to make herself pretty for Terry.

Tears stung her eyes, but she willed them back. Then one by one, the verses she'd memorized marched before her, and she could see them as clearly as if they had been taped to the wall. Sweet words, bold words that told her through Christ, she could do all things. Even be with her husband.

"God, don't let what happened with the Dragon get in the way of me being with Terry. Please."
"Maddie, who are you talking to in there? Are you okay?"

"Yes, Terry."

"Are you ready to come out?"

"Almost." She took the plastic cup, filled it with water, then sucked in a deep breath. "I'm ready now." The door opened slowly, probably because Terry wanted to give her time to close her eyes so she wouldn't see the bedroom behind him, but she couldn't move. She kept her eyes open as the door creaked, and Terry's face came into view.

Everything around her slipped away, and all she saw was Terry.

As he took her in, his eyes stirred with emotion, and with lust, but also love. A great deal of love.

"I'm ready, Terry." She held out her hand to him, and he took it with so much tenderness, she knew he hadn't understood. "I'm ready to go downstairs," she said gently.

He nodded, blew out a breath, and she closed her eyes.

The carpet felt soft to her bare feet as he led her through the bedroom, though she couldn't help but shiver a little.

The night was getting cold.

"You can look now," Terry said, as they started down the stairs. "Sorry about that, Maddie."

She gripped his hand, and tried to breathe while she kept the cup from spilling. Her heart was full to overflowing, just like this cup, and it was all she could do to keep from passing out. As they came to the last step, she fought for air.

"Terry?"

He looked at her.
"Would you kiss me?"

He grinned his sweet Terry lopsided grin, took the cup, and went and placed it on the floor beside their pillows. Then he came back to her, and pulled her close with the gentlest of tugs. He could have been pulling thread through the softest cotton, and she wouldn’t have come any easier.

"Are you wearing your wedding band?" she asked. Her fingers felt his, but he nodded, "yes." "I need to remember it's you. I'm wearing mine." She showed Terry her rings, and he kissed them.

He turned her hand, planted a warm kiss in her palm, and met her gaze so firmly, Madison's breath caught. He caressed her cheek, and her heart raced as his mouth lowered to hers. He kissed her with such pained need, it broke her heart. He'd been holding back for so long, she strained to give all of herself and to answer his touch.

She felt his breath as he pulled her close.

"Don't leave me, Terry. Don't leave me alone when you're done." She melted as he kissed her, and as they moved to the bed, she sent up one last prayer.

A prayer without words, a cry that only God could hear.

Overwhelmed, but pulsing with love, Madison took to the sky.

* * * *

She could hear him sleep, that soft breathing that said he wasn't awake, and she needed him to be awake. Madison shook his shoulder, and a snore caught in his throat.

"Terry?"

The arm cradling around her pulled tight, and she kept shaking him until his eyes fluttered open.

"Terry, I have to use the bathroom."
His arm moved, and she straightened her nightshirt before pushing the covers back. The fireplace was off, but the lamp on the table was still on, casting enough light to see by. The suite felt cool, but not cold, and she absently wondered what time it was.

She sucked in a breath, held it, then slowly got to her feet. Her knees wobbled, and when she started for the stairs, she gasped, and had to stop a moment.

"Maddie?"

Behind her, Madison could hear the rustle of blankets as Terry climbed out of bed. A hand went to the small of her back, and she stiffened at his touch before relaxing.

"Do you want me to go away?" he asked, and she shook her head. "Does it hurt?" he asked quietly.

"Just give me a moment." She swallowed, looked at the stairs, and felt weak.

Suddenly, the floor disappeared from under her, and she found herself in Terry's arms, floating toward the stairs. She put her arms around his neck, hugged against his open pajama top, and closed her eyes. Someone else tried to invade the moment, so she clung to Terry even harder.

"If we can't do this without hurting you, then I won't touch you, Maddie." He pressed his forehead to hers. "I mean it. Tonight will be the first and last time I ever touch you."

"Could we talk about it later?" She closed her eyes as they neared the bedroom, then opened them when he lowered her, and her feet kissed the cold tiles. "Don't leave, Terry. Please, don't leave me alone."

"I'm still here." He took a step back as she moved to the toilet. "Your limp is worse."

"It doesn't hurt that bad. You were gentle, Terry."

"I'm glad to hear that, because right now, you're giving a great impression of someone in pain."
"I'm all right."

"Please be honest with me, Maddie. I need to know."

She flushed the toilet, made her way to the sink and felt more sure of herself with each step. "You aren't the Dragon. It hurts, but you aren't him. You treat me differently."

"But you are in pain?"

"I feel some," she had to admit, "but it's because of the Dragon, and what he did to me, and not you. You didn't hurt me-- the Dragon did." She washed her hands, and looked at Terry. "I don't know how I look to you, but I don't hurt as much as I have in the past. The ointment my doctor prescribed is helping, and so is the painkiller. When the Dragon was finished with me, I usually had to fight not to crawl. This time, I can walk. See?" To prove it, she crossed the bathroom to Terry, and his arms came around her as she leaned into his hug.

"If it ever becomes too much for you, Maddie, tell me to go soak my head under the faucet, and I will."

"No, stay with me."

"I'm here. I'm not going anywhere." He held her tight, and her eyes caught the gleam of diamond on her ring finger.

She sighed as she remembered three small words: "I am loved."

"You aren't the Dragon," she said again, taking great pleasure in that truth. "I will be with you, Terry. I will." She hugged him fiercely, and closed her eyes as he gathered her even closer. "Do you know what? I flew tonight."

He pulled her back a little, looked into her eyes as though he wasn't quite sure he'd heard her right. Then a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"I love this woman. This wonderful, sweetheart of a woman."
"You didn't have a flashback, Terry."

"God blessed us." Terry hugged her, and nuzzled her ear. "He blessed me with you. Lovable, kissable, Maddie." He groaned softly. "Get ready, I'm carrying you through the bedroom." He lifted her, she closed her eyes, and when she put her hand to his chest, she could feel his heart quicken to her touch.

Just as quickly, dragon eyes flashed before her, and she blinked hard to make them go away.

She was with Terry. She was safe.

Terry carried her downstairs, then lowered her onto the bed. He crawled in after her, and she quickly cozied into his arms, even as he tugged the blankets over their shoulders. Touch sparked more touch, and they triggered things she had to fight like crazy to keep at bay, but as she felt warmth surround her, she knew she was home.

The sun was warm on her face, the wind felt gentle on her wings.

And Madison was flying.

"Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled [Terry and Madison]: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge ['the Dragon']."
~ Hebrews 13:4 ~

"I [Madison] found him whom my soul loveth [Terry]: I held him, and would not let him go..."
~ Song of Solomon 3:4 ~
"Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh."
~ Genesis 2:24 ~

It wasn't morning yet. Terry knew that much, just by looking at the dark curtains over the windows. He yawned, then rolled onto his side to snuggle with Maddie. He nudged his head closer until his lips kissed the side of her face.

"Terry."

Her sleepy voice made him smile.

"I'm hungry."

"I don't know why, when we only left home before lunch, and then went without dinner."

"I had the pretzels you bought."

"True enough. Still, we should eat." He thought about it, but made no effort to get up. He nuzzled, found her mouth and started to kiss her. She tasted better than any food he could ever imagine, and as he started to lose himself, she pulled away.

"Please--"

"I know." He pushed onto his back, and stared at the ceiling. He was getting up, but in his own way. The suite had grown cooler as the night had worn on, and the bed felt so comfortable, he had to mentally prepare himself to shove the covers off. He just wasn't there yet. He turned his head, and looked at Maddie. "Are you all right?"

"Are you going to ask me that every time you hold me?"
"Is there going to be a next time?"

"After everything I said in the bathroom, do you even have to ask?"

"It was only a question--" He laughed as a slender hand darted under his arm, and he couldn't stop howling as she moved to get a better vantage for her armpit-attack. "Maddie..." He tried to grow serious, and keep a straight face, but he failed miserably.

When he started to flex some muscle, Maddie let out a nervous giggle. Her giggles turned to peals of laughter as he dug beneath the blanket and tickled under her arm. She gasped for breath, then leaned in, and the next moment her mouth was on his and they were kissing. For all her play, Terry knew she needed to stop. He tried to ease back, but she held fast and wouldn't let go. She needed to stop-- he knew she did, and with that sounding in his brain, he pushed away, got to his feet, and breathed deep. The only miracle was that he'd been able to think clearly enough to act.

Rubbing his face, he looked down, and saw Maddie curling onto her side as though trying to comfort herself. "Sweetheart--" he knelt, and gathered her in his arms-- "I didn't mean anything when I pushed you away. We just have to calm down a little, that's all."

"I'm sorry, Terry. I'm sorry."

"Hey, don't apologize."

"It's just that I feel so much-- so many things are happening at the same time. If I don't hold on, maybe this will all go away and I won't be able to find it again."

"Don't worry about it. Let's just relax, and have that dinner before someone calls from home and we're forced to admit we still haven't eaten." He looked at the freezer bag by the door, but she was clinging to his pajama top so he couldn't get up. "I'm just going over there to get our dinner, okay?" He smiled when she nodded, "yes," then eased a hand behind her to give her comfort. "Are you all right?"

"You keep asking that."
"Only because you winced just now."

"I'm okay," she nodded.

He climbed to his feet, then stepped away to get the freezer bag.

She looked about the room. "What time is it?"

"It's still dark outside, so whatever it is, it's early morning." Terry lifted the bag onto the blankets, then opened it, and checked inside. "The ice packs are still cold."

Maddie rubbed her arms as he took out the first of the plastic containers. "Could we turn on the fireplace?"

He leaned over, picked up the remote, and clicked on the flames. Opening a container, he popped a tasty shrimp into his mouth, then passed the seafood to Maddie. The next had fancy pasta with a creamy sauce that had Agatha's name all over it, and another with finger food. He took out a bag with half a loaf of crusty bread, fresh from the bakery, and even cold, it made the room smell fragrant and hungry. Wincing a little, Maddie leaned in, and took out two plastic cups while he opened a bottle of sparkling apple cider.

"A must at all of our honeymoons," he smiled, as he handed her the bottle.

"Do you think John and Izzy are up right now?"

"I doubt it." Terry set out the paper plates. "Why do you ask?"

"Izzy helped me get ready, and I wanted to tell her everything worked."

"Oh." Terry handed Maddie a napkin and a plastic fork. "Just do me a favor and be vague?" The napkin came flying back at him, and he smiled.

"I wouldn't tell Izzy anything that was just between you and me, and you know it."
That I do." Terry pulled out a rather large container, frowned at the sheer size, and opened it. "Look at all this cake. We even have two of the roses. Abby wasn't kidding when she said they gave us the trimmings."

"I'm hungry, Terry."

"We're praying." He took her hand while the smell of food made their stomachs rumble. He didn't know why, but he spoke to God with a hushed voice of thanks. Maybe it came from trying to keep Maddie calm, or the fact they had just come from a very private time together. When he opened his eyes, Maddie looked happy, her face soft from the light from the fireplace.

While the world spun in chaos outside their door, they sat warm in bed, and dined on shrimp and pasta, and bread that came from the bakery at the MegaMart. Maddie dipped her shrimp in his pasta, and he helped himself to her bread while she leaned against an armrest of pillows so she wouldn't have to sit up the entire time. Pain was mixing itself into the moment, and she looked to be reaching for the joy even harder. He watched her and marveled, until he was lost in the moment himself, and eating bites of food because she kept teasing them in front of his lips.

Then he cut a large slice of cake, placed a rose beside the wedge, and settled beside Maddie. They ate from the same plate, then each had a rose, with neither of them being able to finish all their petals.

"Do you want me to carry you upstairs?" he asked, as Maddie started to get up.

She shook her head, and gingerly got to her feet while Terry stood and readied to help her. She started to walk, and her breath caught, and Terry waited for the verdict. Instead of speaking, she took another step, then kept going to the stairs. Her limp was a little worse than before, but she was walking, and not crawling, and for that, he was grateful. She took the steps slowly but surely, and he kept behind her in case she needed help. With food in her, she looked stronger, though when they came to the bedroom, he lied her in his arms, and carried her to the bathroom. She had been strong enough-- he could take her the rest of the way.

They brushed their teeth side by side at the sink, sharing the toothpaste, and the running water. She was a different kind of friend, one who shared his bed, his plate, his toothpaste, and his last name. They truly were one flesh. With all this proximity, he half wondered if he stubbed his toe,
would she cry out in pain. Probably, because that was the kindhearted woman she was. Just for that, Terry hugged her before she could spit out her toothpaste.

"Tewee!" She spit into the sink and gave him a look.

"It was unavoidable," he apologized, and hugged her from behind as she washed her mouth out.

"I say we lock the door and stay in here forever. What do you think?"

"I say that's too long to stay in the bathroom." She reached for the towel, and he let her go just enough for her to grab it, then he pulled Maddie back in his arms and she leaned against him while she dried her hands.

He studied her ear, nibbled her earlobe, and she giggled. He hugged her, she laughed, and he felt her pulse begin to race, a frantic bubbling up of joy and passion that needed to be soothed into something more manageable. Taking a deep breath, he held her and quietly let the moment pass until her body relaxed against his. Then, pressing a kiss to her forehead, he walked her to the bathroom door, gave her a moment to close her eyes, then swept her into his arms, and carried her downstairs.

"I'm sorry we couldn't stay in the bathroom," she whispered, and he lightly bumped her forehead with his in gentle reply. "I wish we could do everything you want, Terry. I'm sorry I'm not--"

"Stop right there." He let her down on the bottom step. "I was teasing about the bathroom."

"I know, but--"

"I've had a beautiful night with my wife, and the only thing left for me to want, is to see you getting some rest." He watched her climb back into bed, and he couldn't help but smile that he could lay down beside her, and hold her, even if that was all he could do for now. Unlike before, he could sleep with Maddie beside him. For any other man, it might not be such a big deal to simply fall asleep beside his wife, but for Terry, the space that had separated them before tonight, had sometimes felt miles wide. He climbed into bed, pulled the covers over them and sucked in a breath as Maddie cuddled into his arms.
"Like you said, we're done for tonight?" she whispered, and he kissed her hand in quiet agreement. "I love you, Terry."

"I love you, too. Oh, I love you, too." Terry gentled his hand at the small of her back, and she sighed deeply.

Morning was dawning through the curtains as Terry drifted away with Maddie cozied under his arm. The day was just beginning, but both were fast asleep.

* * * *

A small snort, then a held breath, and it was gone. Madison opened her eyes and held still, wondering if she'd dreamed it, or if it had been real. It came again-- a faint, almost-not-there catch of breath that faded with Terry's next snore. She turned to see his face. His eyes were closed, and he looked to be sleeping, but there it was again, a barely whispered catch of breath that she wouldn't have been able to hear if she hadn't been in his arms. His mouth twitched, and for a moment, she thought he'd suddenly burst into tickles and laughter, but his eyelids flickered and he kept sleeping.

She watched, and waited, and when nothing happened, she closed her eyes and let sleep pull her back into rest. A soft snort caught her attention, and she looked at Terry. His eyes were flickering again.

"Terry," she whispered, and moved in his arms, and snuggled against him until he stirred. She kissed his cheek, then closed her eyes and listened to him breathe.

When all sounded peaceful, she went back to sleep.

* * * *

The next time Madison woke, she found Terry sleeping against her shoulder. She looked at the curtained windows and saw full daylight trying to get through. The fireplace had turned off, but with the sun up, the room felt comfortable enough she didn't miss its presence. She and Terry had even kicked off one of the two comforters, for it had been too much.
Trying not to wake her husband, she eased away, and quietly left their bed. She moved to her purse, took out her phone and did her best to breathe without Terry hearing her. The painkillers had worn off, and it didn't feel as good to move around. What if she couldn't go out with Terry today? John had things planned for them, and she didn't want to ruin anything for Terry. And what if Terry knew she was hurting this much? He'd never touch her again as long as he lived.

Sending up a prayer, Madison crept to the stairs, kept an eye on the bed, and slowly took each step as it came. The pain was nowhere near as bad as it had been with the Dragon, but it wasn't good enough to go outside and be seen in public. She couldn't walk this slowly without people staring.

When she came to the top of the stairs, Madison closed her eyes, then went forward, and felt for the bathroom door. She knew the door was nearby, and gulped when she instead knocked into a bedside lamp. It toppled, but to her relief, she was able to right it before it fell over; she peeked about, saw the bathroom, and beelined for the door, not breathing again until the door was shut behind her.

Her hands couldn't hold still as she scrolled through the numbers on her MegaMart phone and found Izzy's name. She glimpsed herself in the mirror and realized she was fighting tears, and struggled to pull herself together. It wasn't the pain, it was the thought of Terry finding out, and spoiling their day that made her tremble. Izzy's number almost went to voicemail before its owner picked up with an apologetic sigh.

"You caught me as I was leaving church service, so I had my phone off. I hope everything is all right?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize--"

"It's okay, service just ended." Izzy sounded as though she was on the move. "Hold on, let me go someplace where I can talk in private. How are you doing? I've been praying for you and Terry."

"Thanks, Izzy. Thank you so much." Madison squeezed her eyes shut and tried to breathe. "God answered your prayers, He really did. It went much better than it should have. My problem is that I'm hurting, and Terry is still asleep, but if he sees me like this, he's going to take it the
wrong way-- I just know he will. What am I going to do?” Madison gulped in air, and moved away from the door to make sure Terry couldn't hear her downstairs.

"Have you tried the ointment?"

"Not this morning."

"Maybe you could use it again, and try more acetaminophen. And there's always the cold water Carol suggested. Do you have access to a bathtub?"

Madison looked behind her. "There's a fancy tub with holes in the side. Would that work?"

"It just means you're staying in an upscale place. Run some cold water, and see if that doesn't help, though you might need to ask Terry to keep his distance until you're feeling better."

"He's already starting to do that." Madison pressed the phone to her ear. "Could you ask John what he has planned for today? Are we going to be walking a lot?"

"Wait a moment, and I'll ask."

As Madison waited, she looked about the bathroom. Laying on some towels, she found instructions on how to operate the jets in the tub, and what not to do. This place was fancy, all right-- she just hoped it wasn't too fancy for her own good. She needed to be able to turn on the water.

"Madison?" Terry knocked on the bathroom door, and Madison quickly whispered into the phone.

"Izzy?"

"Hold on--"

"Never mind, Terry's here." Madison hung up as she went to let Terry inside.
"You went through the bedroom on your own?" Terry looked at her in surprise, and with some admiration as he stepped into the bathroom. "Were your eyes open, or closed? Or were you sleepwalking, and you're now trapped in here?"

"I came on purpose." She hugged herself as he moved to the toilet. "I almost knocked over the lamp, so I had to look most of the way."

"Hey, progress is progress. I read John's itinerary for today. We're supposed to eat at a country restaurant near here-- that is, if you're up to it." Terry flushed the toilet, then went to wash his hands while she wondered if this felt as new to Terry, as it did to her.

"What do you mean, if I'm up to it? Don't I look up for a restaurant?"

"Not exactly." He nodded to the phone in her hand. "Calling for help?"

"How did you know?" She bit her tongue as she realized what she'd just said, and he gave a pained look, as though he hadn't known until now. "I was talking to Izzy. I was asking for advice, that's all."

"Maddie, if there's something going on, I want to know about it."

"I need to run a cold bath."

"Why? Is my presence too overwhelming?"

"Not exactly."

He smiled wryly, and went over and turned on the bathwater without even glancing at the directions.

"Thanks, Terry. It'll help with the pain." She hugged herself, then thought of some things she needed. "Could you bring up my purse, and something to drink? And while you're at it, I could use my suitcase."

"Anything I can do to help," Terry nodded, and left the bathroom.
trying to keep warm, madison climbed into the tub while still wearing her nightshirt. the water chilled her, but she eased herself down, and when she began to chatter, she hugged herself and rubbed her arms. when the water came to her knees, she shut off the faucet, and prayed this would work. the bathroom door opened, and terry stepped inside with her purse and suitcase.

"is that helping?" he asked, as he shut the door.

she nodded. though it was too soon to know for sure, there was no need to tell him that.

"i'll get something for you to drink-- just hang on."

she kept hugging herself, and tried not to move, for moving only made her colder.

the water did a thorough job of chilling her to the bone. how long had she been in here? a minute? five? it felt like fifteen.

the door opened, and terry came in with the remainder of last night's bottle of apple cider. he took the plastic cup he'd brought, poured some cider, then placed the cup on the edge of the tub where she could reach it. "acetaminophen?" he asked, setting the bottle on the floor beside the tub. when she nodded, he went to her purse, and began rummaging around as though the thing had no bottom. "i can't find it."

"it's in there."

"it's hidden well," he muttered. "i remember when this purse only had a handful of things in it. now, you're hauling around everything but the kitchen sink." he pulled out a small bottle, opened it, and tapped out two pills. "i noticed the time while i was downstairs." terry came over, placed the pills in her hand, then passed her the cup. "i hadn't realized how late it was. we should be having lunch right now-- not breakfast."

she washed down the pills, then bit on the cup's plastic rim to keep from chattering. "sorry i'm making us late, terry."
"It's our honeymoon, so we slept in." He dipped his hand into the water, shook it off, and gave her a sympathetic look. "I don't have any complaints. You're the one paying for last night."

"How was your sleep?" she asked, handing him the cup.

"Are you kidding?" Terry set it aside, and shook his head. "I can't remember when I've ever slept so well."

She smiled as he sat down on the edge of the tub, and started to rub her back. He hadn't been able to remember any bad dreams, and it made her happy to think that maybe she'd stopped them as they'd surfaced. That maybe she'd helped give him a good night's sleep, that he'd been better off because she'd been with him.

"Why are you smiling?" Terry leaned over and looked into her face, his hand still making lazy circles on her back. "Don't tell me my baby's happy."

"Would it shock you?"

"You're sitting in cold water, so yes, it wouldn't be the first thing to cross my mind." He deepened the rub, and she closed her eyes and willed herself to relax. "You want me to stop?"

"Please, don't." She bit her lip and asked God to take away the feelings that had pushed into the moment. "It's not you-- it was someone else. Besides," she said with a happy sigh, "you're helping to keep me warm."

He hugged an arm around her, then went back to the rub. When she moved to get out, he helped her onto the bathmat, then rushed a thick towel around her, and hugged her to him while she shivered and enjoyed the warmth. His chin scraped her cheek and she tucked into him, wet nightshirt and all. To her relief, he didn't seem to mind getting his pajamas wet as she rubbed her cheek against his and enjoyed the scrape of his morning beard.

"Feeling better?" he asked, and she nodded.

"I'm not going to kiss you." His breath was warm on her face, and his arms tightened as he spoke. "I'm not, Maddie. I'm going to leave you alone."
She nodded, and leaned her head against his shoulder, and he rocked her gently, a quiet dance in
the bathroom with no one looking. Just them, in love, enjoying the fact they were together,
sharing the same space, and the same morning. She had no idea love could be this strong, or this
simple. That a man could hold out his hand and she would be so grateful to fill it.

More memories pushed at her, and she kept pushing back. Screaming. She could hear herself
screaming. His hand gentled at the small of her back and she relaxed into him even more. After
that cold water, she soaked in his warmth all she could without smothering him. He looked into
her eyes, and delight skimmed across her heart just as surely as if he had touched it. Images
rushed her, she gagged at the heavy breath, the smell of tobacco, then reeled at the soft touch at
her back, and the reminder that came with it to fight.

"Maddie," his voice whispered across her skin, "I have to let you go."

"Don't leave me."

"I won't." He held her so gently it hurt.

She looked up at him, and his mouth dipped into hers. Her Terry-- her wonderful, wonderful,
Terry. She kissed him, and clung to him, and felt him step back.

"Help me let go," he breathed. "Please, Maddie."

"Will you hold me again? Will you promise?"

"I promise."

He moved away, and her knees started to give. He steadied her, but she reached for a towel rack
and nodded that she was all right.

"I'm just a little tired," she tried to smile.

"How much sleep did you get?"
"The same as you." She let go of the towel rack to move to the edge of the tub and sit down. It felt good to not have to fight the Dragon, to just sit and breathe, and relish her victory. She'd been with Terry last night. She'd won. She closed her eyes and thanked God. She was truly married now, and no one, not even the Dragon could take that from her.

"Do you want me to help you dress?" Terry asked, and she shook her head. "You're looking pale," he observed solemnly.

She cocked her head. "And you're as handsome as always."

"I'm serious, Maddie."

"So am I." She tugged off the towel, and tried to ignore the chill coming through her damp nightshirt as she pushed off the tub. "I'll feel better after I've had some breakfast." She felt Terry watch as she moved to get some clothes from her suitcase. "You can go get changed-- I'll be all right."

"Are you sure?"

"Just don't leave without me, and we'll get along fine."

He understood her joke, for his reply came in a lopsided grin. As he left, she saw the bag in her suitcase, and an idea came to her. Unzipping her makeup bag, she picked out a lipstick, went to the mirror, and did something spontaneous. She was feeling more loved than usual-- even for her and Terry-- and she needed an outlet.

Laughing, Madison looked over her handiwork, put the cap back on, then went about getting dressed before her knees wobbled so much she had to sit down again.

He loved her. Terry loved her, and the amazing thing was, so did God. She would never get over that-- not in a million years. The morning shimmered in all its glory before her like the gift that it was, and she hurried to meet it with open arms.

* * * *
He'd heard others joke about newlyweds, and honeymooners, and now he was one, so he tried to take things in stride. To keep Maddie and everything about her in perspective. The way her hair fanned on the pillow, the feel of her beside him, and the knowledge that she would be there in the morning. Right there beside him.

Pulling a shirt over his head, he rushed to get dressed before she needed to leave the bathroom. He tried not to think too much. She was happy, but she was pale. Not as pale as he'd seen her in the past, thank God. He'd seen her look worse, and he grabbed onto that hope and ran with it like a desperate man. Even so, he kept promising himself to check Maddie, to always hear "no" if it came.

Already, he was wondering how soon he could hold her again, and he hated himself for that. He would wait for her no matter how long it took, and be over-the-moon grateful for whatever he got. She'd already given so much. Such a sentiment might mean he was suffering from honeymoon-itis-- he didn't know, and frankly, he didn't care. No one had the privilege of holding her hand but him. That right was his, and so was everything else that came with it. He took to the stairs, rounded into the bedroom as he tucked in his shirt.

"Hey, Maddie?" He leaned in to hear her behind the door. "Do you want me to bring our meal back, so you don't have to go out? You could rest if we ate in."

"You can come inside, Terry."

He opened the door, saw her finishing the buttons on her shirt and couldn't help but stare at what she had on.

"Yes, Terry?" She turned down her collar and looked at him expectantly. "What were you saying?"

"When did you get those clothes? I don't remember seeing them before."

"I went shopping, remember?"

"Oh, yeah." He took in the ruffled dark pink skirt that swept below her knees, then realized she was watching. He cleared his throat. "Would you rather eat in this morning?"
"But I got dressed."

"I noticed," he grinned. He shook himself, looked back at the door, and wondered if he should leave and start over. "You don't have to go out, if you don't want to."

"I want to." She bit her lip, and he knew he was still falling.

God help him, he was still falling in love with her.

She smiled as though she knew his thoughts, though she couldn't possibly.

"Are you going out like that?"

"Like what?"

She rubbed her cheek, and he suddenly realized he hadn't shaved.

"I'll be quick." He went back down for his shaving kit, wondering how on earth he would ever get anything done with Maddie so close to his heart. When he pushed into the bathroom, and saw her zipping up the suitcase, he willed himself to not tug her into a kiss. His eyes were still on Maddie, and not on where he was going, for he bumped into the sink.

Then he looked up, and saw the mirror. In soft pink lipstick, someone he loved had scrawled, 

_I love you this much!_

"Maddie." He gulped, and closed his eyes as her arms came around him from behind. "I love you too, Honey."

"I've never been so happy, Terry." She kissed his ear, let him go, and he was left happily dazed with the scent of whatever she'd put on.

Hairspray. That was it. He sucked in a breath and stared at the mirror.
"The cold water helped, so I'd like to go out this morning." She smiled in the reflection of the mirror, over the "this much," and his heart sighed. Oh, yeah. He was a gonner.

As he started the electric razor, Maddie moved beside him at the sink, and opened her makeup bag. He smiled, watched as she applied stuff to her face in tiny, hesitant strokes, and wondered if this was what the future looked like. Sharing the mirror in the morning with Maddie, getting to know her so well, he would know what came next when she put on her makeup.

"I'm doing it wrong-- I know."

"I have no idea," he shrugged. "I was only watching."

Maddie frowned at her face, then washed it off and went in search of something. He went back to his shaving, then turned off the razor as she came back with his smartphone and a video of Izzy explaining how to apply foundation. Maddie set the phone on the edge of the sink, kept watching, and started over. He went back to shaving while Maddie followed directions. Eyes, lips, and things he honestly had never considered were addressed by Izzy, and by the time Maddie had paused, and gone back to hear something again, Terry was done and patiently waiting.

He didn't mind waiting, in fact, he rather enjoyed watching his wife.

His wife. How he liked the sound of that.

"Thank you for being so patient, Terry. This is taking longer than I thought it would." She sighed as she looked at her reflection. "I'm no good at this. Maybe I should stay, and you should go get the food like you wanted."

"I only want you to stay if you need the rest." He came around to see her progress, and smiled when he saw how pretty she looked. "Izzy should charge for that video. You look like a million bucks."

"Really?" Maddie perked up. "You won't be embarrassed to be seen in public with me?"
"I'll be able to hold my head up," he grinned. He didn't want to tell her she'd applied so little makeup he could barely tell it was there, but maybe that was the point. "Ready to go?"

She added lipstick, glided some color over her eyes, and he saw her look was complete, after all.

"Maybe I should start practicing, I'm with her," he smiled.

"No, I'm with you," Maddie said, as she put away her makeup. "I'm ready now."

In some ways, this was their first morning together. The thought went through him as she took his hand, and he walked her downstairs. He helped her into her coat, picked up his on their way to the door, and greeted the morning outside. As the light fell on Maddie, he could have sworn music started to play. A sedan moved past them, and from a half open window, a symphony, powerful and moving, cascaded the air with Pachelbel's Canon. Terry could only smile. With the kind of morning they'd been having, music wouldn't have surprised him one bit. Sunshine streamed down on them from a generous Heaven, lightly kissing the breeze with warmth.

As Maddie's hand slid into his, Terry looked up at the sky and sent up his thanks.

* * * *

Was this how normal felt? Madison had no idea, but strolling with Terry, life breathed into her lungs and fed her dreams. The world was still big, every bit as wide and as mysterious to her as before, but now, anything was possible. Life was something she could do-- it wasn't just for the ones who hadn't been chained, life was for her, as well. Now that she'd been with Terry, her goals spun even bigger.

There was a next, a tomorrow, and she had hope that it was within reach. She'd gotten off the ground, so now anything was possible.

A quick glance at Terry reminded her that she could still come crashing down. God had given her the strength to fly, and she had to trust that He hadn't put her there with a view of tomorrow, only to rob her of her sky.
The restaurant John had chosen was a log cabin with polished counters and gourmet coffee blends Madison had to turn down. A woman with a hurried smile took their order, while hungry smells, the sound of plates and silverware, and the conversation that came with the rush for lunch filled the room. A carved bear held up their table, while mountain paintings hung on the walls in vivid greens and earthy browns. The tap tap of the waitress’ pencil made Madison rush for a decision. Since it was too late for the breakfast menu, she asked for the garden salad, and when Terry gave her a look that made her think he would’ve liked her to eat more, she added a cream soup.

"I'm hungrier than that, so I'll have the Shallot Burger," Terry hunted down the menu as though picking carefully, "and we'll take the fruit and cheese plate." He looked over the menu at Madison. "You don't mind sharing with me, do you?"

She shook her head.

"And what will you have to drink?" the woman scribbled on her notepad.

"I've already got coffee, but she'll take chamomile tea," Terry answered before Madison could shrug it off and say water was fine. When the waitress left, he leaned forward and whispered, "You'll get over your shyness. Give it time."

She wanted to say it wasn't true, but it was. She would've said anything quick and easy to get the ordering over with, and that's pretty much what she'd done.

"I'm thinking we should do something else besides what's on our itinerary, today."

"Why? What did John have down?"

"Didn't you know?" Terry shrugged. "It's someplace in Roscoe. A museum."

"Oh? A museum about what?" Madison rubbed the edge of the table with her finger. When Terry didn't respond, she looked up at him and he seemed to not want to say. "It's probably just a boring place John is trying to make us visit."

Terry shot her a wry look, and she smiled.
"So you know about it."

She nodded. "I just didn't know he had it planned for today."

"It was nice of him, but we'll go some other time."

The waitress came back with the chamomile tea, and slid it in front of Madison with a spoon to stir in the sweetener. The first sip was oh-so-good, and Madison settled back with the teacup hugged between her hands, and looked at Terry.

"I know something you don't," she smiled.

"You and John planned this honeymoon, so tell me something I don't know." Terry wasn't looking away though. He was curious.

"It's on the itinerary for tonight, but I asked John not to write down all the details. I hope you'll like it. The museum was for you, but this was planned more for me. I hope you won't mind. John thought you wouldn't go to the museum, if we only did things you liked."

"Smart guy." Terry nodded slowly. "Okay, we'll do the museum."

She smiled, and sipped her tea, and a few minutes later, the waitress moved in with a tray loaded down with food.

"You had the burger?" the waitress asked Terry, and he smiled.

A small basket of breadsticks was set in front of Madison, to go with her soup and salad. Hunger stirred inside of her as a plate of fruit and cheeses scooted between her and Terry. And then she smelled Terry's burger. He thanked the waitress as she left, but already, Madison was thinking of ways to tease Terry into giving her a bite.

They bowed their heads, and Terry said a prayer over their food. When it was over, they started in on their meal, and Madison found she had more of an appetite than she'd thought.
"That's a nice painting, isn't it?" Terry asked, nodding to something behind her.

She turned, then looked back to find Terry sneaking lettuce from her plate.

"Terry!"

"They gave me onions, but not enough lettuce. Are you going to eat those tomatoes?"

"Could I have some of your French fries?"

He grinned, and took the tomatoes. "So what's this about tonight?"

"I'm not telling." She picked out the largest fry, ate one end, then finished it off. "Have you ever been to the museum?"

"You know I haven't." Terry dumped ketchup on his plate, capped the bottle, and gave her a look. A serious one that sided on playfulness. "John would have told you if I had."

"These fries are good." She took another, then tried a little cheese with some fruit. She watched as Terry cut his burger in half, then placed the larger half on her salad. "You didn't have to do that."

"It's a large hamburger," he shrugged, and plucked some fruit off the plate as she felt his foot under the table.

She smiled, and switched the hamburger sides with Terry. Though she was no expert, it had to be the best burger ever made. It had been given to her by Terry, and love made everything better, even sharing food in a busy restaurant where carved bears held up the tables. When the meal was over, they each had a large chocolate chip cookie for dessert, (though she gave most of hers to Terry), then they headed back to the resort at a leisurely stroll.

The moment they stepped inside their suite, she was kissing Terry, and he was pulling her close. He shut the door, took one last kiss, then moved from her with such force she knew he was tearing himself from her.
They went up to the bathroom to brush their teeth, though Terry waited until she was done before stepping to the sink. When they went downstairs, he checked the time.

"The museum should be open by now, so when you've got your things together, I'd like to get going." He tasted his lips. "I checked in the bathroom mirror, but I'm not wearing lipstick, am I? Then let's get out of here." He grabbed the itinerary, opened the door, and gave her a wide berth as she moved outside.

"Are you wishing last night never happened, Terry?"

"Are you?" he asked, and she shook her head. "Then there's your answer."

She bit back from speaking her next thought out loud, and let him help her into the jeep. If she couldn't find a way to make this work without the pain, she knew she'd have to go back and see her doctor again. And talk to her doctor about private things she hadn't wanted to. It had been hard enough the first time.

If it meant staying in Terry's arms, though, then Madison would do anything to make that happen.

On the drive to Roscoe, Madison played Bible passages over the phone. It took a little over an hour to get there, so she kept busy by playing hymns, and coaxing Terry into singing along with her when the choir didn't get too ambitious.

When they parked at the museum, Terry's mouth tugged into a wide grin. His brown eyes studied everything, even the building. They paid their way to get in, then started to look around while Madison quietly let Terry lead the way. Fly fishing stuff was everywhere, displays with historical significance that made Terry stop and shake his head. He pulled her to one display after another, some with photos of people, others with fish, and everywhere plaques that explained what they were looking at. A screen on the wall showed video of someone displaying various fly casting techniques, and some people stood about and watched; Terry paused to see, too, and quietly commented with the others about what they saw. While they watched the video, Madison stayed at Terry's side and counted the nails in the display case below the screen.
They moved to the next area, and she was satisfied to let Terry linger for as long as he wanted. He even pulled out his phone and took pictures of her standing beside some fish mounted on wood, but she smiled, and more importantly, he was smiling, too, though he wasn't in the picture. With a passion she didn't understand but greatly admired, he explained one facet of fly fishing after another, and though she didn't pretend to understand any of it, she enjoyed hearing him talk. With his eyes all earnest and wide, it was easy to picture him as a boy, and she found herself wishing more than ever for a child--a little one who took after Terry. He led her to a display with hooks and started to tell her about them, and she hugged his arm. She could listen to him, forever.

They looked at art, Terry talked with other people, and then they moved outside and the air felt so good, she couldn't help but sigh.

"Do you mind if we take a look at the grounds?"

He was so hopeful, she didn't have the heart to say "no." They strolled down the walk, while she enjoyed the breeze and let Terry take in the sights. She could walk easier now than when she'd talked to Izzy, and even though her feet were getting tired from all the standing, she was beginning to feel stronger about tonight. She'd even been able to put on her makeup that morning with nothing but the video to help her, and no one had given her odd looks to signal that she'd done it wrong.

Terry tugged her hand, and she realized they were heading for the jeep.

"We should probably start back to our suite, since we have plans for tonight." He glanced at her, and she nodded. "According to John's note, we have to be ready at six o'clock." Terry paused. "So what are we doing tonight that was worth all this?"

Madison bit her lip, and watched her feet.

"Maddie?"

"We're going somewhere for dinner, and it's going to be special."
"Okay. It's only reasonable we have to eat somewhere, but what's the big deal? What's so special about it?" When she didn't answer, Terry stopped, and tugged her in front of him. "Sweetie-pie, what did you trade this trip to the museum for? It had better be good, because I'm not blind--for all of your smiles, I know you were bored out of your skull."

"Just remember you love me."

"I know you do, otherwise we wouldn't have been at the museum. It's your turn now, so what is it? Come on, spill." He reeled her in for a kiss, but she smiled and pulled him toward the jeep. "I'm starting to get a sinking feeling about this-- not that it isn't a good sign. It means you're coming away with something from this deal, but what are you getting me into?"

"It's in our suite."

"What is?"

"What you're getting into."

He blinked. "If you're trying to confuse me, you're doing a good job. I thought you said we were eating somewhere special, tonight. We are? Then what am I getting into?"

She shook her head. "I took it from your closet."

"Now I know we're not on the same page." He looked at her with such carefulness, she hugged his arm to keep from hugging herself. "You took what from my closet?" He opened the jeep's passenger door, helped her inside, then leaned in as she mumbled her reply.

"What did you say? I didn't hear."

She'd kind of hoped he hadn't heard, and sighed when he asked her to repeat herself.

"Your tuxedo."

"You're kidding. You brought my tux?" He closed her door, moved around the back of the jeep, and she hurried to unlock, and open the driver's side before he had to use his keys. He climbed
in, and looked at her. "This must be some restaurant. Either that, or I'm going to be horribly overdressed for a burger joint." He shut the door, put the key in the ignition, then froze as if he had a frightening thought. "It isn't a burger joint, is it?"

"Oh, no, this will be nice."

"Whatever you say," he shrugged. "I kept you on your feet all day, so if you want me in a tuxedo, then so be it."

If Terry was upset, he hid it well. When he didn't say more about it, she decided he really hadn't minded, and sat back to enjoy the ride. They were making good time, and things were amazingly on track.

* * * *

A tuxedo? Was she kidding? He slid a glance at the woman resting in the passenger seat, and knew better than to underestimate her. Especially when she had help. John and Izzy were backing her, so he supposed he should've expected something out of the blue. But a tuxedo? He hadn't worn one in a while, not even on his wedding day. Maddie was just full of surprises.

He smiled. Not that he didn't mind them, especially the museum. He could hardly wait to email John and Abby some of those pictures. Abby would've loved that place.

The jeep filled with music as Maddie played DJ with his phone, and he grinned when she found the new music he'd put on there, just for her. He hadn't been sure what her taste in tunes were, for she basically listened to whatever he did, so he'd stepped out of his usual ruts and added something different. Something romantic, with people singing about the wonder of love. As a bachelor, that sort of stuff hadn't been his cup of tea, but now, it matched his life. Even if it was on the fluff and girly side, it was worth it to see that dreamy eyed, melty look on Maddie's face. The one that said, "Hug me, I'm yours."

As he drove, Terry winced to find himself tapping the steering wheel in time with the music. Good thing John wasn't here, or he'd never live this down, but then, he had no idea what John and Izzy did in private; Terry reasoned that if he and Maddie were like this while John and Izzy
weren't looking, then he really, very truly, didn't want to know the silly things his friends did when no one was around to laugh at them.

Maddie started to sing, and Terry smiled at the road in front of him. Did he sound that crazy in the shower? in church? no, surely not in church, or someone would've wrestled him out the door long time ago. Sweet, sweet Maddie, gave it all her heart.

He tapped the steering wheel, then turned off the road as their resort came into view.

"I love you, yes, I do," Maddie belted out while the backup singers added their, "yes, I do's," to the anthem.

Smiling, Terry pulled past the resort's front gate, found a good place to park the jeep, then waited for the end of the song, in no way intending to open his door until the music had ended. As the chorus died down, Maddie leaned in and gave him a peck on the lips.

"I love you, too," he smiled.

"Thank you for the music, Terry."

"After all the work you've put into this honeymoon, I'm glad I was able to surprise you for a change."

"What time is it?"

Picking up the phone, he showed her the time. It had practically been staring her in the face, but she'd been too busy having fun to pay attention. Leaning over her, he popped open the passenger door, and she hugged his shoulder.

"When I go in, I'm going to use the makeup that isn't easy to put on-- the really hard things like mascara and lip liner. Whatever happens though, I know you'll love me."

He looked at her mouth, and answered with his heart. Probably a little too soundly for his own good, but her mouth had been so close, and she had looked so kissable. She closed her eyes, and he kissed her again. Her fingers ran through his hair and he forgot to remember to be careful. As
he pulled her to him, a dim thought tried to get through. It was something important, but he couldn't be sure what. Surely, if it was urgent enough, he'd remember. She wasn't trying to stop, and he wanted to hold her, so at that moment, he didn't see why he shouldn't. It made perfect logic... right up until a black sedan pulled in next to them, and Terry remembered where they were.

"How'd you do that?" Maddie breathed, her eyes looking after him with such feeling he had to fight himself not to kiss her.

"It wasn't just me." He blew out a breath, sat back and tried to gather his thoughts. "I need to be more careful with you, but that wasn't just me."

"The Dragon never made me feel like you do, Terry."

"I'm glad to hear it." He pushed open his door, climbed out, and let the air revive him as he went around to help Maddie outside. He tried not to notice her smile, but when she stepped into his arms and hugged him, he hugged her in return, and was helpless to do anything but thank God for her.

"Would you take me through the bedroom so I can start getting ready for tonight?"

"Try not to fuss too much over your face, Maddie. You were right-- I'll love you no matter what." He smiled, and shut her door as she started for the suite.

An SUV moved into the parking space between him and his view of Maddie, and he lightly jogged around the vehicle to join her. He fell into step beside his sweetheart, saw how their shadows moved side by side on the pavement in the late afternoon sunlight. Her limp was back to normal-- no more or no less than usual, and he let her move in front of him to make sure of that fact before he quietly rejoiced.

He was still going to stay away from her, and let her rest, but he was grateful last night hadn't done anything more to her than it had.

When they went inside their suite, the light scent of pine and disinfectant told him housekeeping had been through, for even the carpets looked clean, and the wastebasket was
empty. It wasn't a big guess to conclude the bathroom mirror had been wiped clean, and Terry was grateful for the effort the staff at the resort had been taking into making their stay memorable. He shut the door, saw Maddie take off her shoes and thought about researching the address John had given him. He wouldn't of course, though he was curious what Maddie had planned for the evening. The fact she'd brought his tux told him she was being ambitious with her honeymoon plans, and he hoped she wasn't aiming too high.

Maddie was a fighter, but she was new to all this. He hated to see her get discouraged over things like makeup, when life would have bigger challenges that would need overcoming. But small steps led to those bigger ones, and you couldn't run before you walked-- to mix some metaphors.

He dropped his coat on the couch, tugged off his sneakers, then went to take Maddie upstairs to the bathroom.

"Would you bring up my garment bag?"

"Are you going to wear the party dress you wore to the Doyle's house?" He nodded when Maddie smiled. "Make sure you wear that sweater-- you're going to need a coat, tonight, but you'll need the sweater, too." He led her up to the bathroom, then went to get her garment bag, and when he came back, he found her in front of the sink, setting out her weapons of war. "Anything else?" he asked, hanging the bag on the hook behind the door.

"Thanks, Terry, you can go now." She started opening something, then stopped and looked at him. "Just don't leave without me?"

"Why would I do that?"

"I mean, don't leave the suite so I'm here alone."

He looked at her and knew she didn't want to give herself the chance to cut-- not so soon after that first night together. "I won't leave," he nodded, and was rewarded with the sweetest smile.

As Terry went down to the living area, he found himself looking forward to tonight. She was such a knuckleheaded sweetheart, up there trying to make herself pretty when she was already the prettiest woman on the face of the earth. What was she thinking? He grinned, scratched his
face, and felt the five o'clock shadow. Easy for him to laugh, when he was the one who needed some maintenance. "Hey, Maddie?" he called as he went upstairs, then moved to the closed door, "is it okay if I come in?"

"If you have to."

He winced, but went inside.

The bathroom lights were on, the shower was running, and her bathrobe had already been laid out. She was still dressed, but she stood in front of the mirror, removing her makeup, and looking as though she wanted to get into the shower.

On second thoughts-- he left, knowing a retreat now would be better than later regret.

So much for getting a shave. He'd already written off a shower, but tonight, if she didn't leave the bathroom in time, he'd just have to go as he was. Oh well, worse things could've happened. He could've married the wrong woman, lived a different life, and never have known what he was supposed to have had.

And what he had was quite a lot.

Terry went to the couch, moved his coat to wait, and noticed the phone the resort had provided, sitting nearby. Since Maddie had taken his, he picked up the receiver to run a small errand from the couch.

Maddie was worth it.

* * * *

A chiming doorbell roused him from his catnap, and Terry got to his feet to see who it was. When he opened the door, a woman with a cheery smile greeted him.

"Mr. Davis?" She handed him a clipboard, he signed it, then she passed him the clear container that had a ribbon around it. "Have a pleasant evening."
"Same to you." Terry gave her a tip, then closed the door to admire his purchase.

Not too shabby for a guy who'd been kept in the dark until the last moment, in fact, he thought it showed some class. Why, they even went with her dress. Feeling pretty good, he checked the time, then went to get out his tux. He smiled when he saw his sweetie had understood to bring his tuxedo shirt. Changing into the shirt and pants, he was starting to think about cuff links, when he heard something shatter upstairs.

His first thought punched fear into his gut.

Terry rounded their bed, took the stairs two steps at a time, and pushed into the bedroom. "Maddie? Maddie, are you all right?" He didn't wait to knock, but shoved open the bathroom door and had time for a second thought.

There was no time to pray, but it was on the edge of his tongue as he looked at his wife.

She stood in front of the sink, dressed in her bathrobe, her eyes red from tears while Izzy's voice played from a video on the phone from somewhere nearby.

He panted, and tried to see the robe covering Maddie's stomach. No blood.

"I broke my mirror." Maddie dried her tears, and he looked down at the floor to what was left of a shattered hand mirror. "It got knocked off the sink, and nothing I'm doing is working. Terry, I only have an hour left, and I'm still not dressed. What am I going to do?" She didn't wait for him to answer, but turned and looked in the mirror hanging on the wall. "I've washed my face and started over so many times, my skin hurts."

"Then forget the makeup."

"I can't. This has to be perfect."

"Why? Why does everything have to be perfect, to be a great evening? Don't move-- let me get something to clean the floor before you cut your feet."

"It has to be perfect because it's our honeymoon, and you're going to remember it forever."
"I can't possibly remember every single detail. Please, don't move. Do you know if there's a broom around here somewhere?" Terry started for the bedroom, then paused. He didn't know if he should leave Maddie with all that broken glass.

"Can't I do anything right, Terry?"

"That's discouragement talking-- not you." He caught sight of his phone, and started toward it. "Don't move. I've got socks on, and you don't."

"You should go get your shoes."

"Don't worry about me, I'm watching where I step."

Terry picked up the phone, stopped the video, then placed a call to the main desk. After they had promised to send someone over, he hung up to find Maddie working on her face again. In all honesty, that one act meant more to him than it ever had before. It meant she hadn't given up. He would have told her to not bother, but the fact she was thinking about getting ready, and not about cutting, meant God was answering his prayer. Quietly sending up his thanks, Terry started to close his cuff, when he remembered the lost cuff links.

"They're in my wallet." Maddie applied a dab of flesh colored makeup to her cheek.

He nodded absently. "Do you want the phone back?"

"No, you can keep it. I've memorized Izzy's video by now."

He started for the door, then paused. "What are in your wallet?"

"Your cuff links."

"You have them?"

"Of course." She worked a small white sponge over her cheek. "Why wouldn't I?"
He opened his mouth to answer, but found he had none. "Where'd you find them?"

"On your dresser."

"Then you--" he rubbed his face and decided it didn't really matter. "Don't move until they send someone over with a broom." As he turned to go, Maddie called him back.

"You're looking awfully nice, Terry."

"Thanks for remembering the cuff links," he smiled, and shut the door as he left. Sweet kid, he hated to tell her he wasn't much to look at, for if she ever believed him, then where would he be?

A man with cuff links.

Terry shook his head, and went downstairs as the chimes rang. Housekeeping hadn't lost any time answering his call for help, for when he answered the door, a woman with a cart waited outside.

"I'm afraid we broke a hand mirror in the bathroom," he apologized.

"I'll take care of it," the woman nodded, and turned to the cart parked by the door for what she needed.

It didn't take long for the mirror to be swept up and dumped into the pail the woman had brought with her. She did such a thorough job of cleaning, Terry was no longer afraid of Maddie hurting her bare feet on any stray slivers of glass. To show his thanks, Terry gave her a tip for all her trouble.

Then he went in search of the missing cuff links in Maddie's wallet. Thankfully, Maddie had thought to empty out the coins first, so the cuff links looked unharmed for their journey.

He changed into dark socks, slung the bow tie around his neck, then went upstairs to see if he could use the bathroom.
"Maddie, do you mind--" he hushed when he saw her trying to guide a pencil around the edge of her lip. He carefully stepped past her, and reached for his shaving kit. His shaving oil didn't draw a crowd, but when the electric razor started, she stopped to see what he was doing. He shrugged, and kept going. She went back to work, but when he moved over to share her mirror, he noticed he was once more drawing attention.

"Bored?" he asked, and her mouth quirked in good humor.

"I'm learning less is more. Izzy kept telling me that, and it's turning out to be true."

"Whatever you're doing, you look good to me." He applied some aftershave, then started in on his bow tie. She tilted her head as he began to form the bow. "It's just a tie," he smiled.

"You're good at it."

"This tux has been to some formal business dinners, so I've had practice."

With a sigh, she went back to her lips.

He finished the tie, combed his hair, then put away his shaving kit while she moved over to use the whole mirror. He wasn't about to tell her the time. If they were late, he would take her somewhere else-- a drive-through, if necessary, and they would eat in the jeep in all their finery. She was under enough pressure.

While Maddie busied herself, he hung up her damp towels, then went downstairs to plot tonight's address on his phone's map. Even before he'd finished entering the address, he realized that it looked familiar. When the map came up with its plotted route, he understood why. The restaurant was quite literally on the grounds of the resort. He pulled up more information, and found Maddie could easily walk to it from here.

Pocketing the phone, he put on his dress shoes, then felt his cuff links as he looked at the top of the stairs.

It was almost six.
He made sure he had the key to their suite, and tried not to pace. In five minutes, he would call the restaurant and warn them they'd be running late.

"Terry? I'm ready," Maddie called from the bathroom. "Are you still there?"

"Where else would I be?" he laughed as he moved up the stairs, then rounded into the bedroom. "I haven't wanted to tell you the time, but you had me concerned for a mo--" he stopped as he opened the bathroom door.

She turned from fixing her hair in the mirror, and faced him.

That was no orange and brown dress she had on, but a full formal affair-- black and white, and sleek all the way to the floor. Gold embroidery circled her waist, with gold lightly kissing her shoulder length sleeves, and graceful neckline. His mouth must have dropped open, for she smiled.

"Thank you for that, Terry. Thank you so much." She turned. "Would you zip me up?

As he stepped over, and tugged the zipper up, his senses were knocked for a loop. What was that in the air? the honeyed scent of something wonderful that he'd tasted once before. He nosed around her hair, and she laughed, her blonde hair waving in his face. "Forget the restaurant, let's eat in," he murmured, as he moved closer.

"Terry, we have reservations."

"I'm kidding with you." He kissed her neck, then stepped away to find that humor he'd just talked about. It wouldn't have mattered if they stayed or not, he'd be taking a cold shower tonight, for that's what she needed. He knew it, and accepted it fully. "You're quite a sight," he smiled, as she gathered a matching black clutch. "Let me take a picture of you, so you can show Izzy what a triumph you were."

"Oh, no-- please, don't. I didn't get it right." She gasped as Terry took a phone from his pocket. "You wouldn't."
"Maddie, you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, and that's a fair, and unbiased opinion. Please, let me take this, if only for myself?" He grinned when she nodded, "yes." "Wait, I almost forgot--" he snapped his fingers, took her hand, then started her toward the bathroom door. "I have something for you, but it's downstairs. Close your eyes." He opened the door, led her through the bedroom, down the stairs, while she held her dress to keep from tripping. She opened her eyes while he went to the couch.

He plucked up the container, saw the color of the flowers, then looked at Maddie's evening dress.

They were the wrong color.

"These were supposed to go with your orange dress." He handed her the flowers, and hoped she wouldn't laugh too hard. "I had no idea you had this one, but there's no obligation to wear them. Just leave them here."

"Terry, you got these for me?"

"No, they're for me." He sighed when she opened the box and pulled out the wrist corsage. "They're silk," he shrugged. "The woman on the phone said some women liked silk because they last forever, and they're a keepsake from the person who gave them. Which is about all these are worth, because they're not the right color."

"They're gorgeous. Oh, Terry, they're absolutely wonderful!" She slipped the corsage onto her wrist, and turned her hand to look at the display of three orange roses, three white orchids, and green finery all crowded onto a soft orange bow.

"You don't mind?" he asked, but she didn't seem to hear, for she was too busy holding up her flowers to the light to pay any attention to him.

Putting on his tuxedo jacket, he took his phone out, woke the phone, then framed her in the screen. Without warning, he snapped a photo. When she looked up, he snapped another. He moved beside her, held the phone before them, and snapped one together. When he looked at the results, he saw Maddie's face. He turned to the woman beside him, and found her blinking back tears.
"What's wrong?" he asked. "Did I step on your foot?"

"I'm so happy," she whispered.

He put an arm around her, and the perfume went straight to his head. With a small nuzzle, he let her go, and pocketed the phone.

"Is it time to go?" she sniffed, as he placed her coat about her shoulders to keep from crushing her corsage.

"As a matter of fact," he opened their door, and showed her outside, "it is. I'm going to have to call the restaurant while we walk, but we should only be a few minutes late." He locked the suite, then pulled up information on his phone, and while Maddie took his arm, they started for the restaurant while he explained the situation.

They readily agreed to hold his reservation, so Terry put his phone away to enjoy the short walk while it lasted.

The early evening chilled him through his jacket, but Terry didn't mind. He had Maddie on his arm, the sky was showing off as the sun slipped behind the Catskills, and he was drowning in bliss. Not even the knowing smiles of the people who passed them, were enough to make him self-conscious-- he was in love, and he didn't care if it showed. They moved across a footbridge, and the gentle sound of water made Maddie look over the side. He took her hand, gave her a tiny tug, and they were moving again, this time, with a restaurant's lit sign in view.

"Is that the place?" Terry asked, and she nodded that it was.

Terry headed for the front entrance, but a uniformed man stood by the building, and asked for their names. "Terry and Madison Davis," Terry said, and was surprised when the man showed them to another door. "I called to explain we would be late," Terry apologized, but the man smiled, and led them past the main dining room, and to a side room with large windows, one overlooking the Catskills and a blazing sunset. The room had three tables, two of them empty.
The man showed them to the one table with place settings, and smiled generously. "This is our private dining area. It was reserved in your name, by a friend. I was to tell you that tonight is his treat." The man smiled as Terry helped Maddie into her chair.

"John did this?" Terry took Maddie's coat, and the man offered to take the coat from him.

A second man came in before Terry had finished speaking, and Terry glimpsed the name "John" on the uniform. Terry smiled as the African American asked if they would like the candles on the table lit. Maddie nodded, "yes," and the first man left with her coat.

"I understand this meal is celebrating a honeymoon," John smiled, as he pocketed the lighter. "We have a lot of honeymooners and anniversary celebrations here. On your right, is the menu your friend selected in your honor, and I'll point out that each of you has a different menu. I'll bring in the first course as soon as it's ready, but until then, would you care to start with hors d'oeuvres and refreshments?"

"That sounds great." Terry grinned as he looked over his menu. The different courses had some of his favorite foods-- a fact that only made him shake his head. It had his friend's fingerprints all over it.

A tray of stuffed cherry tomatoes was carried in, filled with gourmet cheese and seasoned to perfection. Their crystal glasses were filled-- Terry didn't pay attention to what, he only caught the words, non-alcoholic, and was good with it-- and when John left, Terry reached across the corner of the table, and took Maddie's hand to say a prayer over their candlelit meal. The sounds of the restaurant were distant where they sat, and it was easy to forget anyone else was even there, except for the random laugh of conversation from the main room.

Terry bit into a stuffed tomato and sighed. This was worth dressing up for, even losing and re-finding his cuff links over. He saw Maddie sipping from her glass and admiring the sunset as the colors began to cool.

She was so beautiful, it put a lump in his throat every time he happened to look her way.

The tinkle of china made Terry look up as John came in with a tray of plates.
"Your first course," John said, presenting the tray before them. "I believe you had the caramelized duck breast?"

Maddie nodded as the dish was placed before her in all its splendor.

"Then the ancho-rubbed prime rib with grilled papaya butter, would be yours." John slid a large plate in front of Terry, and Terry felt profound gratitude that he wasn't a vegetarian.

They started their meal in earnest, and as the evening went on, the sky showered its beauty on them by casting stars over the Catskills in great abundance. Terry and Maddie marveled at the vista by candlelight, and fed bites from each other's plate. He couldn't help thinking she stole glances at him every now and then, but he threw it off as being wishful. Just because he was wearing a tux, didn't mean he had suddenly turned into something he wasn't. He was the same guy as before, only now he was dining with a beautiful woman in an evening dress.

When dessert came, he almost begged out of it, but it was fresh apple crisp with maple ice cream. How could he say no to that?

They drank and admired the view, and all around them the glow of their candles gave them the feeling they were in their own little world with just the two of them. When the last of dessert had been finished, Terry was given Maddie's coat, and he made sure to leave a generous tip for everyone who had served them that night. He shook John's hand, and though the chef couldn't come to accept their thanks, John promised to relay how much Terry and Maddie had enjoyed their dinner. Since everything had already been paid for, there was nothing left to do but to quietly leave, hand in hand, into the cold, clear night.

Maddie leaned into him as they strolled down the sidewalk, and when they came to the bridge, she paused to look at the now softly lit water.

"I can't believe I'm here," she said quietly.

Terry kissed her hair, hugged an arm around the coat draped over her shoulders and looked down at the water flowing beneath them.
"I never thought I'd ever get to have a day like this." She shook her head. "I never thought I'd love a man, willingly let him touch me, or lead a life that was anywhere near normal. If the Dragon saw me right now, I don't think he would recognize me. I really don't." She looked at Terry. "And it's all because of you. God used you, Terry. I wouldn't be here without you."

"Since this is a honeymoon, I wouldn't be here without you, either."

"I'm serious. You're making a joke, but I'm serious."

"It's only because I don't know what else to say." He quieted as a couple strolled behind them, then moved on down the walk. "God knew I needed you." Terry shook his head, and smiled when her hand fit into his. He should be cold, but he wasn't-- Maddie's gaze warmed him where he stood.

Hand in hand, they strolled back to the suite, the breeze carrying her perfume. He breathed it in, hating to go inside when they reached their door.

As he took out the key, Maddie stepped close, and he was caught up in her kiss. Her hand went around the back of his neck, and when she pulled him close, he nearly dropped the key.

"You won't hold me, tonight, will you?" She looked into his eyes, and he slowly shook his head, "no."

"You come first, Maddie." He traced his thumb across her cheek, kissed her lips once more, then turned to unlock the door. "If you're still in the mood, and you think it's a good idea, then we'll see what happens, tomorrow."

"I'm feeling better, and you still won't? I could chase you, Terry."

"I won't be caught." He gently tugged her inside when she remained on the doorstep. Trying to ignore her smile, he closed the door, then made sure to lock up for the night. When he turned, he saw she'd taken off her coat-wrap, and was looking coyly thoughtful.

"I could make you sleep on the couch until you come to your senses."
"Move my bed, and I'll move it back."

"Or, I could tell you that I think I'll be all right, if you only hold me once, tonight."

"Maddie--"

"You said intimacy would go at my speed, remember?"

He remembered.

"You aren't putting me in any danger." She calmed a little, and looked at him thoughtfully. "We had a good day, didn't we?"

"We did," he nodded.

"I don't have any guarantees, Terry, but I'm praying we can do better. I have faith we can." She hugged his shoulder like she used to when that was all they had. "If we can't make this work without pain, then I'll talk to my doctor when we get home. Please, Terry, I know we can make this work."

What a woman he had. He touched her hair, feeling the slight curls at the ends-- something she'd done with the help of an iron, and some patience. "All right," he whispered.

He felt her reach for the phone in his pocket, and a few moments later, a singer swooned about the love of her husband while violins and a full compliment of musicians did their best to make their hearts soar.

Maddie swayed to the music, and Terry kept her in time.

He edged her to the remote, turned on the fireplace, then switched off the overhead light.

"Doesn't my husband look handsome in a tuxedo." She paused to straighten his bow tie, and he swallowed hard as she looked into his eyes. "You're my hero, Terry."
His heart hummed as she rested her head against his shoulder, and he almost forgot to breathe. "I love you." He breathed out the words, hugged her, and let the night spin slowly around them.

Outside, stars blinked in an endless sky while the Catskills stretched out for the night. The land seemed to yawn and go to sleep, while the moon sailed overhead and blanketed all it touched with silver. Night deepened, and peace descended over the mountains, hugging the trees, and kissing the ground like dew on grass.

A star fell across the silent heavens as the land slept and waited for the coming dawn.

"How fair and how pleasant art thou, O love [Maddie], for delights!"
~ Song of Solomon 7:6 ~
Chapter Forty-four

New Every Morning

"It is of the LORD’S mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness."

~ Lamentations 3:22, 23 ~

She didn’t know how early it might be, but the window was still dark when Madison crawled from bed. Terry mumbled after her, seemingly half aware that something had changed beside him. She held her breath, he slid back to a deep slumber, and she slowly made her way to the stairs. While she didn’t know for certain what was on today’s itinerary, she could guess.

Holding onto the banister, she took one step up, paused, and waited for the pain to come so it wouldn’t have to sneak up and surprise her later. If there was going to be bad news, she wanted to get it over with now. It was hard to know what she felt, only that what her body was telling her, wasn’t what it usually did after being with a man. Taking another step, she tried not to brace for something worse, but it was hard not to think it wouldn’t come. After all, how could her body forget? Even when sex hadn’t been the cause, during that pelvic exam in the doctor’s office, there had been pain afterward. It’s just the way things were. Though she’d told Terry she thought they had a chance to make this work without pain, she’d been talking in faith, and by promise, not what her life had told her was probable.

She’d done everything she could to be ready for last night, including things she hadn’t done the night before. She’d waited to go to bed a full half hour after putting on the pain ointment, so the ointment was already working, and she’d felt easy enough with Terry to tell him exactly where it hurt so he could understand her better. She’d just wanted him to know, but he had listened, and made suggestions about what they could do about it, so by the time she’d closed her eyes to sleep, she was in surprisingly little pain.

Which is why she wanted to know how God would answer the rest of her prayer.

The ointment could still be working, which could explain why she felt the way she did this morning. That could be it.
Please, God, cause it to be more than that.

Tightly holding on to her prayer, she went up the staircase, hesitated, then pushed into the bedroom without pausing to think, or let herself register where she was. It wasn’t until she’d safely made it to the bathroom, that she fully realized what she’d done. She’d kept her eyes open and had stared at the carpet the whole time, but she had made it through on her own. And without any awkwardness.

Hardly worth throwing a party over, but for her, it felt lightly powerful. Dazzling, and a bit scary. What other powers did she possess?

Only God knew, for He was the one Who had made that possible.

It wasn’t until she was washing her hands, that once again, she realized she still felt very little pain. Not in any measurable way. While she appreciated the pain not giving her trouble, it was kind of dismaying that it could be overlooked for even a moment. She wanted to be aware of the difference, to be grateful each and every single second for that difference, not to shrug it off and go on with life as though it was no big deal. Was this her answer? In the past, she had known pain that had lasted for days, and this had not been like that. It had hurt, and now it hardly hurt at all.

The comfort of a self-hug calmed her down, and she wondered how much longer she’d have to wait before knowing for sure if the ointment had worn off.

What if this was wishful thinking, and she was deluding herself with hope? Maybe she was hurting more than she realized, and nothing she or Terry had done last night had changed a thing. One thought latched onto another, and they spiraled into fear, and a voice inside her said to pray.

Sitting on the edge of the bathtub, she did just that, and calm descended once more.

God was answering her prayer. She just had to have faith. If not this morning, then some other time, but if she held on, His answer would one day be, “Yes.” If it wasn’t that, already. The fact she could sit without wincing could be counted a victory right there. She didn’t have her phone
with her, and there wasn't a clock in the bathroom, so she didn't know how close to morning it was, but the ointment shouldn't be so strong she should feel this well-- not if it was there.

This wasn't her imagination. She stood, and found the only part of her that really hurt, was her hip. This was good.

The temptation to compare herself to others, to wonder if this was how normal people felt, only lasted a moment. It didn't matter. She wasn't anyone, but her. This was her life, this was what she had, and it was a good thing to be her. She tilted her head back and shut her eyes as the walls of the bathroom fell to a green valley; she was perched on a tall mountain, like in one of those paintings she'd seen in the country restaurant. That next cliff? She could get there. God had given her wings, and through Him, she could do anything, so long as she kept believing and didn't let fear keep her back. The ground was a long way down, but all things were possible.

They were.

Blinking, she looked in the bathroom mirror, turned on the faucet, and splashed water on her face. It ran down her arms and onto the floor as her body woke up and her soul took flight above those mountains. Riding the wind, she wanted to shout-- she felt so free. Knowing she had to calm down, she shook herself from the daydream and grabbed a towel, but still caught herself smiling in the mirror.

"Thank you for my life, God. Thank You."

God's lovingkindness was sweeter than life, and that sweetness stirred into her heart and made her all the more grateful for this chance to live hers. Even those puddles on the floor were something to thank God about, for if she hadn't been alive to make them, they wouldn't be there.

She was awake, and the day was calling to her, and she wanted to get dressed and answer it as best she could. To do that, she would need boots, and they were out in the jeep.

Some days, a woman needed boots. Rugged lace-ups. Her first pair, ever.
She got into her new blue jeans and a bright flannel shirt, mopped up the water by the sink, then did her best with a light dusting of makeup. Nothing ambitious, for she figured it wouldn't mean much where she was going. She tucked in her shirt, put on some thick socks, then started into the next room. Her breath caught the moment her eyes fell on the bed. Heart tripping, she backed into the wall while panic closed her throat. Forget that high view, she was crashing into the valley and there was no way out. She shut her eyes, and fled back to the bathroom, falling against the door as she fought to catch her breath.

Life had caved in on her awfully fast. She hugged herself, and as the tears began to well up inside of her, she remembered where she'd come from. Not that bedroom just now, but where she'd come the last so many days with Terry, and the years that had stretched beyond that with the Dragon. She was here, and God had given her today.

She'd already come so far.

Calm pulsed back into her veins, and she took a deep breath. The mistake was hers. She hadn't given herself a moment to brace for the bedroom. She'd been careless. She could do better-- she would do better. Putting her hand on the doorknob, she sent up a prayer, then filled her mind with one thought. One thought that could crowd every corner of her mind for the few moments she needed. Settling on that one thought, she turned the handle, kept her eyes on the floor, and pushed into the next room.

His smile was lovely, and when it went lopsided, that's when she felt its full force. He had a loveliness all his own. He was so casual about it, as though he had no idea he had all that at his disposal. He could've been as homely as a naked mole rat, and she still would've gone weak at the knees. She loved him that much.

Madison was halfway down the stairs before she let herself celebrate, but only for a moment. She wanted to keep moving, or else those small victories would become huge mountains again.

A check found Terry still asleep, his soft snore reassuring her that he was out just like the lights downstairs. She'd left the bathroom door open, and its glow shown from the top of the stairs, leaving her with just enough to find the jeep keys on the end table. She slipped on her shoes, lifted the keys and bit her tongue when they jingled. Too bad for her, they sounded like what they were-- keys-- and from the bed, she heard Terry moan. She eased her free hand around the
keys to keep them from making any more noise, though the damage might have already been done. Her eyes hadn't adjusted to the dark, so she couldn't see Terry well enough to be sure. A few moments passed, and just when she was beginning to feel silly, Terry's faint snores drifted to where she stood by the end table. When they came steadily, she tiptoed to the door.

She hoped she was guessing right, or she would feel even sillier than she did right now. She knew John though, and he wouldn't delay the surprise any longer than he thought he had to, especially since she and Terry had enjoyed their fancy dinner the night before.

As she opened the door, the air greeted her with a cold shock to the senses, only adding to her adventure.

How could she go back to sleep when she felt so wide-awake? So ready to get her feet wet? That's what John had asked when they'd picked out her boots. "Ready to get your feet wet?" He'd tossed some outdoor joke at her that she hadn't understood, but she was ready for new things today, even that.

A faint change in the sky told her the sun was trying to come up, and she rubbed her arms and hurried to the jeep before she froze without her coat. Which key went to the tailgate? The keys fumbled as she tried one after another. The parking area had an outdoor lamp, and she held up the keys to see if they were marked. They weren't. It took several times through the key ring before the fifth key turned with effort, and the tailgate opened. Eagerly, she pushed back the dark blanket and searched for her boots. She'd been so proud of them. They made her feel like she could walk through anything.

"Maddie?"

Madison's heart jumped to her throat as she spun about.

Behind her stood Terry in pajama bottoms and untied sneakers, an iPhone screen lighting up his face like a flashlight. His hair stood on end, and his eyes looked as confused as his appearance.

"Terry? What are you doing out here?"
"I was about to ask you the same thing?" A breeze blew past them and he shivered noticeably. "Why is the jeep open? Did you lose something?"

"Aren't you cold, Terry?"

"Never mind that-- what are you doing out here in the dark?" He glanced at the outdoor lamp, and turned off his phone. "I looked all over the place, and thought something had happened. Burglars don't usually kidnap, and nothing was missing but you..."

"I'm sorry." She tried not to smile. "I was only gone for a moment, and you were sound asleep. I didn't think you'd miss me."

"Well, I did." He rubbed his arms, and looked about. "What are you doing out here, anyway?"

"Just getting my boots." She turned to pull them out, then neatly covered the things over in the back of the jeep.

"I didn't know you had those. What else have you got back there?"

"You'll find out soon enough," she smiled, shutting the tailgate while Terry stomped his feet to keep warm. "I'm sorry I scared you, Terry."

"That's all right." He followed her back to the suite. "I'm just glad you're okay." As he shut the door behind them, she hurried to turn on the fireplace. "I noticed your limp doesn't look any worse than usual. Or am I wrong?"

"I'm feeling good," she nodded, as she punched up the flames. "You're turning blue."

"I doubt it," he grinned, but went over to the fire anyway and took off his sneakers. "Thank You, Lord. Your mercies truly are new every morning."

"I only went to the jeep," she sighed. "I wasn't in any danger."

"That's not what I meant." He smiled as he warmed himself before the fireplace. "Did you need to run cold water this morning?" He looked over his shoulder, and she shook her head. "That's a
blessing. We'll take it as it comes, but all things considered, it sounds as though God is in the process of answering prayer." Terry said it with a bit of a question in his voice, and when she nodded in agreement, Terry bowed his head. He looked back at the fireplace, and she could tell a burden was lifting from his heart. "Don't say it, Maddie."

"I didn't say anything."

"If you weren't thinking it, then I'm glad, but if you were, wipe it from your mind. It has no place between you and me."

"But I'm so much trouble."

"I knew it." He shook his head, went over and picked up the top to his pajamas. "Give me one good reason why I should be sorry."

"We had to have a conversation before you could hold me last night."

"I said a good reason."

"I make you sad."

"Only when you think knuckle-headed things like this."

"I cut myself."

"Not lately, you haven't." He moved directly in front of her, and she swallowed. "You're my wife, and I don't regret a single thing except the time we're using to have this talk." He kissed the tip of her nose, and smiled. "By the clothes you've got on, I have a feeling you know something I don't."

She went over and picked up the envelope with their itinerary, and handed it to Terry. "If you did have any regrets, would you tell me?"

"I don't know about you, but I probably shouldn't have gone back for seconds on that maple ice cream." He pulled out a sheet of paper and began reading. "Are you sure you're up for this?"
looked at her as she went over to the couch to exchange her shoes for boots. "You don't have a fishing license, you know."

She felt good, for she'd guessed right. "I can watch. You don't need anything special to watch, besides the right clothes. And I have those."

He smiled, and she could feel him watch her as she got up to cross the room. She wasn't limping-- well, not more than she usually did, so he could relax. If that's what he was thinking. She looked over at him, and saw his thoughtful face. They were so busy trying to read each other's mind, it was kind of annoying, especially when they guessed right. If she'd been able, she would've run somewhere, did something terribly athletic to prove she was feeling well, but she'd never been able to do that anyway, so she settled for going upstairs without Terry.

He called after her, and she smiled.

Carefully, she paused at the top of the stairs just long enough to grab onto a thought, then pushed into the bedroom, and hurried into the bathroom before she froze up and had to call for help. There. She'd done it more than once. Catching her breath, she turned to close her suitcase when Terry came bounding in.

"You made it through?" He looked at her, and she nodded, and went to start the shower for him. "On your own. You did it on your own."

She didn't know how to answer, but suddenly found herself caught up in a great big hug.

"Maddie, my girl, you're one surprise after another." He squeezed her so hard she gasped, and he laughed, and spun her about. Then he let her go and she was left to find which way was up while he checked the shower. "Are you sure you don't mind?"

"Mind what?" She latched onto a towel rack until the room stopped spinning.

"The fishing-- I intend to do a lot of it. I don't want to drive all the way back to Roscoe, just to stare at the scenery."

"I don't mind."
She'd just gotten the words out, and he was out of the bathroom to get his clothes. She wished she could do that-- pick him up and spin him around when she was happy. It must be nice to be so strong. She tidied his towels, took hold of her big thought, then pressed into the bedroom while her eyes tracked the carpet.

"Hey, you're getting good at that." Terry's voice moved past her, but she didn't look up.

It was like Peter walking on water. If he watched the waves, he'd sink. So she had to keep her mind on faith, and her eyes not on the thing in the room.

As she passed onto the stairs, the phone on the couch began to ring. She hurried down, but by the time she'd reached her purse, the phone had stopped. The number was from home and no voicemail had been left, so Madison called back, praying that nothing was wrong for someone to have called so early, and on a honeymoon. John answered on the first ring, and in the background, Madison could hear the clamor of small voices.

"Sorry about that, you can go back to sleep--"

"Wait, we're awake," Madison tried to get in before John hung up. "Is everything all right?"

"We're fine." John sounded as though he were giving someone a look of displeasure. "I told the girls we'd call you after lunch, but they got it into their heads they couldn't wait. They know the phone isn't a toy. Right?" John sighed. "I'll have a talk with them later."

"Could you put the girls on?" Madison asked, and a moment later she heard an eager,

"Aunt Madison? Guess what, we're getting up early 'cause Daddy's taking us hiking, and Mommy's making trail-mix and everything. Do you and Uncle Terry want to come?"

"Ask them some other time," John said in the background.

"Daddy got a hook in his arm," an excited munchkin clamored over the voice of her sister.

The phone shifted.
"It was a tiny flesh wound, not even worth mentioning," John spoke in a no-big-deal voice, and before Madison could ask questions, she'd been passed to a triplet.

"When are you coming home?"

"On Thursday."

"That's..." Madison could see the girl counting the days on her fingers. "Can't you come faster?"

"Okay, breakfast time," John said, and the phone moved away from the girls. "Sorry about that. Is Terry around?"

"He's in the shower, getting ready for our trip into Roscoe."

"I envy you. It should be some good fishing. Tell him we're all doing well, and everyone sends their love. I have to get going, too, but I had an interesting talk with your brother before he left Sunday evening. He was asking some pretty big questions about God, and we spent the better part of an afternoon discussing some passages from the Bible. I'm praying for that guy-- he's asking the right things."

"Thank you, John." She would've said more, but he had to run, and they hung up with Madison thanking God for someone like John in the family to be there for her brother at a time when her brother was asking questions. A moment later, Terry came jogging down the stairs, buttoning his long sleeved flannel shirt. "You just missed John."

"Are the munchkins sick?"

She shook her head and told him the reason for the call, then what John had said about Tim.

More than ever, it gave them cause for hope, and as they walked to a nearby restaurant while dawn hued the sky, Madison kept thinking about the promises stuffed in her suitcase, the paper she'd taken down from the wall in their bedroom. God was keeping His word, and it made her want to claim even more, this time for her family. They ate toast and cereal, and Terry read from his iPhone while Madison sipped chamomile and enjoyed the quiet of the restaurant. They were
early and few people were there, and it gave her room to think and feel more relaxed. If only the world would stay this way.

After they had paid their bill, they headed back at a comfortable walk while the world woke up around them. When Terry saw their jeep, he lightly bumped her shoulder.

"I trust John packed my gear?"

Oh. Madison had been waiting for this.

"He did, didn't he?"

She toyed with how to answer.

"Maddie?"

"John said you really know how to handle a fly rod."

Terry's eyes narrowed. "Why do I sense this isn't a compliment?"

"Since you're already so good at fishing the old way," she explained, "we thought a do-it-your-self fly rod made more sense."

"A what?"

"You know-- popsicle sticks and glue," she smiled brightly. "We thought you'd appreciate the challenge, since you're probably bored to death with the real thing."

Arms grabbed around her, and she laughed out loud as Terry pulled her in for a gently wrestling hug.

"Popsicle sticks? Popsicle sticks?" he laughed, and pulled her toward the jeep. "Here I've been making a mental list of things I would've brought from home, and you make jokes."
"It was easy," she smiled, hugging him as they fell into step. "I think I'm picking up your sense of humor."

He gave her a pained look, then stared at the jeep as though he was trying to see inside as they grew near. "John's too cautious when it comes to my best fly rod, so I doubt he packed it, but I'm hoping for at least my old standby. Abby's flies would've been nice. I would've had to cut their shanks, but it would've been worth it to see how the trout responded. Do you happen to know if John packed them?"

Since Terry didn't look as though he really expected her to know that, Madison kept quiet.

In record time, Terry had gotten the tailgate open, had ripped back the blanket, and the next, he was standing in odd silence. He climbed inside, and moved stuff about, the bottoms of his shoes and his back the only things she could see.

"I can't find my fly rod."

Madison gulped.

A moment later, "What's this?"

"I don't know-- I can't see. What are you holding?"

"This." He pushed out of the jeep, lifted out a long hard case with a soft cover in dark green. He looked over one end, saw the brand name clearly sewn into the fabric on one side, and a smile crept over him. Placing the large object on the bed of the jeep, he smoothly zipped it open to reveal a treasure trove of goodies. He whispered something under his breath as his eyes fell on the prized fishing rod tenderly tucked in there by John. Terry wouldn't have to make do with his old standby, after all. He explored the pockets, the small cases with all kinds of things in them.

"There's more." Madison leaned in, and tugged out a heavy-duty tote from under the blanket.

Terry looked at her, then at the bag. He opened it, pulled out new waders in his size, the boots he usually wore, and his baseball cap.
"John did all this?"

"With the advice of Abby. She's reviewed a lot of products, so John relied on her to know what to get."

"I feel like it's Christmas." Terry pulled a case from a side pouch, and shook his head. "Is this what I think it is?"

"It's a fly tying kit for beginners-- it was a gift from Abby and Jake." Madison stuck her hands in her coat pockets and wondered what Terry was thinking. "It comes with a manual," she added, and Terry gave her a look.

"You did all this for me?"

"You don't like it?"

"Are you kidding? What's not to like?" He carefully closed the tote, went back to the case and touched his fly rod. "Thank you. Having this with me on the fishing trip, means a lot. All of this-- it... it's unexpected." He looked at her. "This came from the wedding budget?"

She nodded.

"Didn't you get anything for yourself?"

"I got you."

"Anything besides me? Because this is some pretty cool gear." He unzipped another pocket on the tote and pulled out a hard case. He glanced at Madison, and opened it to find some sunglasses. "No way." He put them on, turned to look in the window and grinned. "If there's something you want, start leaving hints, because I'm evening up the score at Christmas."

"I didn't do this to get stuff out of you."

"I know." He put the shades away. "If we're going fishing, then let's get out of here before we burn our daylight." The gear was put back, though much more carefully than when he'd taken it out,
and he gently helped her into the jeep. Like she was something extra-special. "I hope you don't regret this trip," he sighed. "When you want to come back, just say the word, and we'll leave."

Guessing it wouldn't have done any good to debate with him, she let the subject drop. They were going, and not to turn around and drive back after a few minutes of fishing.

She hadn't bought these boots to wear in the suite.

On the drive to Roscoe, Terry was more considerate than usual. When she started to play music he liked, he asked if she would rather listen to something else. When they neared a gas station, he wondered if she needed to stop and use the bathroom, or maybe stretch her legs. Would she like a quick snack? They could pull off for one. It would be no trouble. She turned everything down, for as she kept reminding him, those stops would only burn daylight—time he could use for fishing.

The scenery begged to be admired, and soon she was taking pictures like an out-of-town tourist. The trees looked to be past their peak of fiery autumn color here, but she loved the warm cinnamon, the muted shades that said this was life, and all was well. Trees crowded the sides of the sloping mountains, towered along the roads, and seemed to welcome them wherever their jeep turned. She had come to love autumn, not only for the color, but since it would forever remind her of these soulful days with Terry. The road crossed over water, snaked around bends, and this time she put down the smartphone to enjoy the view. As the land opened up, a house here and there began to scatter into the landscape. Terry had come this way before, on their way to the museum, so he hadn't needed the phone, but as they passed through the outskirts of Roscoe, he asked Madison to start the map.

They were getting close.

If the fishing didn't pan out, one of Abby's friends who knew the area, had listed a few of the best fishing spots.

It took some navigating, but Terry found their destination, parked their jeep, then while Madison loaded up on sunscreen, Terry went down to the stream to "check out the action." She couldn't see anyone else around— a fact that at any other time would have made her happy, but
she felt as though she didn't belong there and would've been glad to see someone else to prove her wrong.

As she worked lotion onto the back of her neck, Terry came back and announced they had the whole area to themselves.

"Are you sure this is the right place, Terry? This looks like someone's private property."

"Relax, this side of the bank is open to public fishing. See that yellow sign? You can get out of the jeep."

She leaned through her open window and saw the sign nailed to the tree. Breathing easier, she climbed out, felt the ground under her new boots and looked up at the pristine sky. The trees kept her from tumbling off into space, but if they hadn't been there, she imagined she could lose her balance, and do just that, for the sky seemed endless.

"Hard to imagine New York City is only two hours from here, isn't it?" Terry shouldered the fly rod case, his wading tote, took out the two folding chairs, then locked the jeep. As he started down the steep bank, he called out to watch her step.

She did, though it wasn't easy. She slid a little, grabbed onto some weeds to stop her momentum, then kept going before Terry got too far ahead. He looked over his shoulder, and she smiled. This wasn't exactly like going fishing on the bay, where home was just a few steps away. Here, the Willowemoc Creek flowed with trees on all sides with no place to go but a steep rocky bank that leveled out to more rocks and then water.

"I'll put our chairs over here, so it'll keep you away from any stray line." Terry led her to where the shade and sun looked inviting, and set out their chairs. Then he sat down, and started getting his things ready.

"You really like fishing, don't you," she smiled, as she took the chair beside Terry's.

"There's no hook on this, so it isn't really fishing-- it's casting." He opened a small box, and kept talking, but she could tell he was already having a good time. "Do you know who taught me to love this? My step-dad. He gave me my first fishing rod, but he didn't know how to use it, and
when I found I could get away from him by going out to the water, I suddenly couldn't get enough. Funny, isn't it?” Terry looked out over the stream, then back at the small box. "Let's try this one." He snapped the barb off using a hand tool, then showed the fly to Madison. "Let's see how these trout like Abby's handiwork."

Though Madison didn't want to take off her coat, Terry did, and climbed into his chest-high waders as though they were made for him. He slung the corded sunglasses around his neck, then put on his baseball cap.

"I won't go far if you need me," he called as he headed off, and she nodded.

She pulled out her hand and looked over the raw scrape she'd gotten coming down the bank. Oh well. Sitting back in her chair, she soaked in the fresh air. With no one there but her and Terry, she was beginning to enjoy the solitude, the sounds of birds and the bugs floating about in the air. The only thing that told her they weren't out in the middle of nowhere, were the occasional sounds of passing cars on the nearby road. She watched Terry's line arc over the water in graceful loops, and admired the way he handled himself. He wasn't out there wondering what to do, for he knew, and was content to simply be himself. He enjoyed being alone. For all of his easygoing smiles, there was a part of Terry that enjoyed being by himself.

She didn't dwell on the thought for long, for drowsiness was pulling at her eyes, and she decided to take a nap.

* * * *

It had been too long since he'd gotten in some serious fly casting. Terry breathed in the air, let his line sail out and watched the water for any signs of trout. His arm felt rusty, so he practiced hitting targets when a tug on his line made him smile. A sharp tug, and then it was gone. He'd gotten some interest. He turned to tell Maddie, when he saw her catnapping in the half shade, and kept the news to himself. No wonder she was tired, for she'd gotten up so early, even the early bird would've been still in bed. She was having a good day though, a very good day.

As the sun traveled overhead, he tried different flies, and went downstream a short way, just to see how the fish were biting. He tried different approaches, even setting aside his rod and just
watching the trout, and the flow of the creek, when he checked the sun and decided it was time to head back.

Whistling, he hiked along the bank, when he saw Maddie up ahead, standing by their chairs.

"Hey, you're awake," he smiled to the woman who was hugging herself tightly. He pushed around a fallen tree stump, and went to her, bracing himself for a where-were-you look, but when she gave him none, he pulled off his sunglasses and kissed her cheek. "I don't know how long I was gone, but I'm sorry I lost track of the time. If it helps my case, I didn't go far."

She gave a one-shouldered shrug.

He hesitated, sat down and gestured to the fly rod. "I had a few tugs, but I have to confess, what I really loved was the clearance I could get over the water. I wasn't snagging my line in any of the trees. There's this really good spot downstream where I could really let go and cast my heart out."
He started putting his gear away, and looked at Maddie. "Are you hungry? I was thinking we could find a place to eat in Roscoe."

She nodded, and stared at the ground.

"I'm really sorry, Maddie. Are you angry?"

She shook her head.

He paused, trying hard to let a familiar feeling pass, and when it didn't, he took off his waders. Like tape sticking to his hand, he tried to shake the uneasiness loose. He found her coat in the tote, and while she put her coat back on, he put his waders away. She was quiet, and for some reason, so was he.

After his rod had been packed, he asked for a phone, and when he saw the time, he groaned. He should've worn his watch.

"Are you having fun?" he asked, trying to rally her spirits as they climbed the bank.

"Uh-huh," she grunted.
He looked back to see her struggle with her footing.

He gave her a hand, and pulled her up, and after some effort, they made it back to the designated parking area. He unlocked the passenger door and carefully helped Maddie in, then went around to the back to put away their gear. He didn't want to waste time finding a restaurant. If he was starving, then so was she. He climbed behind the wheel, started the engine, and noticed Maddie had yet to put on her seat belt.

"You'll feel better after lunch," he tried to coax.

She looked at him, and he fought back his own thoughts. It was awful to not trust her in that moment-- in that instant, to think the worst and to deep down feel that it was an act of betrayal to read what he did in her eyes.

"Do you have something you want to tell me?" he asked quietly.

She nodded. "I put it back."

"What back?"

"The small knife in your tote."

He thought back to the pocketknife he'd kept with his old gear-- the same one John had packed inside the wader tote. She hugged herself as though she was the last leaf on a tree, hanging on for dear life.

"How bad is it?" he asked.

Her head snapped up, and her eyes trained on him with such intensity, he wasn't sure what he'd said to get such a reaction.

"Let me see your stomach," he coaxed, and unzipped her coat, himself. He tugged the shirt from her jeans, lifted it a few inches, then pushed her jeans back to see if he'd missed something.
"I didn't cut myself."

He saw the disappointment in her eyes.

"You were thinking about it, Maddie." He dropped her shirt, closed her coat, then sat back and left the engine running. "Please don't look at me like that. You were thinking about it."

She was quiet.

"Tell me I'm wrong."

Again, silence.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?"

"I woke up, and saw you were gone, but I knew you'd come back. You told me you wouldn't go far." She hugged herself, and he felt badly for mistrusting her when she had trusted him. "I got up, but it was warmer out in the sun, so I took off my coat and put it in the tote. That's when I saw the knife."

He waited, not wanting to interrupt.

"I thought maybe it would be good to have it in my pocket, just in case someone came while you were gone. But I knew I shouldn't touch it. I knew it was dangerous for me to even look at it." Tears began to crowd into her voice. "That's when I started thinking that this morning was a fluke, that maybe the next time with you wouldn't go as well. What if I had to cut but didn't have a way out? The more I thought about it, the more sure I was that I needed that knife, that maybe I even needed to cut right now, but I kept thinking about all the chances God was giving me, and I kept thinking about you, and I didn't want to mess it up. I was close to it, though. I was really close." Defeat sounded in her voice. "I was hoping if I put it away before you came back, you wouldn't have to know."

He let her words sink in, heard the engine, and switched it off. "Thank you for telling me the truth."
"You believe me?"

"I believe you."

"Do you want to check the tote for the knife?"

He shook his head, then rubbed his face with both hands. "I love you, Maddie. I want what's best for you, and I'd like to think I know the truth when I hear it."

"And you saw my stomach."

"I would've believed you without seeing all the evidence."

"You would've, anyway. Eventually." She gave him a small smile as she touched her stomach. "I'm sorry I took the knife."

"I'm sorry I thought you'd cut yourself."

"Don't be sorry for that. You saw inside of me, and I wouldn't have wanted you to lie to yourself."

Terry didn't know how to tell her all that he was thinking, only that sorrow was part of what he felt. Happiness was there, as was guilt, and relief. "I'll be more careful in the future-- I give my word."

"In the future, I'm going to cook like Izzy does," Maddie said with a sniff. "I'm going to chop, and cut, and dice, and that's all I'll ever use the knives for. I'm not there yet, but one day, that's going to be me. God will get me there. You'll see."

"I believe I will," Terry said quietly. He started the engine, and as Maddie put her seat belt on, he thought the changes in her were more visible now. She had been overcoming, for God had been giving her victory, and that success had encouraged her to rely even more on Him than before. It encouraged Terry, it gave him hope for the future, and he needed that hope, especially after the knife scare. He couldn't always shield her-- they both knew that-- but even so, he promised himself to take better care of her. Whether she was safe with knives, or not.
Still calming down, Terry headed into Roscoe to find a restaurant, and found himself admiring the scenic small town. The shops along the main street, the many homes with Old Glory out front, the tree with the wooden bench beneath its hefty branches for any and all passersby, all spoke of a quintessentially American town. In short, it reminded him a lot of home-- except bigger and more organized. He spotted an Italian restaurant, and the next hour was spent enjoying chicken carbonara while chatting with the nice couple across the table. When Maddie had something to add, Terry kept quiet, but when shyness overtook her, he shouldered their half of the conversation and worked to find ways to include her again. Around him, Maddie had come out of her shell, but around others, the shell was still there, though not as solidly on as before. He could tell she was trying.

When they left the restaurant, the gifts and crafts shop across the street caught his eye, and wanting to give Maddie a change from the fishing he'd put her through, and was about to put her through again, Terry took her by the hand, and walked her over.

"Why are we here?" Maddie asked, as they looked through a large window where handcrafts of all kind were set out on display.

"I thought maybe we could do a little shopping." He took her inside, and smiled as a woman greeted them from behind a counter.

"May I help you?" she asked, and Terry shook his head.

"We're just looking."

Terry perused a rack of postcards, each card showing different scenes around town. He picked one, showed it to Maddie, and she nodded. They'd send one home, just to get a smile from the munchkins. They browsed beautiful earthen pots-- all locally made, according to the sign-- before Maddie went over to several shelves lined with porcelain. Terry followed her, and smiled when he saw what had captured her interest. An angel, painted in light pastels, holding two hearts to her chest.

"It's a night-light," Terry whispered, when he saw the cord running from the base. Leave it to Maddie to find another glowing angel.
She caressed the hearts with her finger, and Terry checked the price tag. Hey, he was a man; it was his job to check.

"Do you think this would go well in our bedroom?" he asked.

She looked at him in surprise, and he shrugged.

"If we get her, we won’t have to leave the bathroom door open, anymore. What do you think?"

When she looked back at the angel with longing, he had his answer. The sales lady must have been watching, for when he started to look around for help, she came over with a ready smile.

"We'd like to buy the angel," he explained, and she took it down from the shelf, and brought it over to the counter.

"Will there be anything else?" she asked in a perky voice, and before Terry could shake his head, Maddie was looking at another part of the store.

Smiling to the woman, he went to stand beside Maddie as she looked at photo frames. One in particular seemed to grab her attention, and Terry thought he knew why. The words, "Our Family," had been carved into the wood, but it was the pair of cuddling doves in the "O" that made him think of John and Izzy.

"The wedding frame we love so much was John's idea," Maddie asked a little timidly, "so I don't suppose he and Izzy would like this?" She sighed, and shook her head, as though answering her own question. "It was a stupid idea. Never mind."

"It wasn't stupid. I know they'd love this." Terry took it down, and handed it to Maddie. "Is there anything else? You're not being reckless with our money. I'll remind you, you still have the balance of the honeymoon budget, and this trip qualifies as our honeymoon. The angel was on me, though. Just so you know."

Maddie bit her lip, and looked about the store from where she stood.
She went to the counter, gave the frame to the woman, then went over to a pile of huge handmade cloth dolls. Terry picked one up and looked it over. Large eyes tucked under a prairie bonnet, with thick yarn braids made for a cute doll. Maddie chose three pink dolls with different print dresses as a woman with white hair peered at them from across the store. Yes, they were picking up three. Terry smiled at her, and the woman went about her own shopping. A sizable die cast dump truck came next, and Maddie took her gifts to the counter, and placed them beside the others. For AJ, Maddie chose a throw pillow with a cozy house on the front and "God Bless Our Home," embroidered in its flowerbed. A token of appreciation was picked out for Agatha, and then Maddie nodded that she was done.

It truly was more blessed to give than to receive, for Terry could see the delight in Maddie's face as she looked over her gifts. He was glad she was finally having some fun.

They paid for the gifts, stowed them in the back of the jeep, and with full stomachs, and some shopping behind them, they moved on to the next fishing spot with Terry being careful to avoid a repeat of the morning.

There wasn't much for Maddie to do while she sat there, watching him cast, so he tried to involve her more. He waved her to the water's edge, and smiled at the surprised look on her face when he coaxed her to step in front of him. Turning away from the water, and with no one around, he put his arms around her and guided her through the principles of fly casting.

When she giggled, he checked the sincerity of his pupil.

"Are you paying attention?" he asked, as blonde hair drifted into his face.

She smiled like a schoolgirl, and leaned into him as he guided her arms for a slow backcast. When he felt her sigh, he momentarily lost track of his thoughts.

"Now what?" she asked.

He shook himself, and finished the cast.

"I never thought fishing could be so nice, Terry."
"Now that you mention it, this is nicer than usual." He kissed her, and watched the stream as it gurgled past them. "We should do this again."

They practiced a few more casts together, then explored upstream, taking every chance they could to spot trout. He did some more casting on his own, with Maddie resting a while on the shore, but then they went back to the jeep, with Terry looking over his map and deciding to take the long way back to the resort so they could enjoy the view. They didn't hurry their drive, and though Maddie had to take painkiller for her hip, past problems kept in the past and they were able to stay in the present, with each other, and enjoy the gift of today. She sat relaxed in the passenger seat, her head leaned back, a smile on her lips as light filtered through the moving trees and onto her face.

Because the road had taken its time to wend through the mountains and countryside, they reached the resort later than Terry had intended. They ordered takeout since Maddie was tired, then brought the food back to their suite so they could eat after they'd had their showers. Maddie went first, then Terry, with Terry hurrying into a pair of jeans and a T-shirt before going downstairs to eat.

He smiled when he found the fireplace on, and the jar candle Maddie had packed, sitting on the end table, doing its best to add to the cozy atmosphere. He jogged to the bed where Maddie was setting out paper plates and napkins.

"You sure know how to make a place feel like home," he sighed.

Happily exhausted, and his arm sore from casting, Terry ate pizza with his wife, then cozied in front of the fireplace with her until they both fell asleep.

The few days of their honeymoon were spent in easy enjoyment of each other's company, with small hikes on trails, an afternoon at a movie, a picnic on the floor when the weather proved to be too chilly. It didn't matter if their plans worked out or not, so long as they were together. They were getting to know each other as man and wife, as friends, as people who would share almost everything for the rest of their lives, and the prospect didn't frighten Terry. Though Maddie may not have intended it, she had taken up residence in his heart as though she had belonged there, and the fact of it was, she did. Now that she owned him hook, line, and sinker, he couldn't see his future without seeing her there, as well. They were like bookends-- even
though they weren’t exactly matched, they were most definitely a pair, for they worked better when they were together than when they were on their own.

The last day of their honeymoon, Terry expected tears, or sorrow of some sort from Maddie, but she looked at complete peace with the world. Unusual for her, even when she was happy. He carried their luggage outside, waited while Maddie did one last search of the suite, then locked the door and headed to the jeep with Maddie at his side.

Another morning, and her limp was no worse than usual. Praise God, His mercies hadn't stopped.

With a heart full of memories, they turned in their keys.

They were going home.

* * * *

Though they had left later in the afternoon than Terry would’ve liked, he made sure they had called ahead, so everyone back home had an idea of when to expect them. He hadn’t thought that would cause a problem, but it had. Since they wouldn't get home until around dinnertime, Izzy had said they would try and wait up for them. The whole family, waiting dinner, because of them. A nearly half day drive, and they would wait? He hadn't said anything at the time, but just thinking about it made him speed more than he should. When he caught himself, he slowed down. "Never do anything you wouldn't do in front of the police." It was something John's dad had once said in half jest when Terry was a boy, and Terry had taken him seriously; as an adult, Terry still tried to live up to that.

"You look like you could relax." Maddie smiled, and Terry knew she was right. "Do you want me to tell Izzy to go ahead without us? I'm sure she'll save us leftovers."

Terry nodded, and felt the pressure ease as Maddie made the call. When the girls had finished chatting, Terry turned on the radio and Maddie took a nap. He could still taste the roast beef sandwiches and ice cream sundaes they’d had just before they left, and figured it would be enough to last them until they got home. It seemed everything was late today. They’d slept in, then decided to take one last romantic walk before packing, and then packing had taken forever
because Maddie had trouble fitting everything they'd brought-- plus the presents they'd purchased-- into the back of the jeep. It had been on the stressful side for both of them, so by the time they'd had their late lunch, the shared ice cream sundae had been a welcome diversion.

Time passed, and the radio helped to keep Terry awake. Though he'd gotten a good night's sleep, the lull of the road was beginning to get to him. Probably too big of a lunch, he guessed. He needed to stop thinking of each day as being a holiday, and get back to normal, everyday eating.

About three quarters of the way through their drive, Maddie began to take note of the signs.

"This is near Syracuse, isn't it?"

He nodded.

"Then we're getting near home."

"That's the first time I've heard you claim Syracuse was near home," he chuckled, but Maddie sat up and paid more attention.

Time didn't go any faster for being more alert, but it did pass, and when Maddie saw the familiar ground of Watertown, she started collecting her things.

"I'm not stopping the car," he said teasingly. "We're still several miles from home, and unless you intend to get out and walk--"

"I just want to be ready."

"You miss being home, don't you."

"I had a wonderful time, Terry, but I miss the kids, I miss Izzy and John. I'm ready to go home."

He nodded in understanding. "Now that life will be theoretically calming down, would you mind if John and I went back to work? I mean in earnest-- not the light stuff we've been doing. I'm especially referring to the client waiting in the wings." He glanced at Maddie, and she readily nodded her willingness. "My schedule will be tight at times, and it might mean I won't be able to
make it to all our sessions with Carol. I will try my absolute hardest to be there, though. On my honor."

"You have to work, Terry. I understand."

"On my overloaded days, maybe Izzy could take you in."

"We'll work something out," Maddie nodded.

"You need to keep going to those sessions, and I need to keep going with you, when at all possible." Terry shook his head. "I'll make the time."

"Izzy can go with me-- don't worry."

It was easier said than done, but Terry tried to not worry by giving his worries to the Lord. It seemed he hadn't even gotten home, and already, the cares of this life were knocking at his door. The end of one thing was the beginning of another-- that was life. He was at a new beginning with Maddie, and it made him curious to know what was ahead. They passed a sign that said Chaumont, and he smiled. Besides that, Maddie zipped up her coat, gathered the scattered wrappers of sugarless candies, the granola bars, the snacks they'd enjoyed in the jeep over the course of their honeymoon, and stuffed them into her purse.

"You won't be graded on how clean the car is," he smiled.

"Please don't give the girls their presents until I'm there. I want to see their faces."

"I'll let you do the honors," he nodded. He caught the bay through the trees, the glorious sight of moonlight over the water, and he knew there was no other place on earth that looked as beautiful, as wonderful, as it did right here. He was biased-- right down to the ground-- but this was home, the place where his roots dug deep.

He didn't have to announce a thing, for the moment they saw the living room window, all lit up, and waiting for them, Maddie hugged her purse.
Terry pulled off the main road, and as he parked in front of the house, the front door opened, and John came out. John waved, noticed the outdoor light wasn't on, and went back in a moment as the others flooded outside.

Maddie couldn't get her door open fast enough.

"Welcome back," Izzy cried, and rushed forward with the girls to give Maddie a great big hug.

"Good to have you back," John hugged Terry.

"Oh, Izzy," Maddie smiled, "we had such a good time-- but I told you that, already." Maddie scooped Lizzie into a hug, then spun the laughing girl around. "You've had a haircut! I love it, but when did this happen?"

"Yesterday," Izzy smiled. "All three were overdue for one. It's only a few inches shorter, but it'll grow back fast."

"Me next!" Ruthie moved in front of Maddie, and got a hug and a kiss while Terry put Debbie down, and swapped her for Lizzie.

"How was Roscoe?" John grinned, as Terry got an enthusiastic hug from his niece. "We got your postcard, and the kids have been showing it to everyone in the neighborhood." John waited while Terry put the girl down, and picked up the last triplet. "Is it my imagination, or have you gained a pound or two?"

"It's not your imagination," Terry laughed, as he held Ruthie. "I ate well, and your fancy dinner didn't help one bit." He nodded to John. "I know I thanked you already, but it really was thoughtful of you. And not just that meal, but all the work you put into the itinerary. And the fishing gear-- I couldn't get over that fly rod case. I know I have Abby to thank, as well, but you did a lot of work. I owe you."

"Nah, that's what brothers are for." John lifted Ruthie from Terry's arms. "Want some help carrying bags? Izzy has dinner waiting for you and Maddie, and it'll go faster with the two of us."
Terry grinned, and went around to the back of the jeep. As he opened the tailgate, he heard a familiar voice across the way. He turned, and saw Abby stepping toward him. She gave him a laughing hug, then moved aside to make room for Jake and Ricky.

"Look at you," Abby exclaimed, as Jake moved to hug Terry, "aren't you looking fit and happy!"

"I don't know about the fit part," Terry smiled, "but I'm definitely happy. Thank you for the kit, by the way, and for the gear you helped pick out. I intend to use it for many years to come."

"Where's Aunt Madison?" Abby asked, looking about as Terry lifted Ricky, and gave the kiddo a hug.

"I think she's with your mom." John nodded to the house, and the men watched as Abby went inside.

Jake smiled. "Want help with the luggage?"

"That's the second offer I've had tonight, and I certainly won't let it go to waste." Terry gave Ricky one last hug before putting the boy down, then started to unload the bags. "How is everyone? Any news you haven't already reported?"

"Tim and Karen took that crib," Jake said over his shoulder as he went into the house with a suitcase and a bag of dirty laundry.

"Izumi gave them some old baby things from the triplets," John added, his arms full of blankets. "Tim was curious about you. It was to be expected," John shrugged, and Terry nodded in understanding. "I told him what we usually do when people ask about your childhood and family. There was shock, and then pity. It was hard for him, especially after the news about his sister. I think it was probably for the best that I was the one to tell him." John nodded for some pillows to be added to his load, but Terry moved so slowly, John nudged his arm to coax him along, and the pillows were added.

John knew where his thoughts were, which was why John was trying to keep him moving. The friends knew each other well.
"After all the questions about your past, he had a grand tour of our office and I talked up your ninja code writing skills--" John moved back a step to get out of Jake's way-- "and before Tim left, I think Tim was properly impressed with his brother-in-law."

"That's great," Terry smiled, but he quietly groaned inside. Hopefully, Tim knew enough to not be impressed.

"You want these in your room?" John asked, and Terry nodded.

"We missed you and Aunt Madison," Jake said, hauling the wading tote behind Terry into the house. "With just Abby and the triplets, and Mom and Dad, it was quiet around here." Jake grinned, for the living room was filled with munchkins trying to talk over each other, Abby talking over the sound of the munchkins, and Maddie and Izzy adding their comments to the conversation as the women moved into the kitchen.

Home sweet home.

Terry moved past the scene, and into the hall, edged past John coming from the bedroom, and came face to face with a room that would've knocked him to his knees, had not Jake been behind him. It was hard to see what he and Maddie had come from when he was so fresh from his honeymoon, but Terry went in, moved inside a room with two couches and looked for somewhere to put his things down. The only place he saw was his couch. John and Jake had already started to fill the far end of the walkway, so Terry dumped the suitcase on the couch, waited for Jake to do the same, then went back into the hall.

Life was waiting for them, but he didn't want to go back to the way things were. They weren't, were they?

He pushed outside, grabbed another armload, and hauled fishing gear without thinking. He wanted to finish, so he could put the jeep away, and get a moment alone with Maddie.

"This is it," Jake said, coming through the front door with two cut-down boxes stacked in each arm. "Dad is parking your jeep in the garage."
"Thanks-- I'll take those." Terry took the boxes, was grateful the woman at the store had wrapped the parcels individually in brown paper, and glanced at the munchkins playing on the floor. Though it was nearing their bedtime, he couldn't tell that by looking at them, for all the excitement seemed to be fueling their energy.

He may be about to make matters worse.

"There you are," Izzy said, getting up from the table as Terry stepped inside the kitchen. "Are you ready for dinner? Madison says she won't eat without you."

"You didn't have to wait," Terry smiled at his wife, who was sitting at the table with Abby, enjoying a cup of tea. "What do you want me to do with these?" Terry hefted the boxes, and Maddie's eyes went wide.

"Oh, yes!" Maddie motioned for him to set them on the table. "Terry and I brought back gifts." She picked up the thick flat parcel, gave it to a smiling Izzy, then hunted through the boxes for something as Izzy unwrapped her present.

"I absolutely love the doves-- thank you, this is very thoughtful of both of you." Izzy gave Maddie, and then Terry a hug.

Maddie beamed, and handed Izzy a small parcel. "This is for Agatha, for when you see her. I really appreciate all the help she gave for the wedding. And this is for Abby and Jake, because we love you." Maddie gave the wrapped pillow to Abby, and Abby hugged and thanked her, while Jake called out his thanks from the doorway. Then Maddie bit her lip as she looked over the remaining large gifts. "You'd better call them," Maddie nodded to Terry, and Terry leaned back.

"Calling all munchkins-- your Aunt Maddie has something for you."

Jake and Terry made way as four youngsters came running to the table, and looked at Maddie expectantly.

"Since Ricky's present is a little heavy, we'll let him go first." Maddie moved some things aside, then lifted out a foot long object wrapped in paper. When she set it on the floor in front of Ricky, the boy smiled, for it was wide, and looked like something to be reckoned with.
"Go on," Jake encouraged, "open it."

Very quickly, Ricky got down on the floor and the paper came flying off, only to reveal a sixties style dump truck. For a full ten seconds, the boy stared in fascination, and ran his hand along the edge of the dump mechanism.

"I think it's safe to say he likes it," Abby smiled, and Ricky nodded. "What do you say?" she asked him.

"Thank you."

"Let's take it into the living room," Jake suggested, and Ricky pushed the truck and made the wheels go round, and drove it into the next room, where beeps and dumping sounds could be heard for the next several minutes.

"Now for the girls." Maddie took out large soft bundles wrapped in brown paper and string, and gave one to each of the triplets.

"Thank you," the girls chimed, while Izzy went to get some scissors.

Debbie squeezed her present, as if testing it, then looked at Lizzie, who hugged hers and smiled, and that made Ruthie excitedly poke her finger through the paper on hers. Terry folded his arms and grinned. He'd seen the way the triplets worked together to solve problems before-- this time, to solve the mystery of what was inside. He figured they already had a pretty good idea that it was a soft toy, they just didn't know what kind.

Izzy nipped the string on the first present, and Lizzie tore off the paper before her mother had the chance to get to the next.

"A doll!" Lizzie held up a doll almost half her size, dressed in a pink calico gown with yellow yarn hair and a matching bonnet.

"Hurry, Mommy!" Ruthie couldn't wait to open hers, and cried in delight when she found a doll similar to her sister's.
When Debbie opened her gift, Terry noticed John was in the kitchen doorway with his phone, taking pictures. John snapped one with the girls and their new friends, then another with Terry and Madison, before the munchkins took off for the living room to play. Terry hoped the kids knew they didn’t have much time left before they would be ushered off to bed.

"Thank you for thinking of the girls," Izzy hugged Maddie, and then Terry.

"That's quite a truck," Jake chuckled, coming from the living room. "We'd better get going, Abby, so they can get around to eating dinner."

"It's great having you guys back," Abby said, going to hug the newly returned couple.

After everyone had said their good nights and goodbyes, John went to lock up the house for the night. With a groan, Terry fell into a chair at the kitchen table while Izzy opened the oven and pulled out their meal, where it had apparently been keeping warm since dinnertime. Maddie sat in the chair beside Terry, and resumed her tea, her face a picture of happy fatigue.

"Here's your chili casserole," Izzy said, setting two plates before them. "You'll find cheesecake in the fridge."

"So much for losing weight," Terry chuckled, but he shook his head and smiled when Izzy looked at him. "Thanks, Izzy."

"I'll leave you two alone," Izzy smiled. She turned on the lights beneath the cabinets, but switched off the overhead, giving a softly private feel to the kitchen before leaving.

The couple prayed over their meal, then Terry started in on the casserole, looked over at Maddie, and kept his voice low, even though from the sound of it, John and Izzy were getting the girls ready for bed.

"Have you seen our room?"

"You mean, since we got home?" Maddie shook her head. Her eyes closed as she tasted the food. "I can hardly wait until I learn how to make this. Izzy's so good--"
"Maddie, we have two couches in our bedroom."

The words fell like crashing cymbals to the table, for Maddie suddenly went quiet. She stared at her plate.

"When can we move them out?"

"I was hoping you'd say that." Breathing relief, he dug back into the casserole, only to notice Maddie had stopped eating. "What's wrong?"

"What are we going to sleep on, if we take out the couches?"

"I thought about shoving them together, but I know from experience that my couch gets uncomfortable the closer you get to the edge." He shrugged. "We'll use the camping mat. It worked in our suite, so we'll use it here."

"You're willing to sleep on the floor? For weeks, and maybe even months?"

Food caught in his throat, and he reached for Maddie's tea.

"I couldn't do that to you, Terry. What if I'll never be well enough to sleep on a bed? If we couldn't think of something else, you'd be stuck on the floor, forever."

He put the cup down and shook his head. "So long as I'm stuck with you, then I say, bring it on. I'll keep looking for the bright side." Terry loaded his fork, and kept eating. "The bright side--like having more space in the bedroom because we moved out the couches. The fact we wouldn't be in this situation if you weren't making progress. No, I'd rather be on the floor than the couch. This is a good problem to have, Maddie. Very good." Terry gave her a look, and she seemed to believe him, for she went back to eating her dinner.

"You're really easy to please, Terry."
"I beg your pardon." He sat back and studied her. "I don't happen to be married to just anyone. This is a first rate sweetheart we're talking about, one who gives everything she has, even when she doesn't have it to give."

She didn't answer.

"I have every reason to feel loved, Maddie. You're not talking me out of this."

She looked at her plate, and was silent.

"I'll get the couches moved out as soon as I can, but for tonight, maybe we could bed down between them, in the walkway. There won't be much room, but we could sleep on our sides." He smiled when she nodded in agreement. "Then we'll go with that. See? Was I so easy to please?"

She smiled, and ate her casserole, and Terry took heart.

The night had grown late, he felt drained from a day of packing and travel, and to top it all off, he faced a possible lifetime on a mat on the floor, or some other non-bed alternative. Weary though he was, he could honestly say none of it mattered. Not in any way that made him want to take up arms and fight, or rail against God. What had God done to him, except to be faithful in bringing them home safely? As Terry finished his dinner, he didn't need to renew his faith in God's master plan for their marriage, weigh his love for Maddie against the ache in his back, or measure out the fairness of the situation. Love was a great equalizer, and Terry had that in abundance.

As her hand reached across the table, and touched his, Terry smiled.

He was tired, but he was happy.

"Remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how He said, It is more blessed to give than to receive."
~ Acts 20:35 ~

"Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to Him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator."
~ 1 Peter 4:19 ~
Chapter Forty-five

His Eye is on the Sparrow

"Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows."

~ Matthew 10:29-31 ~

They kept to Terry's plan and slept between the couches before Terry called the next day and donated both couches to charity. Two men had come in a large truck, and hauled the couches away without much comment, for they had other stops to make, and that had been it-- no more furniture in the bedroom except the dresser. For all the trouble Terry and John had gone through to get those couches in there, it felt like a letdown to see them go so easily, so quietly. In their wake, they left a room where echoes bounced off the walls like some unexplored cavern.

While Terry and John went to work for their new client in Singapore, Madison set about turning the empty room into a home. The sleeping mat was laid out with comfy blankets and pillows, her verses went back up on the wall, and the new porcelain angel was placed on the dresser. She unpacked their bags from the honeymoon, caught up on their laundry, and considered moving the recliner in from her apartment so the bedroom wouldn't look so terribly vacant. In the end, she decided to leave the recliner where it was; she had plans for this room, and they didn't include more upholstered furniture. Even though the mat on the floor, the things in the corner, and the dresser didn't sound like much, she wanted to save room.

Room for something big.

As October ended, she kept pushing at her goal to get off the floor. Before she knew it, November had turned into December, and still, they were sleeping on the floor. She kept going, and didn't let herself give up, though it felt like she was getting nowhere fast. Even though previously Terry had said she was making progress, and even though reason told her it was still true, she felt like a caterpillar down there, and not very much like the butterfly she knew she'd become. Using the things she'd learned from Carol, Madison fought for her future, but she did it in private, with no one looking, for she did not want Terry or anyone else to see her struggle. The trick was, to not lose herself in a flashback.
At first, Madison could only eye the master bedroom at the end of the hall, and wish herself in there. However, wishing wasn't the same as doing, and one morning, when Izzy left to take the triplets to preschool, Madison made her move. With Terry and John in the office, the house was all hers, or at least mostly hers, for the men were usually so absorbed in their work, Madison knew she could count on them to leave her alone unless she cried for help. Which she had no intention of doing.

This was it-- her mind filled with promises from her wall, she turned the doorknob, and pushed open the door.

The Dragon did not own her. Fear did not own her. She would conquer this. She took a step into the bedroom, and let herself stare at the carpet. Her heart pounded, her hands tightened into fists, and she prayed one of her promises. A short one-- just something to hang onto while she gathered her courage. Little by little, she inched her eyes up until a dark brown ruffle came into view. A ruffle? Then she saw the edge of a matching bedspread that hung over the side of the mattress, and knew she was looking at the right object. Bile tasted in her mouth, but she forced herself to just stay there and look at the edge of the bedspread. She remembered Carol's words, their talk, and took several deep breaths to calm her breathing. To shut down her fight-or-flight response.

It was only a bed. It couldn't hurt her.

She prayed, meditated on her battle cry, and practiced her breathing. How long she stood there, she didn't know, but when she was able to stare at that bedspread edge without thinking of the Dragon's ugliness, she backed into the hall and thanked God.

The next day, when no one was looking, she went in, and made it as far as the foot of the bed. She couldn't go in until two days later, because she lacked opportunity, but when she did, Madison made the most of it.

It was just a mattress on box springs, something covered with a pretty bedspread, and yet to her, it meant a place of pain. She'd escaped, and now she wanted back in? It seemed to her to be proof once and for all that she was crazy, and yet she kept coming back whenever Izzy took the girls into preschool. Then, one weekend, when the girls were home, but the house was quiet, Madison felt brave enough to go in and touch the bedspread. She nearly passed out, but sheer
will pumped into her, and she stayed put; she breathed, ran her hand over the length of the bed, and felt the weave of the fabric. Her jailer was dead. He could no longer hurt her. This bed was just an object— an object without a jailer.

Over and over, she repeated these words, then prayed and asked God to free her the rest of the way.

Then she saw the painting, above the headboard of John and Izzy's bed. She instantly recognized the artist as Jake, and the faces of her family. So this was the painting, the one in the bedroom she'd never seen. It made her want to see every inch of the house.

Going into the hall, Madison steadied her pulse, then looked into the girls' room. She smiled as she watched Ruthie play on her computer; so that was the computer she'd heard so much about.

When the munchkin saw her, Ruthie excitedly called her over, and Madison went inside and found herself learning all about Hoppin' Frogs-- small multi-colored frogs that easily got squished if you didn't know what you were doing. And Madison didn't. The other two triplets were quickly pulled into the game, until Madison had quite forgotten the three beds surrounding her. It was all she could do to keep her froggie alive. When Madison finished level one, she got a high five from Lizzie, and a man's laughter came from the doorway.

Grinning, Terry folded his arms, and nodded to them to keep playing, and Madison could tell he was proud of her. He was practically glowing with pride at her accomplishment.

In that moment, Madison knew-- really knew-- that she was going to finish her own level and beat that bed.

* * * *

Looking through the kitchen window, Madison saw dark gray blanketing for as far as she could see. It seemed all this month, they cycled between rain, and snow, and now it was raining again. This early December gloominess didn't bother her though, for it only made the house feel all the more snug and safe, and she went back to cleaning the counter while Izzy kept watch over the vegetable stew simmering on the stove. When Madison caught sight of the printed email from Abby tacked on the fridge, Madison's thoughts turned to family. The email was a reminder of
Abby's upcoming schedule, and just looking at it made Madison wonder how Abby intended to do it all. Abby had listed where she would be going, and when-- all different places, but grouped during the months that were better for fishing, not to mention a camera crew.

With Jake's full support, Abby had accepted a request from her boss, Dennis, that she do something called segments for "Bassin' the Weeds." It was more than Madison could understand. It meant Jake would be staying home with Ricky while Abby went to shoot, or film, or whatever it was they did to make those segments, and while Abby's schedule would be minimal, it meant she would still be busy. When possible, she would take her family with her, though since Ricky would be attending preschool soon, he and Jake would be staying home when Abby's trips meant being away on a weekday.

Even the triplets would be starting kindergarten next year, for they were turning five in January, and thankfully, all four children seemed to be looking forward to school.

Though Tim hadn't been able to come up for Thanksgiving, he and his family were going to spend Christmas in Three Mile Bay, and the thought of it made Madison eager for a real Christmas. Momma had never much cared about this season, even grudgingly going so far as to pull a dismal five-inch plastic tree from a public trash can one year, just to shut up her little girl. But Madison hadn't wanted things. Not really. She'd wanted what made Christmas special. As a child, Madison hadn't been able to put it into words, but looking back, she understood that Momma simply never had any love in her to give. Momma had known so little about love, and could have cared less for the Reason for Christmas, that Madison might as well have wished for the stars than to hope for anything more tender than that trash can tree.

Ever since playing Hoppin' Froggies, Madison knew what she wanted Terry to get her for Christmas. This morning she had put her request on a gift tag, tacked it onto an office present, and hid the present in his top desk drawer. After working so hard, her goal was now within reach.

Family, Christmas, and goals-- they all reminded her of what was on her heart, and her thoughts went back to the calendar. Ever since last month, she’d been wondering how to ask Izzy a question without her getting excited. It probably wouldn't be what Izzy would think it was, but the longer this went on, the more Madison wondered. She knew she needed to talk to someone, and Izzy was her best choice, but she hadn't, just in case things went back to normal. She'd
always gone back to normal in the past, but then, she'd been with the Dragon in the past, and now that she wasn't, she couldn't be sure what to expect when not beaten.

She wasn't sure. If only she could be sure.

"Hey, Maddie," Terry moved into the kitchen, his wool sweater pushed up around his elbows, "I found it." Snagging Madison around the waist, he hugged her, while Izzy pretended not to notice. "Are you sure about this?"

Madison nodded.

"I hope you're not doing this for me." He kissed Madison's neck. "I've been doing just fine on the floor."

"I'm sure," Madison nodded. "I'm ready for a bed, and I want one for Christmas."

"Then we'll get one, but that's like getting socks. It's too practical. What do you want for just you?" Terry brushed the hair from her eyes and smiled encouragingly.

"But I already have--" she stopped as he let go and gave her a look. "I can't think of anything else I don't already have. Honestly."

"If you could let me know sooner instead of later, I'd appreciate it. What with the holiday rush, and all. You wouldn't want me trampled by last-minute shoppers, would you?" He kissed her nose. "I have to get back to work, but think about it."

As he left, Madison looked at Izzy, and Izzy smiled.

"I think he feels guilty about the fishing equipment."

"I wish he didn't. It wasn't as though I didn't get to enjoy using some of it-- he gave me casting lessons."

"The sweetheart," Izzy smiled, and Madison laughed. "Maybe I should get John to give me some casting lessons, sometime."
Now was as good a time as any, so Madison took a deep breath. "When I saw my doctor..." She paused, and searched for something else to say. "I've been doing those exercises my doctor gave me to strengthen my hip. Terry's been helping me in the gym, before the guys come in and do their workouts."

"Have they helped?" Izzy asked, sprinkling a dash of seasoning into the stew.

"I think so." Madison knew she was a big fat chicken, and decided to try again. "When I saw my doctor, she didn't do any tests. So that means she didn't noticed anything different about me, doesn't it?"

"Different in what way?"

Madison bit her lip.

"I think I know what you're trying to ask me."

"You do?"

"The Urgent Care Center where you went to be treated for your cuts is in the same building as your doctor's office," Izzy nodded, "so your doctor knew about your stitches, and if she didn't say anything, then it's because she had better things to talk about. They don't have much time with their patients, so they have to get down to the important things fast." Izzy smiled. "I know it's that way with my doctor. You can relax-- if your stitches had healed wrong, she would've told you."

With a smile and a sigh, Madison put her sponge away. Izzy hadn't understood, but then, Madison hadn't given her dear friend much to work with.

While Madison helped Izzy get dinner ready, she prepared to try again. This time, with someone else. Dinner almost ready, Madison went into the hall, and peered into the office. The men looked to be in the middle of something, so she stood outside and waited for a lull in all the intense concentration before trying to get Terry's help. Terry sat with his hand on his chin, peering at one of the two large monitors on his desk that were supposed to make his work a little
easier. The two monitors were connected to a laptop, a setup mirrored on John's desk, giving the office an almost command-center feel.

Throwing at a dartboard, John spoke without looking away. "I'm telling you, I'm good at spotting these bugs."

"Stay where you are-- I almost have it." Terry hit a key, and scanned the screen while John accosted the dartboard. "I'm afraid we can't come right now, Maddie."

"It's okay," she shrugged. "Dinner's not ready."

"Oh?" Terry looked up. Every feature said he was busy, and impatience edged into his eyes. "Is it important?"

"I-- I don't know."

He pushed away from the desk. "John, I need to take five."

"Take ten, take thirty."

Terry shot a look at his friend, and John got up and went to Terry's laptop. "You need to unwind, Buddy. I'd suggest you don't come back until after dinner."

"I'm close."

"That may be, but you still need a break."

Terry rubbed his forehead, pushed into the hall with Madison, and sighed deeply. "What is it?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"You aren't." Terry rubbed his neck. "What's up? Is it the bed? Are you having second thoughts?"

"I need your help, Terry. I think I have to get to the store."
He hung his head. And let out a breath-- a very patient breath. "Okay."

She braced herself for what she needed to say. "I don't know what it would feel like if the Dragon hadn't beat me when he did, but since you haven't, I missed my period last month. It hasn't come back. I think I need to take one of those home pregnancy tests you see on TV."

His eyes grew wide. "You're kidding."

"Do I look like I'm joking? Would I pull you away from your work--"

"Maddie," he held out a hand, "it was a poor choice of words. What I really meant was, 'Wow, that's great.'"

"Are you happy? Because I'm not sure. You look stunned."

"That's because I am." He shook his head, and grinned. "It's a delayed effect, I promise. I knew protection wasn't one-hundred-percent effective, so this shouldn't come as a complete surprise, but still. Wow. You don't know if you are though, do you? So I can't start celebrating, and tell our family?"

"You want this to happen?"

"If it's God's timing, yes. Absolutely."

She sighed in relief. "For a moment, I--" She didn't have time to finish, for Terry pulled her into a hug.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"If God gives us a baby, then I have to believe He'll make me strong enough to be a momma." Madison hung on to Terry. "And I'll have you."

"You'll have me. And Izzy, and John."

"I'll have help," she nodded.
Terry kissed Madison again, and walked her to their bedroom. "Do you want to come with me to the store, because it's on the stormy side, and I'd feel better if you stayed home. I already have a good idea of what to get." He smiled at her surprise. "Who do you think got Izzy's pregnancy test when it was time? John? He was a nervous wreck." Terry pulled a coat from the closet. "You get some rest, and let me do all the running."

"Thanks, Terry." She kissed her husband, and felt so much better, now that he knew, and they were doing something about it.

"Don't tell the others until we know for certain?" Terry asked. "No need getting their hopes up for nothing. Just in case."

She nodded, and zipped up Terry's coat while he smiled.

They said a quiet prayer for safety, then he left while the jeep keys jingled in his coat pocket.

From the triplets' room, one of the girls sang the sparrow song, the words drifting to where Madison stood in the bedroom doorway as she watched Terry leave.

"I sing because I'm happy,
I sing because I'm free,
For His eye is on the sparrow,
And I know He watches me."

Humming it herself, Madison went back to the kitchen, and helped set the table. She marveled at her own presence of mind. She couldn't celebrate, or accept disappointment-- she was in an in-between, a waiting room for two, for Terry was in there with her. Quietly, she prayed and kept moving, and asked God for His will to be done. She didn't trust herself to know what was best, and was willing to accept whatever He decided.

* * * *

It was snowing again, this time coming down heavier than before. Terry adjusted his driving even more, grateful the store was so close by. As he pulled into the parking lot, he couldn't stop
grinning. That grin would have to go when he got inside, or he would really get comments when people saw what he was buying. He just couldn't wait to find out. Was she, or wasn't she? He should probably go through the self-checkout, though. It would be hard for the store cashier to resist commenting.

He parked the jeep, and as he unfastened his seat belt, light glistened off his windshield. He turned to look behind, and the cutting glare of headlights blinded him. What was going on? The thought had barely registered when a hand shoved at his back, pushed him from the driver's side door, and onto the pavement as his jeep disappeared before him.

Metal crunched on metal, followed by eerie quiet.

His heart hammered, he looked up, and snow filled his eyes.

* * * *

"Are you sure Terry was only going to the store?" John checked the time as Madison called Terry's phone. "It's not like him to be late for dinner."

"Voicemail again." Madison went to the living room window and looked out at the falling snow. "He was only going to the store-- one here in Three Mile Bay. It wasn't supposed to take this long."

"I'll find him," John said, zipping his coat. "Call me when you hear from him."

Madison jumped when her phone sounded, and John paused as he went to the door. "Hello, Terry?"

"Hold on, Maddie." Sirens overshadowed Terry's voice.

Clutching the phone, Madison prayed those sirens weren't for Terry.

"Is that him?" John asked, and Madison nodded. John shut the door, while Izzy looked relieved.
"Sorry, I'm here." Terry cleared his throat, and Madison pressed the phone to her ear so she could hear him better, while John watched Madison with careful focus. "There's been an accident."

"Terry!"

"I'm fine. Just breathe, and don't miscarry, or anything-- I'm fine. A man had a diabetic episode, and plowed into the store's parking lot. No one was hurt except him, and even he's going to be fine. We were very, very blessed. He was taken to the hospital, but not before his wife rushed down here. Maddie, that woman was terrified."

"What is it?" John stared at Madison, and since Terry kept talking, Madison could only wave to John that she couldn't speak.

"She insisted on seeing me, and she couldn't stop apologizing. I'm just grateful no one was seriously hurt." Terry spoke at a rapid clip, and when he paused, Madison asked Terry to give her a moment so she could tell everyone what had happened.

"He's in one piece. Thank God." John bent over and breathed deep, and Izzy went to John and hugged him.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Madison asked, unable to help the tears in her voice. "Are you really, truly sure? You're not trying to spare me, are you?"

"Try not to cry. I truly am fine. They want to take me to the hospital to check a few scrapes and bruises, but other than that, I'm fine."

"Bruises?"

"They're minor. I didn't even bang my head when I hit the pavement. Hold on--" Terry paused, and Madison could hear someone talking to him in the background.

"Is he all right?" John asked, and Madison nodded.

"He said he hit the pavement, though." Madison paced while Izzy comforted the munchkins. "He's all right. Uncle Terry said he was fine. Terry, what hospital are they taking you to?"
"I don't need one. I have to talk to the police-- I'll come home as soon as everything's been taken care of. I love you."

"Terry--" He'd already hung up, and Madison tried to calm her heart, especially since the children were watching. She looked at John, and Izzy. "He said he doesn't need the hospital."

"He should go," Izzy insisted, but John shook his head.

"If he said he doesn't need to, then so be it. He walked away-- that's what counts."

Madison sat down on the couch, and Izzy joined her.

"It's okay, I'm sure Terry is fine," Izzy comforted. "If he needed the hospital, then he would go."

Izzy turned to her husband. "Would you serve the girls their dinner?"

John nodded, and went into the kitchen.

Though Madison was distracted, she smiled at Debbie, Lizzie, and Ruthie when they came close, and she hugged them, and calmed her voice so they knew everything was all right. It was good to have someone to be brave for, because it reminded her to stay strong.

"What was Terry doing at the store?" Izzy asked, as the triplets went to eat dinner.

Wondering how to answer, Madison looked up as John came in with a bowl of stew and offered it to Madison.

"You might as well eat," Izzy coaxed. "Terry will be home when he can, and if he hasn't already grabbed some dinner, there will be leftovers. How about I keep you company?" Izzy got up, and came back a few moments later with a bowl of her own, while John ate in the kitchen with the triplets.

The question about Terry was dropped, and when Jake and Abby came over with Ricky later that night, no one left, for they wanted to wait and find out more from Terry. John called Sheriff Peterson, and found out nothing new while the hours ticked by and little munchkins fell asleep.
and were carried off to bed. Everyone watched TV to pass the time, though no one paid attention to what was on, and it amazed Madison that the world was still spinning after what had just happened to Terry. But then, the world was like that-- it stopped for no one. More than once, John threatened to go down to the store and see what he could find out, but Izzy kept him back. They probably had enough of a crowd down there, without John adding to the mess. Give it some time. Terry would be home soon.

The moment Madison heard a car pull to a stop in front of the house, her heart pounded. She raced to the window while John lost no time getting to the front door.

"It's Terry." Madison held her breath as she saw Terry climb from a police cruiser in his heavy coat. For a moment, she thought he might be in trouble, but then Terry gave a friendly wave, and the car drove away. She grabbed at the curtains to see more clearly, and jumped and cried with delight when he started through the falling snow, and made his way toward the house.

The jeep was nowhere in sight.

Stepping back, John held the front door open, and Terry came inside. Madison couldn't help herself-- she rushed Terry, and he caught her up in his arms.

"Oh, Terry, Terry!" She cried into his coat and he held her close. "I kept praying you were all right. Thank You, God. Thank You." She dried her eyes on his damp coat, noticed it smelled of oil and grease, and pulled away to get a good look at her husband.

Loving brown eyes looked back at her from a tired but unhurt face, and she hugged Terry fiercely.

"I'm fine, Maddie. The man in the other car had it worse than I did."

"Your jeep?" John asked.

Terry shook his head. "There's too much damage to warrant having it fixed-- it's totaled."

With a shudder, Madison squeezed Terry.
"It sounds like a miracle you made it out unhurt," John marveled.

"You have no idea." Terry kissed Madison, then walked her to the couch. "Could someone get me a cup of something hot? I could stand some warming up." While Izzy and Abby hurried into the kitchen, Madison helped Terry pull off his coat, then held it for him as he sat down.

"I'll put that away," John offered, and Madison passed him the coat. John stopped in his tracks though, when Terry snapped his fingers and called out to him.

"The left pocket-- it's for Maddie." Terry looked kind of strange, but then, he'd just been through a lot. "It's the reason I went out, in the first place. I bought it after the accident, after they were done with me."

Patting the coat, John checked the left pocket. He nodded to Terry that he had found it, and handed something small wrapped in a grocery bag to Madison. "I'll hang your coat in the bathroom so it can dry out. Try to relax." John turned and left, and Madison looked over at Terry.

Terry smiled, and shook his head.

"Is hot cocoa okay?" Abby called from the kitchen.

"It's fine." Terry put his arm around Madison as she curled on the couch beside him and hid the bag between them. "Man, what a night."

"Thank You for bringing him home to me," Madison whispered. It was her one prayer since seeing Terry, and she kept sending it up to Heaven.

Moving to the recliner, Jake sat down and rubbed his hands together. He smiled at Madison, then looked at the kitchen as Izzy and Abby carried out a tray crowded with mugs.

"Ricky is still asleep on our bed," John said, coming from the hall. "The girls haven't stirred, so that's a blessing." John took a mug from the tray, moved to the couch, and sat beside Madison as Abby went to sit on the armrest of the recliner. "Have the police charged the guy who hit you?"
Terry shook his head. "It’s under investigation, but I doubt they will. From what his wife said, her husband doesn't have a history of blacking out. It was a freak accident-- he's a responsible diabetic. We were blessed no one was hurt, and that only a few vehicles were sideswiped before he hit mine." A strange look crossed Terry's face. "Something happened that didn't make it into the police report. I didn't tell anyone, because I figured they'd think I was under the influence of something, or maybe I'd had a concussion, and haul me off to the hospital. I felt it, though. I know I did."

John leaned forward on the couch. "What happened?"

"Right before the car hit my jeep-- the strangest thing--" Terry stopped and Madison patted his chest to coax him to keep going. "I could have sworn I felt a man's hand on my back."

"A what?"

"A man's hand. It wasn't small-- I had the very distinct impression of a large, solid hand on my back, and it pushed me forward, out of the jeep. I don't even remember opening the passenger door to get out." Terry looked at John. "I didn't hit my head, and unlike the guy who struck my jeep, I didn't black out at any time."

John stared at Terry.

"I remember sitting on the asphalt, looking up at the snow-- and I don't know what came over me-- I said, 'Thank you.' No one was there, absolutely no one, and yet I knew I was thanking one of my guardian angels. I just knew it." Terry looked around, as if waiting for someone to comment.

"Whether we're aware of it or not, God preserves us all the time from things that could have happened, but didn't," John said, looking to each of the family. "There's a time for suffering, and a time for deliverance, and tonight, Terry had a rare glimpse of that deliverance as he was pushed out of harm's way." John paused. "The Lord calls His people His inheritance. That's us. He's delivered us before. Just look around you. I believe God is going to do great things through this family-- He did not test us in a furnace for nothing. I don't know about the rest of you, but what Terry has told us, only makes me bolder than ever."
Jake nodded slowly, as though thinking something through. "'He shall give His angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways.'" Jake looked about the room. "It makes me wonder how many angels we have, and just can't see."

Madison hugged Terry. "I have one right here."

While her family talked, Madison sat curled up next to Terry and quietly thanked God for sending that angel to save hers. Her thoughts turned to the box wrapped in the grocery bag tucked between her and Terry. Now that Terry was safe and home, she ached to know what her body was trying to tell her.

It was almost three when Jake and Abby left with Ricky asleep on Jake's shoulder. After good nights, and hugs, John and Izzy went to their room, and Terry and Madison went to theirs. The moment the bedroom door closed, Madison ripped the bag off the box and began to read the directions. Terry fell against the door grinning, his face a picture of humor and exhausted excitement. She started to talk, but he held out a hand and motioned her to lower her voice.

Then he went first.

"I thought for sure you had told them why I'd gone to the store. When I got back, and they never said anything about a baby, I was impressed. I never dreamed you'd be able to keep it a secret."

"I might get a negative, Terry. We've been trying to be responsible about this. Whatever this says, we accept it as God's timing."

"Agreed," he nodded. He started to pace, stopped, and looked at her.

"What?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Never mind."

While she read, Terry loosened his shoulders, stretched his arms, as though he were doing a warm-up.
He stopped. "If you had a hunch this was going to go one way or the other, would you tell me?"

"I guess so." She turned the box over and read the other side.

"What do you mean, you guess so? That's important information, don't you think?"

"If I knew something for sure, then I would tell you. I don't, so I can't," she smiled, as she opened the box. He quieted as she looked over the test sticks, and when she headed for the bathroom, he began to pace the wide-open carpet. "I'll let you know as soon as I have a result."

He nodded, and she was grateful when he didn't follow her into the bathroom to watch.

"Hey, how long until you know?" he called.

"Two minutes."

"Man." Something punched the wall.

"You're going to wake the girls, Terry."

She had no idea when this hunch Terry had said she might have would kick in, but as she washed her hands and stared at the test stick on the back of the toilet, a feeling did tug at her.

"Anything yet?" He came in and hovered near the toilet. "I forgot to thank you for coming to me about this. I mean, you could have gone to Izzy."

"I did." She smiled at Terry's surprise. "She thought I was talking about something else." Madison shrugged. "I would've wanted you here for this, anyway."

Terry smiled, and hugged himself like Madison had so many times before, and stared at the ceiling.

Madison looked at the test stick. She bit her lip.

"Terry?"
"Yeah?"

"We're pregnant."

He fell back a step, looked at the stick as his mouth fell open.

"Terry?"

She laughed as a grin spread across his face, and he reached for her.

"So it's a yes?" he asked.

She nodded, and he squeezed her to him.

"Wahoo!" Terry picked her up, and gave her a big sloppy kiss. "Are you sure? The plus sign means we're pregnant?" He kissed her again when she nodded, "yes," then he shut his eyes, and she realized he was praying.

She hugged Terry, her own heart full to overflowing. She was going to be a mother. She was going to have her own sweetheart, a part of her and Terry in a child. Would it have his laughter, his sense of humor? More importantly, would she be a faithful momma, one who would love, and nurture, and not walk away as her own had done? Please, God, no! She had not gone through the furnace for nothing, for she had been made to last. This baby would know love, it would have faith, and because of that, hope; it would have a father in Terry, one who was good and true; it would have an uncle in John, an aunt in Izzy, and cousins forever in the triplets, in Ricky, and Abby, and Jake.

This baby would know what family meant.

As Madison hugged Terry, he showered her with kisses.

"Are you scared?" he whispered.
"Terrified." She leaned into the arms that held her. 'I've never been a momma before, and I'm going to have to trust God for this. When God saved you though, He reminded me that nothing is too hard for Him. If He could push you from danger, then He can make me to be a good mother. It's strange-- I'm scared, and yet I've got goose bumps running up and down my arms. I have this, this--"

"What?" Terry asked.

"This overwhelming joy. Something good was started because of you and me." She touched Terry's face. "Because we love each other, someone else is coming into the world. Isn't that amazing?"

He grinned, and hugged her. "What do you think we'll have? A girl, or a boy?"

"I don't know. I've only just found out someone's in there. But you were right-- a few moments before I saw the result, I think I knew." She closed her eyes and thanked God. All the joy that had come before, paled in comparison to this. Terry wiped something from her cheek, and she realized she was crying. "Merry Christmas, Terry."

"That's right-- Merry Christmas!" He laughed, and kissed her again, and started for the bedroom. "We have to tell the others."

"But it's so late. Please, can't we let them sleep?" She looked at Terry, and he hugged her, and laughed quietly into her hair. "I won't be able to sleep. I'm surprised we haven't made enough noise to wake everyone, already." He swung her around, grabbed his phone and before she knew it, he was taking a picture of them, together. "I want to commemorate the first few minutes of our knowing." He snapped another, showed it to her, and smiled. "I'm so happy, Maddie. I can't believe this is my life."

She kissed his cheek. "I know the feeling."

"It's too late for me to sleep-- I'm running on adrenaline." Terry shook his head, and though he sounded wide-awake, for the first time all night, he looked painfully exhausted. "I'm getting some coffee. I'll go watch TV, and wait for everyone to wake up."
"Then would you keep me company?" She tugged him toward their bed on the floor. "I'm tired, but I won't get a wink of sleep without you."

"Well, you're different, you need rest." Terry turned down their covers, and she went to change into her nightshirt.

When she came back, he was still wearing his day clothes, pacing, and in general, looking wired and like someone who'd just walked away from an accident. She turned on their porcelain angel, he switched off the overhead, and she crawled into bed while he tucked her in.

"Terry?" She held out her hand, and he groaned.

"I won't be able to sleep," he warned, but she opened the heavy blanket for him, and he moved in behind her. "Oh, Maddie, thank God you didn't come with me to the store." Terry spooned behind her, put his arm around her, and she sighed with contentment. "I close my eyes, and I see those headlights." Terry squirmed, and she caressed his hand. "If I had lost you, Maddie--"

"Shhh." In a quiet hush, Madison thanked God for the blessing of their baby, the blessings of each other, for their family, and the blessings of His protection. She thanked God for the angel who had pushed Terry from the car, she prayed for the man who had blacked out, she prayed for his wife-- she prayed for everything that came into her heart, and as she spoke, she caressed Terry's hand. By the time she had finished her prayer, she heard a soft snore behind her ear.

Her poor, sweet Terry-- her tired, worn out husband, was sound asleep.

* * * *

"Uncle Ter-reee," a munchkin called from the hall. "Are you still in there?"

It took effort, but Terry opened his eyes long enough to focus on the door. "Am I what?"

"Aunt Madison, Aunt Madison! He's awake!"

Terry pushed onto his side, pulled the warm blanket over his shoulder and let himself fall into the groggy slumber he'd been enjoying. As whispers hushed outside the bedroom door, they
barely registered as a wave of sleep pulled him under and he resumed his dream of washing the jeep in a snowstorm while Maddie insisted it wasn't necessary. Something teased his memory...

He sat up in a flash.

He was pregnant. Okay, he wasn't, but Maddie sure was, and he had to go tell everyone the big news. His heart fell when he realized he was alone in bed, and Maddie had already changed and left the room. His eyes tried to focus on the time, but he was so bleary, he had to rub his face before he could make out the numbers. To his horror, he'd slept in. Some kindhearted soul had let him sleep. Of all days to spend in bed, this was the absolute worst. He reached for his clothes, only to realize he'd worn them to bed. One whiff told him he needed a shower, but that could wait.

Throwing back the comforter, and the thick blankets, he got to his feet and ignored the fact the house felt as though it had been awake for over half the day. Which it had. How could he have possibly fallen asleep when he had such important news to tell? This was his first-- not as though a second or third wasn't as important, but things like this didn't happen to him every day. And he had slept in.

He could kick himself.

He pushed into the hall, and found Ruthie, camped beside his door.

"This time he really is, Aunt Madison!" Ruthie stood up and looked at him expectantly, prompting John to appear from the office, and Maddie from the living room with his yellow smiley mug.

Izzy followed with the other two munchkins, Izzy's smile kind and considerate.

"I told them not to wake you," Maddie said, handing him his coffee.

"Why didn't you?" Terry took the mug, but felt the disappointment sink in as he looked at his friends. "I would've loved to have seen the looks on your faces when you found out."
"Found out what?" John stepped close and took a whiff of Terry's java. "Is there any of that left in the kitchen?"

"You mean, she didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?" John looked at him askance. "You slept in your clothes?"

"He almost didn't sleep at all," Maddie told John.

Terry looked at Izzy. "She didn't tell you, either? I'm not too late?"

"I wouldn't have told them without you," Maddie said, straightening his shirt collar. "Do you want to comb your hair? Someone might take pictures."

"Maddie, you sweetheart." Terry pulled an arm around his wife, kissed her soundly, then grinned at John and Izzy. "We have an announcement to make. Maddie and I are expecting."

A gasp of surprise, then a squeal of delight came from Izzy, while John rushed Terry with a hug.

"Oh, man, congratulations!" John shook Terry's hand until Terry's mug threatened to slosh onto the carpet, then John tugged him into another backslapping hug. "When did you find out? Don't tell me-- that was what your errand was about, last night. Why didn't you say something, or at least drop us a hint?"

"We didn't want you to know unless it was a positive, and we found out it was, after everyone went to bed."

The little ones looked at each other, then at John.

"Daddy?" Debbie pulled at John's arm. "What are we 'specting?"

As John got down on one knee, Izzy covered her mouth and smiled at Terry and Maddie.

"Your Aunt and Uncle are going to have a baby. Do you know what that means?"
"We're going to have a sister?"

"No, a cousin."

"Can we play with her?"

"You sure can, but it might be a boy. You'd better prepare yourselves for that possibility."

When the girls understood a baby was on its way, the questions came rapid-fire. "Where did it come from?" "When will it get here?" "Can we name it?"

"Mommy and I will answer that first one, later," John said with a slightly panicked look at Izzy. "I suppose the baby will come as most babies do, in about nine months. To put that in easier to understand terms, sometime next summer. And, Lizzie-- I'm sorry, but names are for parents to decide, not well-meaning relatives. Anything else?"

Ruthie raised her hand as high as it could go. "It can have my bed! I can sleep with Debbie or Lizzie."

"That's very sweet of you," Terry smiled, "but that won't be necessary. Don't you worry, we'll take good care of this new munchkin." He bent down and gave Ruthie a hug. "I love you for volunteering, though."

"Will it grow in Aunt Madison, like Linda's sister did in her mommy?"

"That's the general idea."

"It'll need toys," Debbie said, and the other two nodded.

"I'll tell you what--" John winked at the girls-- "we'll get together, and do something for the baby before it arrives. How about that?" John smiled when the girls hurried off to their room to start making a list of all the things they were sure the baby would need.

"You don't have to do anything," Terry sighed, but John only laughed.
"I'd like to see you try and stop him," Izzy smiled.

As the women moved into the living room, the men followed, and everyone talked at the same time. Terry laughed as Maddie handed him her cell phone to call AJ and tell them the big news. Abby was checking out a newly opened store exclusively for anglers that Dennis had asked her to review, and Jake had gone with her to sketch and keep her company. If Terry remembered right, Ricky was visiting at Grandpa and Grandma Doyle’s house right now, and was probably having a great time.

Though Terry knew it was customary to only tell a handful of people until the pregnancy was further along, and the danger of miscarriage was more unlikely, Abby and Jake were family, and simply had to be told.

"Oh, Uncle Terry, congratulations! I'm sorry we aren't there to celebrate with you and Aunt Madison!"

"Thanks, Abby." Terry smiled at Maddie. "We're in the process of calling family right now."

"Jake says he'll do the baby shower cake-- whenever we have it. Tell Mom to make sure no one gets you guys a bassinet. We can get Ricky's sparkling like new in no time at all. That is, if you and Aunt Madison want it. Oh, Uncle Terry, I'm so excited for us! We haven't had a baby in the family since Tim's little girl, and even then, he lives so far away, we never get to see her. We get to keep this one! Can I talk to Aunt Madison?"

As Terry put Maddie on the phone, he tugged out his cell phone and checked the time. He knew Maddie hated to call Tim at work, but this was important. He tapped Tim's number in the address book and waited. No matter how few people they told, Tim absolutely had to be one of them. As Terry waited for Tim to answer, Terry quickly smiled with Maddie as John took their picture.

"Hey, Tim?" Terry cleared his throat. "I'm sorry to catch you at work. If this is a bad time, I can call back later." Terry grinned at his wife. "Maddie and I thought you should know you're going to be an uncle. Yeah, we found out this morning-- very early this morning. It's a long story-- I got into an accident on my way to get the pregnancy test, last night." Terry winced, wishing he'd kept back that last part. Now Tim wanted to know more, so Terry told him what his night had
been like, and while Terry was at it, he threw in the angel for good measure, then Terry swapped phones with Maddie and talked to Jake.

"So you're going to be a father," Jake laughed.

"Yup, that's what it appears."

"That offer to babysit still stands."

Terry grinned. "I just might take you up on that." It was surreal to Terry that he would ever say such a thing, and about his own munchkin.

When Maddie hung up, Terry was still talking to Jake, and she gave Terry an odd look. "What did you tell my brother?"

"Only what happened last night," Terry shrugged. "Why? What did Tim say?"

"You told him about the angel, didn't you."

"Yeah. So?"

"There was another angel?" Jake spoke up.

Terry sighed as Jake relayed something to Abby while Madison kept talking.

"I think you really floored Tim, because he kept saying, 'okay' to everything I said."

"I thought it might encourage him," Terry shrugged, as Abby's voice came in strong and clear over the phone.

"Uncle Terry, are you all right? Jake said something about another angel."

Maddie started to say something while Abby kept talking, and Terry handed the phone to John. "Would you please calm them down? I can't talk to three people at the same time." Terry's stomach growled in protest at having been forgotten in all the excitement, and he hunted for his
coffee mug. He turned to Maddie, only to find she had left, probably because he hadn’t been paying attention. His stomach growled, and he knew he needed more than coffee to make that growl go away. He had slept through breakfast, and had missed lunch. As soon as he downed this mug, he would grab a sandwich to tide him over until dinner.

Nursing his coffee, Terry retreated to the couch while everyone kept talking, though not to him. It was then he noticed Izzy was spreading their announcement to the Doyles. He winced, not knowing what to say. Don’t tell them? They were family, though the number of people they had told was beginning to multiply. By all rights, Terry couldn’t spare this time away from work, but by now, the day was chaos. This was a family emergency in the best sense— an aftermath of accident and celebration that was turning his day upside down in a good way. He was alive, after all.

Growing hungrier by the second, Terry looked at his mug and decided to just go find something to eat. Coffee on such an empty stomach was not working out. Then he saw Maddie carrying a bowl into the living room, and heading in his direction. She was beautiful, and not because she carried food.

He thanked her, and she smiled, and as she turned to watch Izzy talk, he gently tugged Maddie onto the cushion beside him, so she could rest her feet. He quietly prayed over his food, then dug into a bowl of heated vegetable stew. It tasted wonderful.

"I’ll call your brother again," he nodded to Maddie, "and clear up any misunderstandings about the angel."

"I think he believed you."

"Really."

"Could I tell Agatha?" Izzy asked, as she hung up from her talk with the Doyles.

"I don't suppose we could limit this to family? Just until Maddie's further along?" Terry breathed a sigh of relief when Izzy agreed, and didn't look hurt.
While Terry ate, Izzy and Maddie talked about pregnancy and prenatal care. Maddie wanted to do everything right, and was intent on learning all she could, and thankfully, Izzy was happy to pass along whatever she knew. Which, for a mother of four on earth, and one in Heaven, was quite a lot. Maddie also wanted to set up an appointment with her doctor, and when she insisted she could do it without Terry's help, Terry went to take his shower.

By the time Terry came out, he found Maddie had set up an appointment for later that week. He kissed his smiling wife, and knew she was making progress in more ways than one.

His time off from work over, Terry headed back to the office with John to get in as much as they could before dinner.

* * * *

Terry's eyes ached from reading lines of code, and he was dying to get up again and stretch, but that wasn't the worst of it. He couldn't stay focused. It was frustrating, to say the least, though he suspected he was coming down from the high of all the excitement. Life was too distracting. It was hard to stare at the screen when his mind kept straying to Maddie, and to the headlights from last night.

"We should call it a day." John looked over his desk at Terry. "It's late, and neither of us can pay attention."

"I won't be able to sleep," Terry shrugged. "I might as well work."

"We might as well have been watching YouTube, for all the work we've been getting done." John pushed away from his desk. "We were crazy to come back so soon, client, or not. Look at us--we've been staring at the same screen for hours."

"But you're turning in?" Terry asked, and John nodded. "I guess we can get back to this, tomorrow," Terry sighed.

"When was the last time you checked your calendar?" John pulled up the app floating behind their code, and pointed to the screen. "We agreed we would take tomorrow off for Christmas shopping, remember? One day to get it all done early, so we wouldn't get caught flatfooted, like
last time? Go ahead and laugh-- I'll remind you, you're a married man now. I won't be the only one hunting for something meaningful for his wife at the last possible nanosecond."

Terry frowned. He knew what to get them, as a couple, but not her.

"Now that I've left you with something to keep you awake--" John grinned-- "I'm going to bed."

"Hold up. I don't have a jeep, anymore."

"Take Izumi's car, and Izumi and I will take the minivan, but get out of the house."

"Thanks," Terry grinned. He put his feet up, pulled his keyboard onto his lap and started searching for the perfect Christmas gift for Maddie. If he got something related to the baby, and she miscarried, it would only bring pain later, so that was out. Anything that was more for him, like nightgowns, was also crossed off the list.

"Terry?"

He looked up, and saw Maddie in her robe, her pink and black pajamas showing around her neck. It was nearly eleven, and besides the office, the house had gone to sleep.

"I thought I heard John go to bed."

"He quit for the day," Terry nodded, and quickly turned on the screensaver as Maddie came in. "What are you doing still awake?"

"Aren't you quitting, too?"

"I will in a moment."

"You weren't going to say that until I asked, were you?"

"Maybe not," he admitted. "My internal clock is a little out of whack." He hung his head as Maddie pulled up John's roly chair, and sat down. "There's no reason for you to stay up, too. I promise, I'll come as soon as I take care of something."
She tucked her legs under her on the large leather chair, and made herself comfortable. "Don't let me stop you."

With a sigh, he woke his screens and quickly closed a window.

"Could I ask you something?"

"You're here," he smiled. "You might as well."

"I know we've talked about moving before, but what are we going to do if we can't stay?"

"What do you mean?"

"We're having a baby. I've been talking to Izzy, and I think I'll want my baby close to me, so we'll probably put the crib in our room, but when it's older, where will it sleep? We can't put it with the triplets because it could be a boy, and even if it's a girl, it wouldn't be fair to Debbie, Lizzie, and Ruthie. It's their room. I'll need Izzy when the baby arrives, but one day, I think we're going to have to move." Maddie looked dismal at the thought.

"We could add on to the house," Terry nodded. "John has already made the offer, and if we can't find somewhere close enough to here, or if we decide we wanted to stay, we could always add on. And if we do, nothing says we have to stay here, forever. We could still move."

"Terry, I don't want to move unless it's right next door, and even then, I'd have to think about it."

"One side of this property faces public land, and the other side, the Wilsons. The Wilsons have been there for as long as I can remember-- Lou is a retired businessman, and his son, Paul, owns a car dealership in town. I don't see either of them leaving anytime soon." Terry shook his head. "Unless you tell me differently, we're staying put."

"I feel much better." Maddie's smile was brighter now. "Winter is coming up, so I'm guessing we'll have to wait until the season is right before we can build, but that's okay. I just wanted to have a plan."
"Sometime after Christmas, John and I will get in touch with an architect."

Maddie climbed down from the chair. "When did you say you were coming to bed?"

"In a moment," Terry smiled. He watched as she left the office, then he opened a browser and typed something in. It was something she needed, could use, and would enjoy, all in one. It didn't take long for him to make the purchase, and after a few minutes of balancing the checkbook, he put his laptop to sleep. He hoped this didn't fall into the socks category, that he wasn't thinking too much like a geek.

He turned off the overhead, stretched out in the hall, and noticed Maddie had left the bedroom door open for him. Tomorrow, he needed to finish his Christmas shopping with Maddie, but hopefully, her gift had already been taken care of.

He tiptoed inside the bedroom, eased the door shut, and heard Maddie stir.

By the softly lit porcelain angel, he changed into his pajamas, then placed his wedding band on the dresser with Maddie's rings. When he crawled into bed, she snuggled into his arms as though she'd been waiting for him.

"I bought your Christmas present," he whispered.

"I thought we were getting a bed?"

"When you come with me tomorrow, you can pick one out."

She sighed happily. A moment later, she propped herself on an elbow and looked at him. "So that's not what you bought me just now?"

"Nope."

"Then what is it?"

"I realize you haven't had much firsthand experience with Christmas until now, but it's usually customary for gifts to be a surprise."
She blinked, snuggled back in his arms and breathed deep. "Is it for the baby?"

"Maddie."

"For the kitchen?"

"I'm going to sleep now."

Silence.

"Another Jane Austen book?"

"I thought you wanted me asleep?"

"I do," she nodded, and closed her eyes. "A hairdryer? Sorry, I'm going to sleep... It's just that Lizzie dropped ours yesterday, and now something inside rattles. I don't know if it's broken, but if it's not, don't get another one, because ours is still working. I only say that because you might've noticed the rattle." She looked at him. "I'm going to sleep."

"Is this the way it's going to be from now until we open our presents?"

"No, I'll be calm." She kissed his cheek, and cuddled with a sigh. "Good night, Terry."

"So what are you getting me?" he asked, then burst into laughter when she tried to tickle him.

It took some doing, but they finally managed to settle down. He said a prayer, and not long after, he heard Maddie drift off, for her day had been an exciting one. It took him an hour and thirty-eight minutes before he stopped checking the time and let himself relax. Then, little by little, sleep overtook him, and Terry drifted off with Maddie beside him.

* * * *

Christmas shopping was fun but exhausting. Madison had come to that conclusion all on her own, though Terry had looked tired, himself. After a day on their feet, Madison and Terry had
returned with several bags of Christmas shopping to hide in the office bathroom. And it all had to be wrapped—something she was thoroughly looking forward to, though the idea intimidated her to no end. When she was little, she had once wrapped one of her toys so she could go to a neighbor’s birthday party, and the gift had turned out a nightmare. Since wrapping could wait until they were closer to Christmas, Madison put off thinking about it for another time, and concentrated on the big deal in the other room.

The new bed.

She and Terry had bought it the first thing that day, then rushed home to meet the delivery people. Though the salesman had done a good job, he probably hadn’t gotten the commission he’d wanted, and it had been Madison’s fault. Madison grabbed onto her one big thought, peeked into the room, and looked at the queen-size bed. It was on the cheap side, for the headboard was plain and didn’t celebrate that it was a bed. She hadn’t wanted "a celebration," she had just wanted a bed. The salesman hadn’t been able to understand that, but this wasn’t his bed. Thank God. Terry had let her make all the decisions, and he’d seemed perfectly happy with her choice. And it was a good choice. They’d gone to the MegaMart and bought sheets, and a matching blue bedspread with pale blue stripes, and a dust ruffle to go at the bottom, just like on John and Izzy’s bed. This bed had everything.

Then Terry and Madison had gone back out to do their Christmas shopping, only to come home late after dinner to find the new sheets washed, and the new bed made. Madison couldn’t find Izzy fast enough to give her a hug.

Looking at that bed, Madison decided the colors had been a good choice, for they reminded her of Terry, and it needed to.

"It’s a beautiful sight, isn’t it?"

Madison jumped at the sound of someone behind her. It was only Terry.

"Sorry," he apologized, and came around her to stand and look at their new piece of furniture.

She was just glad it didn’t have upholstery. The bed had been placed where his couch used to be, against the wall facing the bathroom and closet, so the new walkway went around the foot of the
bed, making it much easier to move around. No longer did you have to reach over her couch to get into the closet-- you could just open the closet and get what you wanted.

He looked at her and smiled. "What do you think?"

"It's just a bed."

"But it's ours."

"I'm not trying to make this into a bigger deal than it already is," she sighed. "I don't want to be so nervous, I can't get into it."

"Point well taken." Terry motioned to the right. "I thought you might like this side. I pushed the bed as far against my side of the wall as I could, to make more room on this side for the bassinet, or crib. I thought you might like to be closer to the baby."

She nodded her thanks.

A triplet looked inside the room, then smiled up at Madison. Though Izzy was getting the girls ready for bed, this one didn't look as though she wanted to go to sleep. Not wanting to encourage mutiny, Madison yawned, and Ruthie blinked. A moment later, Ruthie yawned as well, and leaned against Madison as though she had gone through a long and hard day, and not one at preschool, followed by a play date at Linda's house. Linda's mom had shuttled the girls so Izzy and John could do their shopping-- a kindness to soon be remembered in homemade Christmas cookies.

"Bedtime," Izzy called, and Ruthie groaned.

"Good night," Madison hugged the munchkin. When the girl left, Madison turned back to face the bed.

"Ready to turn in?" Terry asked, and Madison nodded. He took her hand, and he prayed for a good night. It was their usual routine, though they often prayed after they were in bed, and not before. Tonight was anything but usual.
As Terry went into the bathroom with his pajamas, the rest of the house turned in for the night. She and Terry had already talked this out, and this first night especially, Terry had suggested Madison just try to sleep. No holding, no kissing, just sleep. It seemed reasonable. She stepped close to the bed, and put her hand on the blanket to stake her claim. This bed did not own her--she owned it, and it would not make her fall down in fear. It was just an object, and not a person. Her stomach may have felt like turning inside out, but she would not give in.

She closed the bedroom door, then went to get her pajamas. As she passed the verses taped to the wall, she went over them, and prayed the ones she used the most.

Tonight, she would need all the courage she could get.

When Terry came out, she was already dressed in her pajamas. She had the angel clicked on, she'd kept the overhead on, and she even went into the bathroom, and turned that light on, too. Though Terry looked surprised, he said nothing. Unlike last night, his eyes were at half-mast, and he looked as though he had to struggle to stay awake.

"I'm so tired, I could fall asleep standing. If that's possible." Terry yawned as he sank onto the edge of the bed. "This is one comfortable mattress. After the floor, I hope you won't think it's too soft. Hey, are you all right?" Terry came around the bed and hugged her. "Would you like some music? Would that help?"

She nodded, and rubbed her face against his shoulder, hating the fact she was getting his pajamas damp with tears.

As Terry went to get his smartphone, Madison pulled back the heavy covers. She wasn't alone. God was with her, Terry would be with her, the triplets were in the next room, and to top it all off... Madison touched her belly. Life had just started inside of her, and now she really wasn't by herself. But a baby couldn't fight for her-- she had to do the fighting.

Summoning her battle cry, Madison gripped the blanket, and climbed onto the softly firm mattress. It groaned under her weight, and images flashed before her. She gasped, and struggled to keep her mind filled with things she chose. A hand touched her shoulder, and she slapped it back, only to look up and see Terry's concerned-filled face. She pulled his hand, and he climbed into bed, and she fought to get into his arms.
"Easy, Maddie. Calm down."

The bed creaked, and she heard screams.

"Hold on, Maddie. I'm putting earbuds in your ears, okay? Just hold on."

She tugged at Terry, her hands grasping to find the phone he'd promised to bring. Suddenly, music filled her ears, and relief poured through her.

She leaned her head on Terry's chest. "Louder, please."

"I don't want to hurt you."

The music edged a bit louder, until she raised her hand, and the volume stopped where it was. Her head went up and down as Terry's breathing calmed, and she patted his pajama top to say "thank you." Her eyes were still wet, but she was on the bed, and she wasn't in flashback mode.

When her shivering stopped, she tried to sleep.

While she listened to someone sing their heart out about the love of an honest man, a blanket pulled over her right side, and then her left. She opened her eyes to see Terry working a blanket with one hand while trying not to disturb her. When he saw she was watching, he smiled, and motioned for her to go back to sleep. She would have tried to help, but she couldn't risk moving. When the blankets stopped shifting, his arm rested around her, and she felt herself relax.

Then the music stopped longer than usual between songs, and she wondered if something was wrong with the phone.

"Easy," Terry soothed.

The quiet faded into song, and she started to breathe again.
She prayed, and clung to Terry long into the night while the music played and covered the sounds of her own memories. The present felt more comforting than the past could ever be, until even with the music turned up, she felt herself fade.

She was safe.

* * * *

He could still hear the faint sway of music from where he lay, and her body felt loose, and wonderfully relaxed after that long tense fight. Her breathing was regular, the sound of someone almost asleep. He didn't dare hope until he heard the familiar rhythm in her breath, then he knew she was dreaming. Something pleasant, he guessed, for when it wasn't, he usually knew by the way she slept.

Breathing his thanks to Heaven, Terry closed his eyes to get some rest. Maddie was sleeping close enough that if she needed him, he would know.

As he drifted off, he felt Maddie twitch. Much, much too early to be the baby, he smiled, and went to sleep.

"I [Madison] can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."
~ Philippians 4:13 ~

"He shall give His angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands..."
~ Psalm 91:11, 12 ~
After that first struggle to sleep on the bed, Madison continued to need all the lights on until she thought to ask Terry for the angel in her apartment-- the tall Victorian angel guarding the two children crossing a damaged bridge. When it was placed on their dresser, it crowded with the second porcelain angel, but when both guardians were plugged in, their soft light was enough for Madison to calm herself and go over her verses. It wasn't so bright they kept Terry up at night, and all through it, he never complained.

All they'd been doing was snuggling though, and she knew he had to be missing her. By mid December, she had resorted to sleeping some nights on the floor so she and Terry could be close. She promised herself to not be defeated. She would keep trying.

As Christmas neared, the house became busier than usual while Madison and Izzy prepared for the holidays, and Terry and John kept up their hectic work pace. It became even busier when little kids wanted to watch.

Christmas cookies were in the oven, and as they baked, they filled the house with the spicy scent of gingerbread. They lured little children from their play to watch as Izzy and Madison set out wire racks on the countertops and table, and made them want to peek through the glass window on the oven door to see what was happening inside. More than once, they had to be warned not to get too close or their noses would be burned, and when the batch of gingerbread came out, the women had their undivided attention.

While Izzy arranged the cookie-cutter shapes on the wire racks, Madison rolled out more dough.

Lizzie popped up at Madison's side, and with Izzy's approval, the girl scooted in a chair and was given a small wad of dough to form as she liked. Madison cut out a gingerbread man, placed it on the metal sheet as Ruthie looked up pleadingly and Madison nodded for her to get another
It didn't take long for Debbie to join in, and soon small hands were busily forming and reshaping their cookies while laughter filled the kitchen. Madison kept cutting gingerbread men, then did several ginger-women, before moving on to trees and stars. There were so many cookie-cutters to choose from, it kept Madison busy doing ornaments, dogs dressed as carolers, and pretty snowflakes. The real stuff swirled in the sky every time Madison looked out the window—a reminder of just how cold it was, and how much they were enjoying the warmth of the kitchen.

The next batch went in with the triplets clamoring to see their wads of dough. Then the process was repeated, and the women took turns setting out the cookies. While the girls waited for their creations to cool, it occurred to Madison that the triplets could wait and add frosting, but the thought of frosting on all those small hands made Madison shudder, and she willingly gave them their cookies when they cooled.

When the girls left, Madison repeated her thought to Izzy, and Izzy laughed.

"Now you're thinking like a mom."

The icing was as messy as Madison had feared, until she learned how to control the piping. Once she got the hang of it, she enjoyed making smiles on the ginger-people, dressing them in clothes, and writing the names of family members on the front. She paused to watch as Izzy outlined in different colors, then added sprinkles. She could do that too, and before she knew it, she was experimenting, and having more fun than she thought possible.

When Izzy stopped to watch, she gave Madison a slightly hesitant smile.

"I'm getting carried away, aren't I?" Madison stepped back and looked over her snowman, all covered in small swirls of white, and decked with a red and green scarf.

Izzy winced. "As long as you're having fun."

"But if I take this long with each cookie?"

"We're going to be here a long time," Izzy nodded.
With that in mind, Madison went back to work.

By the time a triplet had wandered into the kitchen and was asking when it was time to eat, Madison's hands were cramping.

"Is it really dinnertime?" Izzy groaned when she checked the rooster clock. They had turned on the overhead light long ago, for the gray overcast hadn't helped them see very well, so the sun had been useless to warn them it was getting late. Izzy looked to Madison for help.

"I'll keep going," Madison smiled, and Izzy nodded her thanks, and went to fix dinner.

The ache in Madison's neck had been steadily growing worse, but this needed to get done. This was fun, she kept telling herself, but the truth was, it had stopped being fun a while back, and now it was just plain work. She was making Christmas cookies, though. Life was truly amazing. She looked over her gingerbread man, swept a lopsided smile over his face, wrote "For Terry," then moved on to the next cookie.

"Do you have enough wrapping paper?" Izzy asked.

Madison didn't look up, but kept beading the white icing over the gingerbread snowflake. "I think so."

"I'm going to stay up after the girls go to bed tonight, and wrap presents. I don't know when you were planning to do yours, but you're welcome to join me. Girls," Izzy called into the next room, "settle down, please." Izzy looked back at Madison. "I overheard John on a conference call, and I have a feeling the guys are going to be working late again. We might as well make the best of it."

"Do you know if anything is wrong? I sometimes don't understand everything Terry tells me."

"There's always something going on in that office, but from the sound of it, they're just busy, that's all. Girls, what did I tell you about settling down?" Izzy went into the living room while Madison finished the last of the gingerbread men.

When dinner was ready, Madison set aside her cookies and sat down at the table with the others. Ruthie grinned when the men's chairs remained empty, as though they were having a special
meal for "girls only." Izzy had called the men to dinner, and after ten minutes of them not coming, Madison went to check on them. Looking through the open door, she found Terry and John deep in discussion with a woman on one of the large monitors. Never mind the smooth dark hair that looked as though it had never known frizz, that effortless smile, the easy way she made men smile back at her; Terry was working-- Madison trusted him, but didn't that woman know Terry had to eat?

Terry glanced away from the screen, smiled at Madison, then did a double take.

"Dinnertime," Madison said a little loudly.

"We'll be there in a minute." John wrote something on a notepad as he spoke. "I want to get this down while it's fresh in our minds. I'd hate to have to go over this again."

The woman laughed. "Thanks for letting me take you away from dinner."

"Lara, I'd like you to meet someone," Terry waved to Madison. "You know I got married recently, but you haven't met my wife. Maddie, I want you to meet Lara Garcia, a friend and colleague, currently living in Baltimore."

"It's nice to meet you," Lara smiled. "I'm glad to see you have a life," Lara laughed to Terry. "You spend so much time working."

"You're one to talk," Terry laughed back.

Lara smiled. "I'm happy for you both."

"I think I've got all the major points down," John said, looking over his notepad. "I'll type this up in an email. Is there anything else we can help you with?"

"No, that should be it," Lara sighed. "Thanks, guys. This really wasn't my area of expertise."

"Security can be a lot harder than people think," Terry nodded. "If that's all, I'm afraid we've got to run--"
"I'll let you go," Lara smiled.

Madison smiled back at the pretty woman, and the camera turned off.

"Am I hungry." John pushed away from the desk. "You said dinner was ready? Great. I'll send off that email after I get something to eat. I wish we didn't have a deadline on top of our Singapore account, but I guess it couldn't be helped. You coming, Terry?"

"Yeah, in a moment." Terry sat back in his chair and looked at Madison.

"What deadline?" Madison asked. "Does it have to do with her-- the woman I just saw?"

"Who? Lara? That was just helping out a colleague." Terry scratched his cheek. "One of our clients needs some work done, and there's a deadline involved. We would turn them down, but they're counting on us."

"Aren't you already too busy?"

He shrugged. "By the way, Lara is just a colleague."

"But she likes you. So do I."

"I'm fond of you, too," Terry smiled. "If Lara forgot I was married, she knows now." He got up, reached for Madison, and she rested against him. "You've been baking cookies, haven't you? The house smells of gingerbread, and there's flour in your hair. If we're good, then let's go eat. I'm hungry." He kissed her cheek, and they went to the kitchen while Madison wondered what Terry's colleague must have thought of the flour.

To everyone's delight, they got to sample the gingerbread, though when Terry picked up the gingerbread man with the lopsided grin, he looked it over thoughtfully.

"I guess I shouldn't ask who made this," he chuckled.

"I did," Madison smiled.
"So you're asking me to eat myself?"

"I said 'For Terry.'"

"But you gave it a smile like mine. I don't know..." The triplets giggled as Terry bit off a limb, and munched. "I may be biased, seeing I'm eating my own gingerbread, and my wife helped make it, but this is good. Are there enough to send to Abe Winkler? Can you send cookies to Arizona?"

"Why not?" John smiled. "We should still have his address after we sent that retirement card."

Terry shook his head. "I wish Abe hadn't sold his store at the marina. That place hasn't been the same without him."

"It'll take some packing so the gingerbread won't arrive broken, but it could be done." Izzy got up, and when she came back, she had her recipes. "We're not done baking. I thought tomorrow we could make snowballs, and oatmeal raisin cookies. Then we can pack the Christmas tins, and send them to our neighbors, and of course, some to Abe Winkler." Izzy glanced over at Madison. "He's an old friend of the family. Is there anyone you'd like to add?"

"Could we give some to Carol? She's done so much for me and Terry."

"Carol it is." Izzy set aside the recipes. "I want to make sure we make up a nice tin for Dick and Sara. They'll be spending Christmas with Sara's mother, so we'll need to get it to them before they leave." Izzy thought a moment. "We'll still have plenty for our Christmas, and we'll need to, for there's going to be a lot of us."

"Will Tim be here for Christmas Eve, as well? Let me guess," John sighed when Izzy gave him a patient smile, "you told me while I wasn't listening. I'm sorry, Honey. If you could tell me one more time?"

"The O'Briens will be here for the twenty-fourth, as well as the twenty-fifth. I know I didn't schedule this on your calendar, but I thought I had your agreement that you and Terry would show up."

"We will," John nodded, standing up from the table. "It's a perfectly reasonable expectation."
"We'll be there," Terry assured them as they went back to the office.

Izzy looked at Madison. "This happens every time John gets swamped with work. I talk, and I'm never sure if he's listening."

"They have a deadline on top of their Singapore account," Madison explained, and Izzy looked defeated. "It's okay, they'll come. If they forget what day it is, we'll roll them out in their office chairs. We could get my brother to help."

Izzy laughed. "The poor guys. They work hard for us, don't they?"

"Do you think we could get the house ready on our own? I've never put up a tree, but if we could do it ourselves, then we wouldn't have to bother Terry and John. How soon do we need to get the tree?"

"We usually wait until Christmas Eve, but I'd like to get it done early since we're going to have company. But do it ourselves?" Izzy puffed her cheeks. "I've never put it up without John. You don't know what you're suggesting. Those trees can get huge-- they're usually twice my size."

"I'm bigger than you," Madison tried to encourage.

"We can help, Mommy."

Izzy looked at her girls.

"We could get Jake," Madison suggested. "I know Abby's probably busy with her work, but maybe Jake could spare some time."

"We could pay him in cookies," Izzy nodded, and went to get her phone.

* * * *

It wouldn't count as an interruption if they didn't know she was there, but of course they would. She wasn't invisible, and she had to get all the way to the bathroom. Easing the office door open,
Madison kept her eyes on the bent heads, the faces intent on their work. Terry glanced at her, and she quietly groaned, and decided to just go where she needed before he asked questions and she made the interruption worse.

She kept the light off in the office bathroom, and grabbed every bag on the floor-- every Christmas present, and every office gift still left. Terry had stayed out of that bathroom for so long, he no longer seemed to have trouble remembering not to go in there, and she wanted him to have the room back. As she left, she hugged the rolls of wrapping paper as they slipped about in her arms, and winced as all the noise of crinkling shopping bags made both men look up from their work.

"You need help?" Terry asked as she made her way to the office door.

"I've got it--" Madison grabbed after a spool of ribbon as it bounced into the hall. "I still have it."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. You can go back to work." They were still watching her-- she could feel it as she gingerly balanced her bags and lowered herself without toppling over and losing more from her arms. She grabbed the silly spool of ribbon, glanced back into the office and saw Terry's head cocked.

"Anything in those bags for me?" he asked.

"Maybe, and maybe not." She stuck the spool into a bag. "The bathroom's all clear now. You can go in."

Terry wiggled his eyebrows at John, and she sighed.

"Thanks for staying out."

"Have a good time wrapping presents."

As she closed the door, Terry tossed her a wink. The door shut, but she was smiling. He thought he knew her so well, he could guess and be right. The trouble was, he had. As she struggled with
her load of goodies to the master bedroom, she wondered if she had enough. The rest of her surprise gifts weren't going to be much of a surprise to Terry, for he already knew they were going to be office supplies, and she'd already given him the best ones. She'd bought him a nice sweater at the mall where she and Terry had done their shopping, and though he hadn't known it was for him, she'd felt a little disappointed that she hadn't been able to find him something better for Christmas.

Preparing herself for the master bedroom, Madison bumped against the door, and Izzy opened it and ushered her inside. "I'm glad it's so late," Madison said, as Izzy took her bags. "If the kids weren't in bed and asleep, there wouldn't be any way I'd could've gotten in here without them asking me half a dozen questions about what I was carrying."

"The girls can be alarmingly perceptive," Izzy smiled, looking over the wrapping paper Madison had brought. "You have some lovely gift wrap. Would you mind if we traded once in a while? I love the stars."

"I don't mind." Madison handed Izzy the rest of the wrapping paper as they knelt on the blanket they'd spread on the floor. "I was thinking I'd like to get Terry something more than just a sweater. He's so special, a sweater doesn't seem enough."

"I've always felt the best gifts are the ones that come from the heart."

Izzy's fine scissors zipped through a length of paper before Izzy snipped off the last part. "When we take Jake with us to get the Christmas tree, we could do some last minute shopping before we reach the tree lot. If we don't take long, I don't think Jake will mind."

It was a struggle to flatten but not crease her paper, and when there wasn't enough room, Madison turned and unrolled it on the carpet behind her. "Do you think Terry would be disappointed with a homemade Christmas present?"

"I don't think he would, especially if it came from you." Izzy flipped her package, added another piece of tape, then started in on the ribbon.

"Then I think I won't need to do more shopping." Madison smiled at her own plan, then hurried to follow what Izzy was doing. It wasn't easy to make the wrapping paper behave, or make those
folds neatly. It took patience, and willingness to not get it perfectly, but Madison thought she was making progress. When Izzy turned on her laptop, and played festive music on low, so it wouldn't wake the girls down the hall, it helped to pass the time as they worked. Whenever Madison got into trouble, Izzy helped out, and held down corners while Madison taped.

Sometime after four, Madison realized Terry and John hadn't come looking for them.

"Those crazy men," Izzy mumbled, as the women climbed off the floor from a jumble of brightly colored paper clippings, strips of ribbon, and gift tags gone wrong. "They're still working, and haven't even noticed we've kept quiet about it."

"We usually do."

"I usually give mine a reminder," Izzy nodded, going for her phone. "I'll just text him so he'll know I've noticed. I think we've done a decent job for one night."

"Thanks for helping me, Izzy. I couldn't have done this without you."

"Nonsense. You pick up quickly."

"Not that quick." Madison rubbed her back. She'd been bending over packages all night, and was looking forward to bed. If Terry was still working though, she would be watching TV on the couch.

"He answered," Izzy said, texting John in return. "I'm telling John what we're going to be up to the day after tomorrow."

A minute later, they heard a knock on the bedroom door. Terry came in, his eyes bloodshot from having been up late reading from his large screens. "John told me you were getting a tree. Surely, you weren't getting it without me? Man, I knew I've been working too much. I always get the tree. It's tradition."

"But you're busy--" Madison tried to explain.
"Not too busy for the tree." Terry ran a hand over his hair, and made it stand on end. "If you want to get it early, great, but you're not getting it without me. You girls wouldn't know what to look for-- you'd be lost without me."

Madison nodded. "Yes, Terry."

"So I'm going."

"We don't want to be lost without you," Madison smiled.

Terry quirked an eyebrow, and she went over and kissed him.

"Okay then." Terry shook his head. "Though I suspect you're humoring me, I'm glad we agree."

Then she saw him look about the master bedroom, and watch as she gathered the clips and unusable bits of leftover wrapping paper. "I'll get a trash bag," he offered.

It went faster with Terry helping, and he even carried all the presents to the office bathroom, where they would be safely tucked away from the munchkins until the tree was up. Terry stacked them carefully so none of the bows would be crushed, and John also helped, both men saying it came as a welcome break from their work. When the last gift had been put away, the bathroom door was locked, with Terry joking that he would be staying out, after all.

That night, though Madison needed the music to cover the sounds of the mattress, she fell asleep so fast, all she really cared about was her pillow, and Terry's arm about her waist.

* * * *

The next day found Madison in the kitchen making the last of the Christmas cookies with Izzy. They packed up the gingerbread into festive, cleaned-out tins Izzy had saved from previous years, put gift tags on them, then set the tins aside to be delivered along with Abe Winkler's package. The gifts had been wrapped, the cookies made, and the way was clear to get the tree.

As promised, Terry took the evening off from work the next day, and so did John. They bundled up the triplets in their boosters, and the family packed into the minivan for a short three-mile drive to the Christmas tree lot in Chaumont. The weather was cold, but not so bad John minded
taking everyone out for an early evening outing. The overcast sky sent down a soft dusting of tiny cold lace as Madison walked between the rows of cut evergreens with Terry.

Terry's breath turned to white puffs as he spoke. "We're looking for the right shape, at least two good sides, and a decent price." He took her hand, and pulled her close to his side. "I love you."

She hugged his arm.

"I just want to make sure I'm not too busy it goes unsaid." Terry squeezed her hand, looked at her as though making sure of something, then moved on to the next row.

"What?" she asked.

"If I was doing something wrong, you'd tell me, wouldn't you? Before I kept doing it and it hurt our marriage? Sometimes, I may not see it coming, Maddie, but you might. I may be too dumb, or too busy, or God forbid I'm doing it on purpose, but I'm counting on you to help me out. Tell me." Terry looked at her. "Level with me. Please."

"I will."

"Have I been too busy? Have I been taking care of you? Have I missed any signals, and not been there for you when you needed me?"

She bit her lip.

"Tell me, Maddie. I need to know."

"When you work really late..."

"Yes?"

"I don't sleep as well without you."

Terry stopped walking. "You've been watching TV, and waiting up for me, haven't you?"
She shrugged.

"Have I been that blind?"

"You're under a lot of pressure. I understand." Madison hugged him, and pulled him forward until his feet started to work again. "I'm all right, Terry. I would have told you if I thought I was in trouble."

Terry punched the air as though he wished it was himself. "I'm sorry I didn't do better, Maddie. I think I'm going to need your help on this. Izzy texts John, so maybe you could do the same for me? Maybe we could work on an outside late time, and if I haven't knocked off by then, you could text me. I promise, I'd do my hardest to get to a cut-off point as soon as possible."

She hugged Terry as the snow fell and they strolled through the tree lot. She didn't know anything about finding the right Christmas tree, but she had definitely found the right man.

When Terry had picked out the tree and John had agreed that "this was the one," they brought it home, then ate a hot dinner.

Their night was just beginning.

The Murphys came over, and Abby, Debbie, and Ricky went out to the garage with John to find the Christmas things while Jake and Terry hauled the Fraser fir into the house. Soon John came in with a Christmas tree stand, and when he went back, it was with an excited Lizzie and Ruthie. While the others went to find buried treasure in the garage, Terry and Jake lifted the large tree into the stand, and made sure it had enough water.

The front door pushed open as Lizzie came in, her arms full with a dirty white bag labeled, "Christmas wreath-- don't crush."

"Not on the couch!" Izzy gasped as the girl dumped her armload onto a clean cushion, then dashed outside.

"Is it supposed to be crooked?" Madison asked, cocking her head at the tall evergreen.
Izzy's eyes went wide as Debbie raced into the house with a tall dusty box that was supposed to hold the angel for the top of the tree. "On the floor, please. Thank you."

Kneeling, Terry adjusted the base. "How about now?" he called.

"Now it's crooked the other way."

"Which way?"

The front door slammed, Abby came in, boxes coming up to her nose, while Debbie scampered around her, and back outside. "I can hardly wait until Jake and I have collected enough history to put up this much junk," she declared with a rosy face.

"Just don't put the junk on the couch," Izzy implored. "Terry, Jake-- did you know the tree is lopsided?"

"But which way?" Terry asked.

"To the right," Izzy pointed, and went to Abby's boxes. "Madison, would you help me find the mini lights? Those have to go on first."

Jake shook his head. "I don't know. The tilt might be built into the tree."

"We're going to get neck aches, but we'll survive," Abby laughed.

"How about now?" Terry asked, as he and Jake slightly moved the base.

"I think you have it-- don't move," Madison cried, and Terry scrambled out from under the tree. "Terry, you're brilliant. So are you, Jake." Madison hugged Jake, and the young man smiled.

When the front door slammed open, Izzy shook her head. "Would you children please be more gentle with the front door?" Izzy turned, and saw John.
John grinned sheepishly, and held up a box. "I found the nativity set." Three girls, and a little boy ran in behind John carrying a long garland, the end trailing behind them. "You were supposed to leave that in the trash. It's shedding like crazy."

"Oh, my." Izzy looked a little faint when she saw the carpet, but she revived and went back to searching the boxes for the mini lights.

This was a special night, a tree trimming night, one filled with captured memories from the family's past. Madison searched through ornaments handmade by Izzy during different stages of the girls' childhood, store-bought bows, near-antiques that Abby assured Madison weren't but had been in the family so long they looked expensive. Madison saw wooden cranberries on strings, a pair of white doves with the year stamped in glitter-gold, a porcelain mother holding a baby angel, and cute girl ornaments, often in sets of three.

At last, John found the box of multi-colored mini lights. He placed the large tangled wad of green cord and bulbs on the carpet, and moved to plug the end into the wall. When it lit up, Izzy tried to remember if that meant there weren't any bad bulbs, or if it only meant they now could see the ones that were.

"Careful, those bulbs are made of glass," John warned when someone began to handle them roughly. "Let me do this while you guys fluff the tree, and put hooks on the ornaments. We'll go faster that way."

"Good old Dad. Way to take charge, Dad." Abby smiled at John, but John just shook his head, and worked to sort through the hopeless knot before him.

All four children wanted to help get the ornaments ready, and while the grownups helped them, it seemed progress went slowly. When a child picked up an ornament to "look at it," the wire hook sometimes fell out. While they seemed to be having fun, John was another story.

"Next year, we're storing these lights differently," John announced.

"You say that every year," Izzy smiled.

John rolled his shoulders, and Terry moved to the floor to help his buddy.
It took some doing, but by the time the men had the mini lights untangled, and the bad bulbs replaced, everyone was mostly ready with the ornaments. Abby went into the kitchen to make everyone hot cocoa, and since Ricky was eager to help, she took him along to count out the mugs and spoons.

"I don't know," Jake sighed, sitting on the couch while they all took a break and waited for the cocoa, "by the time we get this tree done, we might not have the heart to put ours up when Christmas Eve rolls around. We might just come over and look at yours."

"Oh no, we're putting our tree up, even if it kills us," Abby called from the kitchen, and Jake dropped his head back with a groan.

"Come on, Baby, you're only thinking like that because you're tired."

"He looks it," Terry said from the recliner.

Abby leaned in from the kitchen, and looked at the couch. "If you'll help me put up the tree, I'll do the decorating."

"I'll help you put it up," Terry said, and John seconded the offer as he came back from checking his email.

Jake smiled his thanks, and Abby grinned.

When the hot cocoa was brought out with a plate of Christmas cookies, everyone perked up, including Jake. The living room was a festive mess, the munchkins were wearing brown mustaches, and Madison felt warm inside—a kind of happy warmth that couldn't come from hot cocoa, but from a full heart. She felt like hugging someone, and since Terry was the closest, she snuggled with him while everyone watched John and Izzy begin to string the lights. Next came the garlands, and the strings of carved wooden cranberry beads.

Then the fun really started, and the triplets begged to put up their own ornaments. Not wanting to leave Ricky out, John entrusted his grandson with the anniversary ornaments, and John's personal favorites. His small face set and determined, Ricky treated each one as though they...
needed just the right spot, and Ricky even crawled under the tree to find them. Madison noticed each child was doing things in their own unique way, even the triplets. Debbie asked anyone who was willing, to place her ornament up where she wanted, while Ruthie scooted a chair from the kitchen to stand on it, and do it herself. Izzy hovered to make sure Ruthie didn't fall. Lizzie, however, hung her ornaments from branches all within reach.

As Madison watched everyone trimming the tree, she felt a tap on her shoulder.

"Why aren't you joining in?" Terry asked. "Maybe it's because you don't have anything in your hands. I can fix that." He handed her a small shipping box. "I ordered this a few days ago, thinking I had more time before we would be getting the Christmas tree. When Izzy told John you were getting the tree early, I thought this might not get here in time."

"What is it?" She looked at the box that had been delivered that very day.

He smiled as she pulled off the packing tape. When she took out what was inside, and unwrapped it from all the foam, she realized Jake was smiling at them.

"I see you followed the same suggestion you gave me," Jake said, as Madison gazed at a porcelain couple-- one with brown hair, the other with hair like her own. They were standing together, holding a Christmas wreath, and on the wreath it said, "Terry and Maddie, Our 1st Christmas," and it gave the year. Jake nodded to Terry, and went back to the tree while Madison held the couple, treasuring their sweet faces, the way they held the wreath and looked at each other.

"You like it-- I can tell," Terry grinned. "This is going to be the first of many. Between John and Izzy, and you and me, we're going to flood this tree with memories. It's going to keel over, it'll be so heavy."

Madison turned into Terry, and hugged him.

"Breathe, Maddie. Just breathe." Terry hugged her, and she wished she could've taken a snapshot of that moment, that warm feeling inside her that love was only beginning. When she looked at the ornament, she realized that's just what Terry had done.
As they hunted for a spot on the tree to hang their keepsake, Izzy saw it, and beamed her approval.

"Since this is your first Christmas together," Izzy said, leading them to the very front of the tree, "it should have a place of honor."

Choosing a branch that could bear the weight of their ornament, Madison looked to Terry to see what he thought. He grinned, and handed her another-- this time a glass bulb. Before Madison knew it, she was hanging ornaments with everyone else. Though it took time, she thought she'd never seen a prettier Christmas tree. It didn't look like one of those trees on TV, all glossy and flawless, and designer. This one had kittens with mittens, skating snowmen, and candy canes from the MegaMart. This one looked like someone loved it, that it was real, and belonged in an actual home.

When they were done, everyone stood back, and John plugged in the tree. Madison had seen what the mini lights looked like on the floor, but on the tree, they took her breath away.

Izzy moved closer. "Can you hear any music yet?"

John stepped behind the tree, fiddled with something, and in a music box voice, the tree began to play "Away in a Manger." Then the lights began to softly pulse to the music, and Abby went over and turned off the overhead lights. Everyone oooed and ahhed, and though Madison knew her mouth had surely dropped open, she couldn't help it. It was the most beautiful sight she'd ever seen, homemade ornaments, and all.

"She's beautiful," Terry whispered, hugging Madison to his side.

"She is," Madison nodded. "Look at the angel on top-- she's dimming in time to the music." Madison glanced at Terry, and saw he was looking at her, and not the tree.

The glow of Christmas lights danced in his eyes as he leaned in for a kiss. Sweet and soft, and filled with love, and every bit of that love tasted of Terry. He chased after her with a nibble on the ear, and she cuddled against his neck. As the tree changed to "Jingle Bells," they turned to watch the lights dance. Madison leaned against Terry, and sighed as his arms circled her and kept her warm.
She was loving Christmas.

* * * *

The apartment was ready for Tim, Karen, and the girls, and if the weather would only hold, they would soon be here. Karen had called, and they were close. It was Christmas Eve, and Madison's excitement was running high as she added another ornament to the small tree she and Terry had bought for the living room. They had wanted to give the O'Briens a taste of Christmas during their stay in Terry's apartment, though if things went according to plan, they would only see it at night, when they came back from Three Mile Bay. The TV was on, and Terry was half watching, half smiling at someone running down a snowy street shouting how wonderful life was. Terry had said he'd seen the movie a hundred times, but Terry's smile told her he was willing to make that a hundred-and-one.

When Madison glanced at the clock in the TV cabinet, she heard Terry chuckle.

"That won't bring them here any faster."

"Will the wreath fall off?"

"I put the fastener in myself. The girls can open and shut that door all they want, and it won't fall off."

"They should've been here by now." Madison looked at Terry, but Terry was watching TV. She put the last ornament on the tree, put the box away, then went to the window. Tim could come now. Everything was in place. Just to be sure, Madison stepped outside and straightened the wreath.

"Maddie, you're letting the heat out."

She came back, and closed the door.

"Double-checking my work?" Terry smiled.
"If they had car trouble, Karen would call. Wouldn't she?"

Muting the TV, Terry held out his hand to Madison. "Do you want to pray about their drive, again?"

She nodded, and went to Terry. As they bowed their heads, something sounded out front. They looked over and saw a vehicle pull up, one that looked an awful lot like Tim's minivan.

Terry smiled. "I'd say that's an answer to prayer, wouldn't you?"

Quickly changing her prayer request to one of thanks, Madison hurried to welcome her family. She threw open the door, and Terry was right-- the wreath stayed put. Terry rushed after her with her coat, and Madison struggled to get the thing on as she ran. Tim came around the hood of the minivan as the side door opened, and Paige hopped out. The girl reached Madison first, a bundle of blue coat and flying red hair.

"Merry Christmas!" Paige flew into Madison's arms. "It's so wonderful about the baby! Oh, why can't we always be as happy as we are right now?" Looking up, Paige smiled into the sky as the snow started to fall. "I love it, don't you? Snow makes the world so pretty!"

Shaking his head at Paige, Tim came over and gave Madison a hug. "I can't believe you're making me an uncle. How are you? Any morning sickness?" The passenger door opened, and Tim hurried to help Karen out of the minivan, giving Madeline her chance to get a hug from Madison. A baby's cry broke through the hellos, and Madison looked over to see Tim lifting Connie from her baby carrier. "There, there," Tim said, rocking the precious bundle before Karen wrapped the baby in one more blanket against the cold.

Madison felt a tug on her coat.

"We brought presents," Madeline informed her, and Madison looked about to see if anyone could hear them.

"I believe there's something under the tree for you, too."

Madeline grinned, the cold turning her cheeks a rosy bright pink.
"Merry Christmas!" Karen waved to Terry, then hurried over to Madison while Tim carried Connie. "You know what this means, don't you?" Karen greeted Madison with a sunny smile and open arms. "Our babies are going to grow up knowing each other." Karen hugged her, then smiled and hugged Terry. "Congratulations to both of you, and Merry Christmas. Thank you for inviting us-- you know how we love coming, especially the girls. I'm afraid it's my fault we didn't make it for Thanksgiving. I was feeling under the weather."

"You needed your rest, and besides, you're here now." Madison smiled as Tim gave the baby to Karen. "Is this the same little girl?" Madison pushed a bit of blanket away from Connie's face, and the baby gazed back at her with the pale blue eyes of her momma. "I can't believe how much she's grown in only two and a half months."

Karen laughed. "I'm afraid babies do that."

"The snow is picking up," Terry apologized, and the party headed inside while the men gathered luggage.

"It hasn't been snowing all morning, so you picked a good time to get here," Madison said, showing her guests into the apartment.

While everyone got settled, Madison pulled out her cell phone and let Izzy know that Tim and Karen had arrived safely.

"I'll have lunch waiting, so come when you're ready," Izzy said, talking over the sound of children playing in the background. "Jake and Abby have their Christmas tree. Would your nieces like to join in the tree trimming after lunch? The more the merrier."

When Madison asked Paige and Madeline, their eagerness surprised her. Then she found out from Karen that they'd only had room for a tiny tree in their apartment, so the chance to decorate a full sized one came as a treat to the girls. Paige and Madeline couldn't get into the minivan fast enough, though the men had to get the bags upstairs first, and Karen wanted to see the bassinet AJ had loaned them for Connie.

"I'm afraid we're putting you to a lot of trouble," Karen worried as they filed outside.
"If you were, we'd be charging you rent," Terry said, and Madison punched Terry in the side. "What? I was kidding."

Tim only laughed, and the couples parted as they climbed into the two vehicles for the drive into Three Mile Bay. Terry had borrowed Izzy's car, and though it wasn't the jeep, Madison enjoyed the gentle ride.

By the time they reached the house, the snow had all but stopped, so when everyone climbed out, sunlight was filtering onto the bay.

As Karen stood in the snow in her boots, she pulled out her camera. Karen had seen the bay before, but Madison had to admit Three Mile Bay held a wild beauty with those snow-covered banks. The bay wasn't frozen yet, and according to Terry, probably wouldn't until mid-January. Tim stood by his wife and held Connie, while Madeline and Paige walked around the house, and out to the shore.

"Come back," Tim called. "You've made enough snowmen at home."

"But not here," Madeline whimpered.

"Later," Tim said, and the girls came trudging back.

As John came out, Lizzie stuck close at John's side. "Merry Christmas," John greeted them.

"Merry Christmas," Tim chuckled, as Connie grasped a tiny hand at John and goo'ed.

Any renewed shyness the triplets had over the O'Briens quickly vanished when Karen sat on the couch and unbundled Connie. The baby girl began to coo, then fuss, and the girls watched, seemingly fascinated as Karen checked Connie's diaper. Paige was sent to the kitchen to warm a bottle while Karen got up with a diaper bag.

When Karen started for the master bedroom, Madison opened the door to her own bedroom, and Karen gasped a little, as though she hadn't expected to see what she did.
"We don't have the couches, anymore," Madison explained, trying not to hug herself. "Do you want the door closed?"

"Thanks, no. I'm only going to change her diaper." Karen glanced around the room, as though taking a silent survey. Her eyes stopped at the wall, then moved away, as though sensing she was seeing something personal. With a nod, she looked back at Madison. "You're a strong woman."

"I didn't move the couches out, myself. Terry--"

"No," Karen smiled, "I didn't mean it that way. You're stronger than I am. I would have given up a long time ago."

"I survived," Madison shrugged. "It's what you do when you don't give up, and since God didn't let go, neither did I."

"Then you keep going," Karen nodded, "because whatever you're doing, it's working." As Madison glanced back at her wall, Karen turned to the bed. "Would you like to help change Connie's diaper? So you'll know how, when your turn comes?"

Grateful, Madison stood beside Karen, and for the next several minutes, Karen showed her the useful skill of changing a diaper. Karen was a pro, and Connie responded to her voice, and to her touch like someone who knew without a doubt, who her momma was. When Connie was changed, and dressed, Karen gentled the baby into Madison's arms, and for a moment, Madison felt too overwhelmed to hold her. The heft of her-- a life, and so trusting, it filled Madison with awe until Connie heard her momma's voice and decided she would rather be with her momma instead of this stranger.

"You're her world, aren't you?" Madison asked, as Connie settled on Karen's shoulder.

"Not all of it, but a big part of it," Karen admitted. "Tim has been a big help, though. Connie knows who her daddy is, don't you, Sweetie?"

Madison smiled. Though she wondered how things were going between Karen and Tim, she didn't want to intrude.
They folded the changing blanket, put things away, then went to join the others in the living room as the tree was being admired. While carols played, people enjoyed ham sandwiches and cranberry juice, then Christmas cookies were brought out and everyone loaded up on sugar.

Then John called AJ, and the party moved to the little yellow house so they could trim the new Christmas tree.

As Ricky snacked on the gingerbread Madison had brought, the tall Fraser fir in AJ’s living room put on her gown of tinsel and lights. Terry and John sat on the couch and watched with Ricky, Tim, and Baby Connie, for there were enough decorating the tree to make quite a commotion.

Moving closer to the couch, Madison could hear Terry and Tim chat over the laughter, the giggles and screams when Madeline and Debbie tossed tinsel at each other. "Maddie said you were coming?" Terry smiled when Tim nodded, "yes." "The road will only be worse tomorrow, so John and I thought we should try and get to this evening’s Christmas Eve service, instead."

Tim nodded that it was fine with him, while on his lap, Connie played with his fingers. Tim glanced at the tree where Karen stood with two of the triplets, holding and passing ornaments. "You know, I didn't think it would last this long."

Madison wondered if Karen could overhear, but the men were speaking quietly, and no one was paying them any attention.

"You've got something good going," Terry said, and Tim nodded.

"She's still here, no thanks to me." Tim looked away from Karen. "We had some hard times after the baby came, but lately, it's been good. It's hard to trust it won't go wrong like it did with Andrea, but I guess it's not Karen I don't trust, but myself. I mean, Andrea didn't just leave-- I drove her away. I must have. She left--" Tim glanced at Madeline, and lowered his voice even more. "If I ever do that to Karen, I don't know what I'd do. Did you know I'm reading a Bible?"

Tim glanced at Terry. "I know that sounds crazy coming from me. I mean, Grandma treated religion like a superstition she was afraid to completely ignore, which was more or less how I was raised. Karen, though," Tim nodded as he looked back at his wife, "she was brought up with a little more respect for religion than me. She had more than I did when it came to God, or for
that matter, parents, and a home. Which wasn't hard. Everyone always had more than I did."
Tim looked at Terry. "Sorry, I didn't mean... I heard about your..."

"We all had things to deal with," Terry shrugged.

Tim slowly nodded, and his eyes fell on Madison.

Madison smiled.

"I was just telling Terry, I've been going to church with Karen."

"You have?" Madison strained to hear her brother, for now that he was talking to her, he lowered
his voice even more.

"I haven't joined, or anything, but I'm trying to listen with an open mind."

"It's a start," Madison smiled.

"What's going on?" Karen asked, coming over with a handful of artistic fish ornaments. She
smiled as Connie reached for her, and slobber fell from her chin and onto her yellow bib. "Have
you asked them about the presents?"

"Oh, yeah," Tim nodded, "we have gifts in the minivan."

While they talked about their plans for Christmas morning, Madison did her best to help Abby
clean away the tinsel, pine needles, and ornament hooks from the carpet. Jake turned on the
lights, and the kids cheered when the lights began to race over the tree in blinking patterns that
Madison had to admit were very hypnotizing. She thought back to Tim's conversation, and
prayed. She would never stop praying for Tim and his family.

The sun had come out by the time they tramped across the freshly fallen snow, and when
Madison stepped into the house, it welcomed her with "Silent Night." She smiled at the tree,
took off her coat, and went into the kitchen to help Izzy prepare Christmas Eve dinner while
everyone, including Jake, Abby, and Ricky, gathered in the living room. Someone quieted the
tree, then turned on "A Christmas Carol" movie that had the munchkins singing and laughing.
While Izzy took in eggnog, Madison finished arranging crackers around the cheese log. Then Madison took in the appetizers, as Izzy slid the homemade pizzas into the oven and set a timer.

The living room was boisterously crowded and noisy, but everyone was having fun, including Connie, who fell asleep in spite of it all.

There was plenty of pizza for everyone, and pumpkin pie and Christmas cookies for dessert.

Then John and Terry closed up the house, and everyone got on their shoes and coats, and Karen went to change Connie one more time. Izzy made sure the triplets used the bathroom, while Abby re-combed Ricky's hair with her fingers, and the men went out and warmed the engines until John came in and quietly wondered what was taking so long. The families piled out of the house and into the vehicles as the sky darkened and a light wind swirled the few snowflakes that fell from the heavens.

Madison got into the car with Terry, and watched as the vehicles formed a caravan. Terry nodded to John to lead the way before pulling in back of John's minivan. Then Madison looked in the mirror as Tim's minivan got in back of their car, and headlights behind them showed AJ's truck. It was quite a line for such a short drive.

"Warm?" Terry asked, as he adjusted the heater.

Madison nodded, though she still kept her coat zipped up over her new red and white sweater. "How did Tim and Karen look to you? I've been praying for their marriage."

"I think they're far from calling it quits." Terry checked the mirror. "Give them time."

"One day, I wish they could be as happy as us."

"They aren't us, Maddie. No one is going to have the same marriage as the next couple."

She sighed.

"I went bird watching once," Terry smiled, "and I asked my friend who knew more about birds than I did, if those small birds all had their own personality. I'm not talking about big flashy
parrots here, but common little birds that bounce on the grass looking for bugs-- the ones people miss all the time because they're everywhere. And he said yes, as far as he knew, they did. And then he pointed out their behaviors: the one who kept hopping close to the others and didn't like being alone, the one who pushed the others away from their hunting spots even though he hardly used them himself, the scared one who was frightened of everything and made the others scatter. The more I watched, it occurred to me that God isn't afraid of variation. Not in snowflakes, not in birds, and certainly not in people."

"You went bird watching?"

"You're missing my point. Tim and Karen's happiness won't look like ours."

Madison smiled at her sweet husband.

"What?" Terry asked.

"Did my present come in time for tomorrow?"

"Did you get my point?"

"I got it," she nodded. "Did it come?"

He grinned as they pulled into the church's parking lot. "You'll find out tomorrow."

A light blinked on in the parking lot, showing off the red bow beneath its lamp. Cars poured in, and it took some doing to find a parking space as John, Tim, and Abby did the same.

"We've should've gone with John and Izzy, and saved ourselves some trouble," Terry sighed, after they'd found a space, and he'd shut off the engine. He quieted as Madison took his hand, and good humor came back to his voice. "We won't let a little hassle get in the way of why we came here."

Squeezing Terry's hand, she pushed her door open. Neighbors waved, cold nipped at Madison's nose as she and Terry joined the rest of their family. Three Mile Bay was in full celebration
mode, and everyone was greeting each other with a hug. Madison saw Tyler Greene and his wife there, looking as though they were enjoying the evening with their baby, and Tyler's parents.

The crowd slowly filed inside, found their pews, and even though Madison didn't know all the carols and hymns, she stayed close to Terry and shared his hymnal as they always did. When Pastor Bill read from Luke about the shepherds hearing an angel tell them of "the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger," Madison tried to dry her eyes without anyone noticing. God had loved her enough to send His own Son, and now that she was having a baby of her own, it meant even more to her.

After the reading, they sang more carols, and then it was time to leave with people lingering in the aisle to wish each other Merry Christmas. Love. That was what Christmas was about, and as she went home with Terry, Madison promised herself to never forget the sacrifice paid by the small Baby in the manger.

* * * *

How could Terry sleep? Madison watched the closed eyes, the slack mouth, then wondered what would happen if she stuck an earbud in his ear with her music pumped up. She pressed the button on top of the phone, and the screen lit up, showing her the time against the green glow of Terry's pajamas. It would be Christmas in four hours and eighteen minutes. Or when everyone woke up, and Tim and Karen and the girls came over. Or did the fact it was after midnight count?

Terry's mouth moved.

"What?" Madison took an earbud out.

"I said, go to sleep."

"Are you having a nice Christmas?"

"Uh-huh." Terry's voice drifted off into a snore.
"Abby said you sometimes go caroling. Could we do that next year? Would you take me? Terry?" Madison nudged him, but he kept sleeping. She went back to her music, closed her eyes, and wondered if it was snowing.

* * * *

For some odd reason, Madison had the feeling she was being watched. The dream slipped away, and the feeling stayed, until she forced her eyes open. A pair of startling blue eyes blinked back at her, along with a sweet, sweet smile. Ruthie bumped noses with Madison, and said something Madison could only half hear.

Pulling the earbuds out, Madison sat up. The mattress started to creak, and Madison had to hurry the earbuds back in.

"It's Christmas," Ruthie said in a loud voice, and Madison nodded that she'd heard her. Ruthie excitedly tugged at Madison's hand, her eyes as large as Madison had ever seen them. "We can't... until... get there." Madison was only picking up a word here and there, but she got the general idea, and hurried to climb out of bed.

Terry appeared in the doorway, and shooed the girl from the room. He pulled out an earbud so she could hear him, then went and closed the door. "Get dressed, the O'Briens are on their way."

He was half dressed in pajama bottoms and a sweatshirt, and they both went to the closet. Terry put on a long-sleeve shirt, some slacks, went to the bathroom to shave as Madison hurried into her soft wool stockings, and the green one-piece dress she had bought for the occasion.

As Terry shaved, Madison shared the mirror with him, fixed her hair, and put on her makeup.

He finished first, of course.

"If you're not out of here in five minutes, we'll start opening presents without you." Terry grinned as he danced from her reach. He was in high spirits, and stepped back to snag a kiss before leaving the bathroom to get his shoes. "Are all our presents in the living room?"
"They should be." Madison added a little more eyeshadow, then looked over her hair. Good thing she'd showered before bed to make getting ready this morning easier.

Deciding she was done, Madison went into the bedroom and found Terry had left. She put on her shoes, made the bed, then hurried into the hall, and checked the triplets. Izzy had her hands full getting them dressed. After Madison promised she would get breakfast started, she hurried to the kitchen, for it seemed everyone had slept in but the munchkins.

The front door sounded as Madison tied on her apron, and Abby came into the kitchen with a sleepy smile.

"Merry Christmas," Abby greeted. "I came over to see if you needed any help."

"If you could make sure the coffee is ready, I can do everything else. Are your presents under our tree?"

"Jake and Ricky are bringing them," Abby said with a yawn. "Ricky had so much trouble staying asleep last night. He kept asking if it was Christmas. He gets it from his dad," she smiled.

Madison was grateful Terry wasn't there to tease her with a comment of his own. While she arranged the platters of muffins, cinnamon rolls, and Christmas cookies, Abby sank into a chair half awake.

Hurrying in with an apology for not helping sooner, Izzy looked over their progress. "It looks as though you and Abby have everything under control," Izzy nodded. She went to the cupboard and got out the paper plates with the poinsettia and holly, and the matching napkins. "Listen to those girls, they can hardly wait. John--" Izzy turned as the men came into the kitchen looking for their coffee--"would you go out there and make sure the girls don't touch the presents? I told them to wait for the O'Briens."

"They're here, they're here!" The triplets flooded around Terry and John, their excited faces searching for someone, anyone, to admit that it WAS TIME.

Running out of time herself, Madison looked over the tray. "I forgot the eggnog." She raced to the fridge while the front door opened.
Terry snagged his mug.

"Where do you want the presents?" Jake asked, as he came into the kitchen with a wide-awake Ricky.

The grownups looked at the triplets, and Debbie shrugged.

"I thought it was them."

"Who?" Jake asked.

"Put the gifts around the tree," Izzy directed, and as she spoke, everyone heard a door slam. "Okay," Izzy admitted, "now that sounds like the O'Briens."

As John went to go check, everyone followed but the women.

"It's them," John announced, and while the triplets cheered, the women rushed to finish getting everything ready. Izzy took two platters, Madison took the last, and Abby followed with the napkins and plates while John invited the O'Briens inside.

As the food was set out on the end table, Madison greeted her family. Karen came in with Connie, but Tim and the girls were carrying presents, and the sound of "Merry Christmas!" filled the air. Cold rushed in behind Madeline before John shut the door, and the living room bustled as coats came off and Tim and Jake set out the new presents around the tree. With so many families, the tree was full to overflowing, and the children, including Paige, were growing restless. Before everything, John asked if they would all mind a prayer, and Tim told John to go ahead.

With bowed heads, John thanked God for the chance for their families to come together and celebrate Jesus's birthday, and for the blessings they were about to share with each other.

Then, with the house smelling of hot cocoa and coffee, the grownups found seats on the couch, pulled out chairs, and with Abby and Jake sharing the recliner, the munchkins sat on the floor.
Presiding as the gift passer-outter, John sat near the tree, and pulled out the first gift. "To Debbie, From Daddy and Mommy."

The girl thanked her parents, then tore into the present with all the enthusiasm of someone about to turn five next month. She took out four books all on one subject, cried with delight, and went to hug John and Izzy.

"Books," Karen said, looking impressed.

"She'll need someone to read to her, but Debbie is into astronomy right now," Terry smiled. "Before, it was whales-- anything, and everything about whales." Terry shrugged, and John passed the next present to Lizzie. One by one, John made sure the munchkins each got a present, right on up to Paige. Ruthie got a fifty-piece jigsaw puzzle, and Lizzie got a working toy camera. Not wanting to show favorites, Terry and Madison had prepared for each triplet, Ricky, Paige, and Madeline a small gift bag loaded with all kinds of goodies. A wind-up dog, a die-cast car, a necklace, a small bottle of perfume, some sugarless candy. Ricky didn't have the perfume, of course, but each bag was heavy with age-appropriate things they hoped each child would enjoy.

The bags were all passed out at the same time, and Madison and Terry had the joy of seeing so many faces light up around the room. Even Connie got a bag, though the girl had no idea what was going on.

"Thank you," Paige said, giving Madison a hug. "I've never tried L. M. Montgomery before."

"Your momma suggested the book," Madison confessed. "I haven't read it, but she said it's a great story. She said something about carrots."

As the gifts went around, Karen got a new coat from Tim-- a nice one that brought tears to Karen's eyes. Though Karen had evidently admired it before, and Tim had bought it in secret, he still looked taken off guard when Karen kissed him. Tim seemed more grateful, than pleased. None of it went unnoticed by Paige, and even though the girl had lovely presents of her own, none of them made Paige look as happy as that one gift from Tim to her mother.

A fact that made Madison love her niece even more.
Then Madison saw John pick up a familiar box.

"For Terry, From Madison."

Everyone smiled as the gift was passed down and handed to Terry. Smiling at Madison, Terry shook the flat box. "It doesn't rattle. I wonder what it could be." The kids laughed as Terry put his ear to the present. "I don't hear any breathing noises, so it's not a pony."

"Ponies aren't flat," Ricky laughed.

"I know, it's a tie." Terry nodded. "Whenever people don't know what to get me, they get ties. Not that I can't use them," he added quickly, and Tim laughed. Terry lifted the top off the box, then parted the white tissue. "Well, well," Terry smiled as he took out a sweater-- a dark one that was soft to the touch. "I was there when you bought this, Maddie, but I didn't know it was for me. Now that I do, it looks familiar. Like I used to own something like this before."

"It's not the same one you loaned me," Madison explained, "but I tried to find one that matched as close as possible. I've kind of worn yours out."

"So I'm really not getting my sweater back, am I?" He grinned, and pulled the new one on, never minding that it was messing up his hair. "I love it, Maddie, thank you." As he pulled the sweater down, something tumbled onto his lap. He looked at Madison, and she smiled. "What's this?" he asked, picking up a small booklet made of construction paper. On the cover it said, "Terry's Coupons." "What in the world?" Terry flipped it open as people craned their necks to get a look. "Good for one foot rub," Terry read, and Izzy smiled. "Good for one spaghetti dinner, redeemable with one day's notice." Terry flipped to the next page and read to himself, and people stopped craning their necks. "You made this?" he asked.

Madison nodded.

"Who gave you this idea?"

"From the kids' arts and crafts book. I just changed it to fit us."
Terry flipped to a coupon, and quickly closed the book before anyone saw.

"Do you like it?" she asked.

"Spaghetti dinners, back rubs-- what's not to like? Before I go through all these, I'm going to be counting down the days until next Christmas."

Madison sighed happily, and Terry shook his head.

He leaned over and whispered as John announced that the next one was for himself. "You're spoiling me, Maddie."

"You're only saying that because it was for you."

She smiled when he didn't have a quick comeback. If she wanted to give him a coupon for a romantic night, it was hers to give, and his to accept. It wasn't a big deal, she couldn't be on the bed with him like a normal person, but that didn't mean they couldn't have romance.

One by one, the gifts under the tree vanished, and Terry opened the last of his office supplies, until John announced they were done. Everyone had opened all there was under the tree. While Madison had gotten presents, she still didn't have any from Terry, and when she looked at her husband, he looked back with a blank expression that instantly told her he was up to something.

"Say, John," Terry leaned forward, "I think you may have missed one."

"No," John looked about, "I don't think I have."

"There's one more. I know there's one more." Terry looked over as Tim munched on a cinnamon roll, and Terry smacked his lips. "That looks good." Terry loaded a plate with food while John searched under the tree. "You know what," Terry said, as though it had just now popped into his mind, and he half grinned when John cast him a wary glance, "I believe I stored it in your closet."

"You mean that big trash bag?" John sat back on his heels and blinked at Terry. "You can't be serious. That was for Madison?"
Terry leaned back on the couch and bit into a sticky cinnamon roll. "I've never been more serious in my life. Well, I can think of a few times. But I'm serious."

"If you say so," John shrugged, and got up to get whatever it was.

Madison watched Terry, but Terry kept eating his cinnamon roll.

"Okay," John said, coming into the living room with a large squared-off object covered in a black bag. "Do you want me to take it out?"

"Thanks, my hands are sticky." Terry wiped his fingers on a napkin while John lifted an unmarked, long, nearly triangular box from the trash bag.

Abby laughed. "You bought Aunt Madison a guitar?"

Terry slid Abby a look. "Did you have to say that in front of Maddie? I tell you," Terry shook his head, "you can't surprise anyone in this family. They're too good at guessing. It's scary."

"What do you mean? Aunt Madison doesn't have to guess. That's what that box is, isn't it?"

John placed the box squarely on Madison's lap. On one side of Madison, it took over Izzy's lap, as well, and on the other, Terry used it a moment as a table. When Madison looked at Terry, he quickly bit into a gingerbread. Madison sighed, and worked the top off the guitar box while Terry held up his plate.

"Well?" Abby asked, craning to see inside.

"It's not a guitar, Abby." Madison took out a small gift-wrapped box, and pushed off the huge cardboard thing. This gift was in shiny paper, and had a beautiful bow-- the absolute reverse of the ugly trash bag. Madison hated to open it, for it looked so perfect, and shiny, but curiosity was killing her and she nibbled at the ribbon with her fingers until someone handed her a pair of scissors. Wincing, she snipped the ribbon.

"Who wrapped that for you?" John asked curiously, and Terry laughed.
"It came gift-wrapped," Terry acknowledged. "I'm not that good."

The bow came off, the wrapping paper fell away, and Madison's breath caught when she saw a slick box with a picture of an iPhone. It looked a little different from Terry's, but she still knew what it was, and she didn't know what to say.

"I once gave you my phone," Terry said, taking the shiny new smartphone from the box. "Now I'm giving you another, but this one you can keep." He turned it on, and it greeted her. "I'll need to sync this up with mine, so it'll have your notes and music, but when I'm done, you shouldn't miss anything important. And this, you can make your own." He handed it back to her, and she looked at him. "If I thought you were going to cry--" Terry pulled out a handkerchief, and she took it and blew her nose.

"I'm sorry," she wept. "It's just that's it's so wonderful."

Terry shook his head. "I should've let you guess what it was-- I shouldn't have hidden it in that guitar box. I got it from a neighbor. No one in this family even plays guitar."

"I never would have guessed, Terry. Not in a million years." She hugged him, and as Terry showed her how the smartphone differed from his, people started to eat, and John began to clear away the wrapping paper and boxes. The room filled with the sound of kids playing with new toys, while Connie fussed until Karen got up and rocked her near the tree. Sitting back with his coffee, Tim seemed to enjoy the whole scene.

After they had eaten their fill of muffins, Terry took Madison into the office, and she watched as he got her phone ready. Since this was a newer model than his, she asked if he didn't want to trade. She felt bad for having such a nice phone, but Terry waved it off and said that he didn't need a new one. This was hers. She watched as he did clever things with some settings on his laptop, then he said he was configuring the Wi-Fi settings on her phone. When he was done, he handed the phone to her, and she didn't know what to do first.

"Can I change the picture behind the icons?" she asked, and Terry smiled, and showed her how.
The next two hours found Madison on the couch with Paige, searching for pretty winter pictures and trying them in the background.

Madison had never really known Christmas before, and she was sure she would never forget this one.

For love made all the difference.

Madison's prayer: "Because Thy lovingkindness is better than life, my lips shall praise Thee... My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness; and my mouth shall praise Thee with joyful lips: When I remember Thee upon my bed, and meditate on Thee in the night... My soul followeth hard after Thee: Thy right hand upholdeth me."

~ Psalm 63:3, 5, 6, 8 ~
Chapter Forty-seven
Always Have Hope

"Thou shalt increase my greatness, and comfort me on every side."
~ Psalm 71:21 ~

The mirror was too short. Madison backed away, turned sideways and touched the blouse covering her belly. Though everyone knew she and Terry were having a baby by now, at seventeen weeks, people could still miss the signs unless they looked closely. If she wasn't careful, they could get her to worrying that the baby wasn't growing like it should. Izzy had warned her not to listen to them. The doctor had said the baby was doing well, and Madison had heard the heartbeats. She was tall and slender, and she simply wasn't showing very much this early in the pregnancy.

She was still growing though, and while it was good for the baby, it wasn't so great for Madison. The stress of the added weight hadn't been helping the osteoarthritis in her hip, making it more important than ever for her to keep up with her exercises. Little by little, the muscles around her hip were being strengthened. It helped that Izzy had started taking regular walks with Madison around the neighborhood, and when the snow prevented them from going out, they walked laps around the house. Thankfully, Dr. Nelson had cleared Madison to keep using acetaminophen for the pain, and so far, Madison had been able to manage her flare-ups.

So far, this hadn't been more than she could bear.

Madison turned in front of the mirror, straightened her hair, and hoped the gas in her belly wouldn't embarrass her tonight. Even though Terry had yet to redeem the coupon for his spaghetti dinner, she had done it for him. Before she got any bigger and she didn't feel like a romantic dinner for two. It had meant getting the rest of the family fed a little earlier than usual, but Izzy had helped. Izzy had fixed their meal and cleaned the kitchen, so everything had been ready for Madison. All Madison had to do was fix their own dinner, and get ready, herself.

The house smelled of the garlic bread that had just been taken out of the oven, and it made Madison hungry no matter where she went. She added lipstick, then went into the bedroom to slip on a bracelet for a touch of jewelry.
As Madison moved into the hall, she could hear Izzy reading to the girls in the master bedroom, the laughter of little ones enjoying time with their momma. Passing by the office, Madison paused to see Terry and John working at their laptops. Not wanting Terry to see her and get the wrong idea that his dinner was ready, Madison hurried to the kitchen.

She checked the spaghetti sauce, then went to set the table.

She wanted dinner to be perfect.

* * * *

The smell of dinner kept reminding Terry he hadn't eaten yet, and he fought to push it out of his mind, and keep working. Not easy to do when he could smell the garlic butter from here. The small red box sitting inside his desk drawer was tempting his empty stomach, but that box was for someone else, not him.

"You should've taken her to a restaurant." John looked over his laptop. "That's what I'm planning with Izumi."

"I tried," Terry shrugged. "Maddie wanted to stay home."

"That works, too," John grinned. "I'd say you're ready."

"You think so?" Terry looked over the bouquet hiding beside his desk. "I've never given anyone Valentine's Day flowers before, or at least no one who was my sweetheart."

"Nothing says it like red roses."

"But you think I should have taken her out?"

"Not if she wanted to stay in." John leaned back in his chair like the longtime married guy he was. "Forget it. You're doing fine."
"I just feel so guilty." Terry swiveled toward the door. "She's in the kitchen, fixing our Valentine's meal, carrying our child, doing all the hard stuff, while all I do is sit here and wait."

"Did you turn in any of those Terry-coupons to make this happen?"

"No."

"Then there you go. If you want to feel better, clear away the dishes without being asked. It's not equivalent to her carrying your child, but--"

The screen on Terry's phone lit up, and Terry smiled.

"Don't forget your flowers," John said, going back to work as Terry stood and got ready.

Though today was Valentine's Day, the couples had decided to split the holiday so Terry and Maddie could celebrate today, and John and Izzy, tomorrow. That way, someone could babysit the munchkins.

As Terry passed through the living room, he smiled when he saw the lights in the living room had been turned down. It made him pause to check his breath, just to be sure.

Looking into the kitchen, he saw Maddie at the table, lighting a white taper candle. A second candle flickered in front of her, bringing out the softness of her face, the peaches and cream in her cheeks. The kitchen lights had been turned off, leaving just Maddie. Which was fine with Terry.

He sighed, and she looked up.

"When you fix a romantic dinner, you don't play around." Terry came around her, hugged her with one arm, and he felt her relax against him. "Will you be my Valentine, Maddie?" He presented her with the roses, and her eyes were full of surprise. "You know me better than that," he smiled. "Surely you knew flowers were coming." He smiled as she turned into his arms and hid her face against his neck. "You're not crying again, are you?" When he felt the wet against his skin, he dropped the bouquet on the table, and hugged her.
"I'm going to stop, Terry. I promise."

"You're happy-- I understand." He rocked her and looked at the table she had prepared. "I love your Valentine, Maddie."

"Thank you for the roses," she sniffed, leaving his arms to look at the red blooms. "I didn't expect you to do anything. I really didn't."

"You thought I was too busy," Terry nodded. "I wish you had believed me when I said I could have afforded the time to take you out, tonight. You could have saved yourself some work."

"I wanted to fix your dinner." Maddie took out her crystal vase from a cupboard, filled it with water, then arranged her roses. "You don't mind, do you?" She smiled when he shook his head. "I've been trying so hard to learn to cook, I wanted one night to cook for only you."

"Then I'm happy we stayed in." Terry watched as she carried the vase to the table. "Have you given any thought about what we talked about?"

She shrugged.

"You have your ID now, so it's not a problem." He pulled out her chair. "I know you're frightened about hurting the baby, but you wouldn't start until after Little Bit is born. And by the time you'd take your first driving lesson, there wouldn't be any snow on the ground."

"Aren't you afraid I'll wreck our new sedan?"

He tugged out the chair next to Maddie's, and sat down. "That's just the point. It's yours too. As long as you stay safe wrecking it..." He smiled when she gave him a look. "You want to learn, I know you do."

"You'll be the one to teach me?"

"I'll give it my very best."

She looked comforted, and nodded in agreement.
That night, as they ate, the small circle of light falling about them felt private. As though they were the only ones in the house. They talked about their day like couples usually do, and each time Maddie smiled, Terry smiled too. He couldn't help it, and even if he could, he didn't want to fight it. Why would a naturally hazy sky fight off sunshine?

After he'd eaten all the dinner he could possibly hold and still save room for dessert, Maddie served him ice cream. And not just any ice cream. It was their flavor, and to Terry, it always would be. Raspberry sorbet. He smiled, and took another spoonful of memories. "Before I forget." He went to get something off the living room couch, then came back and gave Maddie the small, heart-shaped box. "Sweets for my sweetie," he smiled, and kissed her, tasting their first honeymoon on her lips.

"Oh, Terry, it's beautiful." She held the red box with the white ribbon as though it was something extra-special, and not a quick purchase at the MegaMart.

"It's not much," Terry warned.

She opened the box, and bit her lip at the small assortment of candy.

"I know you've been trying to eat healthy for the baby, but I thought you both deserved a little Valentine's Day milk chocolate."

She took one out, and put the box away. The one chocolate though, she ate slowly-- very slowly--relishing each taste.

"I'm glad to see pregnancy hasn't affected your taste buds," Terry smiled.

"Honestly, I've been craving chocolate something terrible. I just haven't been giving in to it." She touched her belly, and an odd look crossed her face.

"What?" he asked. "Gas?"

"I don't think so." She sat still. "It feels like butterflies woke up in my belly. There it is again."
Terry held perfectly still.

Maddie looked at him. "I think it's the baby. I was having gas earlier, but this is different. I felt something when I was eating, but after I ate that chocolate, the butterflies really got going."

Terry got down on his knees, and put a hand on her belly. Maddie moved his hand, and he sighed.

"Can you feel it?" she asked, and he shook his head.

"Our baby is in there."

"I believe you," he smiled, rubbing Maddie's belly. "Hello in there. Did you like the chocolate? Happy Valentine's Day." He sighed, and put his ear to her belly. "I wonder what we're having."

"Would you mind very much if we waited to find out?"

"You're kidding, right?" Terry smiled at his wife, but she looked every bit serious. "Why?" he asked.

"I've been hearing stories from everyone about what labor is like, and I want to save it as a surprise. It would be another good thing to look forward to. So would you mind if we waited? It's not as though it really changes anything. Our baby will be our baby, no matter if we know now or later."

"What about the baby shower?"

"We could ask everyone to get things in yellow. I was thinking, if it's all right with you--" Maddie folded her hands, and Terry couldn't help but smile-- "maybe we could decorate the baby's corner of the bedroom in yellow, and with a teddy bear theme. I wouldn't want to crowd you out with lots of pink, anyway."

"So you think we're having a girl?"

"Terry--"
"I'm just trying to pick up on any and all clues. Now that we're going to wait."

"Thank you, Terry."

"You're in your second trimester." Terry went back to his chair. "It's a little early for the nesting urge, isn't it?"

"I don't know. I've never nested before."

"Teddy bears?" Terry scratched his head, trying to picture a teddy bear-themed crib. "Okay. Why not? No stuffed toys in the crib, though. It's not safe." He kept thinking, and smiled. "This is going to drive our family crazy. Everyone has always found out as soon as they could, and I mean everyone. We knew what the triplets were going to be, and AJ knew about Ricky. Be ready for some begging."

"But it's okay with you?" Maddie asked, and he nodded.

"Little Bit came into this world as a surprise, so why not keep the surprise going a little longer?"

"Do you want it to be a boy or a girl?" Maddie asked.

"Either one is okay with me," Terry smiled, scraping off the melted edges of the raspberry sorbet. "As long as you and the baby are healthy, I'll be over-the-moon happy."

"You'd like a boy though, wouldn't you? To carry on the Davis name?"

"The Davis name isn't that important," he laughed. "It's more important our child will carry the name of Christ. Boy or girl, whoever you've got in your belly, making you feel like so many butterflies right now-- that's our child. That's the person God gave us, and that's who we'll love."

"I love you, Terry."

Terry smiled, gave Maddie a spoonful of raspberry sorbet, then leaned back in his chair to enjoy the candlelight. She slid an envelope across the table to him-- one sealed with a heart sticker.
Smiling, he opened it, took out a handmade card lavishly crowded with pink and white hearts. Inside the card was a message, one meant for a husband. He reached for Maddie's hand, and planted a kiss on her palm.

He leaned in to kiss her smiling lips, but Maddie got up, and tugged him toward the living room.

"I thought I was supposed to clear the dishes," Terry said, but Maddie had him by the hand, and he couldn't resist. He didn't want to. "Where are we going?" he asked, as she led him past the couch. "I'm willing to sit through a chick-flick if there's going to be popcorn. I'll even watch *Pride and Prejudice* with you, if that's what you want." He smiled as Maddie led him into the hall. When they came to the bedroom door, he tugged her to him and kissed her mouth.

She pulled him inside, and closed the door.

After spending part of the night on a makeshift bed on the floor, they moved to the real bed to get some sleep. Maddie put her phone by his pillow, and let the music play at a low hum, and decided to go without her earbuds. Though it didn't seem like a good idea to Terry, he kept quiet. She'd been sleeping with earplugs lately, so if she could go without plugging her ears at all, Terry figured it would be an improvement.

Before they nodded off, he shifted to reach behind him, and when the mattress creaked, Maddie stiffened. He put his arms around her and she burrowed against him.

"Just listen to the song," he whispered.

"I never thought I'd love to cuddle so much, but I do." She looked up at him. "Don't let go of me tonight?"

"I won't."

Maddie moved her leg, and even though the bed stayed silent, she clutched his shirt.

"Maddie, I'm going to reach for something behind me, okay?" He waited until she nodded before leaning back to feel behind him. It was supposed to be there, unless it had fallen off the
bed and onto the floor. His fingers knocked a thin edge, he reached a little more, and Maddie strained to look over him without moving the bed to see what he was doing. He rolled back, the bed shifted, and he winced when Maddie gripped his pajama top so hard he could feel her fingernails. "I've got it." He pulled a large red envelope from under the blanket, and held it in front of her nose. By the light of the guardian angels on their nightstand, he saw he'd gotten her attention. "You thought I'd forgotten your Valentine's Day card, didn't you?"

She un-fisted his pajama top, and reached for the card.

Not being the creative type, he'd resorted to the greeting card aisle at the store. Not that he had to tell Maddie that-- it was obvious. She tugged out a thick white Valentine with a shimmery red heart filled with the strongest Valentine's Day wish Terry could find-- some sweetly sentimental thought that didn't say half of what he felt. He waited as she opened the card and was serenaded with one of her favorite love songs from the phone.

"My card is singing. Oh, Terry, I love it!" She hugged him, and he winced when the bed moved but couldn't be heard.

She set the card open on the blanket, rested her head on his chest and read what he'd written while the tune played. By his pillow, he listened to the gentle, low melody coming from her phone.

"I'll love you forever, too, Terry."

He smiled, and stroked her hair. The night was rocking him to sleep. It felt good being with Maddie like this, satisfied, content, and relaxed. Maddie's card stopped, he looked over and caught her opening the card again to start the tune over.

As he drifted to sleep, the tune played one more time.

A few days after Valentine's, Maddie woke Terry in the middle of the night, put her earplugs in, and for the first time, they made love without moving their bed to the floor. Before going back to sleep, she took the earplugs out, and made sure the phone was still playing. After that night, they stopped moving their bed, and she no longer wore earbuds or earplugs to sleep.
One night, late in February, as Madison lay on her side next to Terry in bed, she felt Terry touch her belly.

"Did the baby just move?" Terry asked.

"You felt that?" she smiled. "I guess since I'm on my side, it's easier for you to feel the baby. My belly is flatter when I stand."

"So what I felt a few moments ago-- that was our baby?" Moving to get a better vantage, Terry smiled at the bump under Madison's pajama top. "Hello, Little Bit. Can you move again for your daddy?" Terry kept feeling around when the baby didn't budge. "Please?" he asked, but the baby held still. "Little Bit doesn't know me yet," Terry smiled at Madison. He kept his hand on her belly, and started talking to the baby while Madison brushed the happy tears from her eyes.

She could hardly wait for them to meet, face to face.

* * * *

By early April, Maddie's nesting instincts were in high gear. She was eager to get their bedroom ready for the baby, and though Terry offered to help, Maddie told him to stay put. He had a job to do. Finish the Singapore account in time for the baby's delivery.

So while Terry worked in the office, Maddie sat in the living room with Izzy, shopping for a crib on Izzy's laptop.

Talk about distraction. Terry had worked through distraction before when Abby and Izzy had gone through their pregnancies, but it was a different matter when it was your wife. Even harder when he worked from home and he could hear Maddie and Izzy talking excitedly from the living room. John might be able to work just fine, but Terry had to close the office door. He had to.

It took some time before Maddie brought him a printout of the crib she liked. She and Izzy had measured it, and had determined it would fit in the bedroom.
Terry smiled when he saw the French white railing, the matching changing table that set above the drawers. "I can see why you like it. Even we don't have a bed this nice."

"It turns into a toddler bed, and a full-sized adult bed," Maddie explained, showing him the pictures. "Here's the mattress Izzy and I thought would be a good idea-- it's supposed to be very safe for infants. I've also picked out some fitted sheets, and matching receiving blankets for feeding time."

He looked over the printouts while Maddie chewed her lip. "Are you doing all right?" he asked. "What do you think of the crib? Do you like it?"

"I like it." He handed the paper back to Maddie. "It sounds like you've been doing your homework, and it's within our price range. If this is the one you want, then go ahead and place the order. Would you like me to take you out for a walk? I can spare a half hour."

"Izzy and I will go walking later. But thanks, Terry." Smiling, Maddie kissed him, and went off to buy the nursery for the baby.

Maybe this crib would satisfy her nesting needs. So far, she'd organized their dresser from top to bottom so he now had trouble finding anything on the first try, and as of yesterday, she'd started in on their closet. Terry had an urge to hide his fishing gear. Overall, he thought she was bearing up fairly well, considering her hip was aching more often, and she was having weird dreams about childbirth. When Maddie slept, she needed so many pillows to keep her comfortable, it left little room in bed for Terry. He stayed, however, knowing he needed to be there for her while she slept.

Probably the hardest of the pregnancy symptoms to deal with were the mood swings. She fought so hard to manage them, Terry could tell it annoyed her whenever he noticed she was struggling. He was careful not to say anything about them, and tried not to offer his shoulder whenever she melted into tears. It was almost impossible not to. He supported her as best he could though, by not getting in her way, but still doing all he could to take care of her and show that he cared. Maybe it was the showing that he cared that sometimes got him into trouble. He couldn't always
tell. Her swings hadn't been as noticeable during the first trimester, and while he knew mood swings usually lessened during the second, Maddie seemed to struggle more.

One Tuesday, about a week and a half after Maddie had decided on the crib, Terry and John were on a conference call when something bumped in the hallway. Terry glanced at the closed office door, then focused back on the call. He was being asked a question-- a rather important one, when a man's laughter in the hallway caught Terry's ear.

Terry looked to John, and John shrugged.

When the call was over, Terry gathered his notes, and handed them to John.

"Are we expecting visitors?" Terry asked, getting up from his desk.

Since neither of them knew, John checked his phone's calendar as they pushed into the hall. Terry was about to crack a joke about how no one told them anything around here, when Tim smiled at him from the living room.

"What on earth are you doing here?"

"Aren't you glad to see him?" Maddie asked, coming from the kitchen with a tray of mugs.

"I meant it in a good way." Terry closed his mouth, but nodded his greeting to Tim.

"What brings you here?" John asked, shaking hands with Tim.

"Since I had a few days off, Madison asked me to help her put together the new crib." Tim shrugged. "She didn't want to disturb you, since you guys are so busy."

"I'm not so busy I can't put together Little Bit's crib." Terry looked at Maddie as she handed out mugs to Tim and Izzy. "Some things a father likes to do. Or at least to be asked."

"By the size of the box, I could probably use the help," Tim admitted. "It's big-- almost a crate."

"It's here?"
"In your bedroom," Izzy smiled.

John nudged Terry. "Go put together the crib."

"What about the progress report?"

"I'll finish it."

"Thanks," Terry sighed.

John waved to Tim, then headed for the office as Izzy checked the time.

"I need to pick the girls up from preschool," Izzy apologized. "I had hoped the crib would get here earlier, so the girls wouldn't be in your way. Would you like me to take them to a friend's house, instead of bringing them straight home?"

Terry nodded his thanks to Izzy.

"Terry?" Maddie put down her mug, and he hurried to help Maddie up from the couch. "Could I talk to you in the kitchen?"

Quietly, Tim drank from his mug while Terry followed Maddie into the next room.

She was trying not to hug herself. Terry knew it by the way she kept forcing her arms down to her sides, and it only made him want to hold and comfort her. When she took a slow, cleansing breath-- a breathing exercise Carol had taught her, Terry took a small step back. At twenty-six weeks, she was more clearly showing, the belly beneath her loose pullover giving her a wonderfully expectant look.

"Why aren't you talking to me?" Maddie asked.

He blinked. He'd been bracing for something else-- he didn't know what-- but not that. "I don't understand," he said cautiously.
Tears spilled from her eyes, and he realized they'd been near the surface all along. "Honey--" he stepped close to her, then paused, not wanting to annoy her like in the past.

"You're doing it again," she cried.

He looked about. "Doing what?"

"Being careful." She stabbed the air with her finger. "Just because I'm pregnant, doesn't mean I'm fragile. Don't avoid me, Terry."

"I didn't think I was." Terry wished he hadn't contradicted her, for she cried all the harder. "I don't know what to do, Honey. Tell me what to do." He wished John was handy, then he could ask for advice. Not that John would know. With a sigh, Terry moved close, checked to see if she minded, then put an arm around his crying wife. She moved into his arms, and he hugged her.

"I'm going crazy," she whispered between sobs. "I just know I am."

"It may feel that way, but the opposite is true. You trust my judgment, don't you?" He smiled when she nodded against his shirt. "You're this baby's hero, Maddie. I would have gone bananas weeks ago. God clearly picked the right one for this job."

A laugh erupted against Terry's shirt, and Maddie reached for a paper towel. This had been so much easier when Izzy had been the mother, and John the father, and all Terry had to do was stand back and be supportive.

By the time Terry and Maddie came back to the living room, Tim was by himself.

"I'm sorry we kept you waiting," Terry apologized. "I'll get the tools from the garage."

"I'll come with you," Tim nodded, and fell into step with Terry. "Is she all right?" Tim whispered when they were outside. "Hormones can play havoc with a woman. Karen cried through this last pregnancy, though she swore she sailed through her time with Paige."

"Maddie is dealing with it better than I would," Terry smiled. "It was good of you to come. I had no idea the crib was supposed to be here today, let alone that she'd asked you to help."
"It's okay," Tim shrugged, as Terry hefted down the toolbox. "My boss is relocating his business, so I have some time off."

"That sounds ominous."

"Not really." Tim followed Terry back to the house. "My boss told me he's reorganizing the company, and that's why they were cutting back employees. He said he's happy with my job performance, and said I'll be staying. I still can't believe it." Tim blew out a breath and looked as though he were a hundred pounds lighter. "I feel like something's going on, like maybe someone's trying to get my attention."

Terry stopped, and looked at Tim.

"I don't know," Tim sighed. "First I find my sister-- the one nobody thought I'd EVER find, then Karen doesn't leave me after she has our baby. If that's not enough, you have an accident and an angel saves your life. I'm the last person you ever thought would believe you, right? Well, I did." Tim didn't look too happy about it, but there it was. "And then there's Paige. It's nothing stellar-- she's not calling me Dad, but at least I feel like she's accepting the fact that we are a family." Tim shook his head. "I can't have everything. I have my family and my job, so I'm not going to tempt fate, or God, or whatever."

"God, Tim. God."

Tim was quiet.

The back door opened and they could see Maddie waiting.

"If you ever need someone to talk to," Terry offered, "you have my number."

Tim gave a half nod, and they stepped into the kitchen.

"Did you find the toolbox all right?" Maddie asked. "How long do you think it'll take to put the crib together? Would you mind if I helped? I could read the directions."
"Sounds like you're eager," Tim grinned.

When Terry saw the chest-high box crammed into what remained of the bedroom's walking space, he let out a whistle.

"Two delivery men managed to get it in here," Tim said, squeezing around the box. "Madison told them the crib would be in this room, so this is where they left it. The unpacking they left to us."

A panicked thought had Terry looking at Maddie. "You and Izzy did measure the crib for this bedroom, right?"

Maddie nodded.

"There's probably a lot of packing material in there, that's why the box is so big," Tim reasoned.

"Let's hope so." Terry maneuvered around the box while Madison stayed in the hall and watched. "I need some scissors to cut these straps," Terry called, and Maddie disappeared, then came back and tossed some scissors onto the bed behind him. The straps came off, then Terry pulled out the metal staples, and the box opened.

Tim tugged out the packing material, along with pieces of the crib and some confusing instructions.

"It appears some assembly is required," Terry joked.

One by one, the packing was removed, and the crib found its way onto the bed and carpet. Terry started at step one on the instructions, and Tim scrambled to find the right pieces while Maddie carried away the packing foam.

When John joined them, Terry was forced to look at the time.

Terry groaned. "According to the manufacturer, this was supposed to be easy."
"Look at the bright side," John said, stepping around their progress, "you took so long, now you're getting another volunteer to add to the confusion."

It took some doing, the teamwork of three men, and the urgent prayers of Maddie, but they finally had the crib together and were scooting it in place beside the bed. Terry had to admit, for all the hard-to-reach fasteners, and complicated directions, once the crib was assembled, it was one sturdy piece of furniture. The off-white finish fit in nicely with its surroundings, giving the room an unexpectedly classy feel. The drawers, and shelf behind the drawers offered a lot of storage space, and the changing table on top made it a space-saving unit that Terry thought would do quite nicely. The fact this crib would change into a toddler bed, and full-size twin bed made it a good investment.

As Terry gathered his tools, Maddie pushed the remaining packing material into the hall while Tim did his best to help.

"You're staying for dinner," Maddie told her brother, and she didn't allow him to turn down the offer. Tim had helped, so he was going to be fed. Period.

Tim wisely accepted, and got out of the way as Maddie opened drawers and looked the crib over.

"John just told me it's finished," Izzy said, coming into the room. When Izzy saw the crib, her mouth dropped open and she hugged Maddie. "Oh, it's even better than we planned. And look how it well it fits beside the bed. I love the drawers."

Their job done, Terry moved out of the way with the other two men as the triplets poured inside the bedroom to see the crib.

The next few days were spent with Maddie fussing over the crib, dressing it with a fitted teddy bear sheet, and draping a teddy bear quilt, and a receiving blanket over the railing for added effect. She stocked the shelves with diapers, and other essentials. By the time Easter rolled around, Karen gave Maddie high marks for getting the bedroom ready for the new arrival, though it was beyond her, and Abby, and even Izzy, how Maddie could stand to wait and find out what she was having. While the usual debate of "Didn't she want to know?" and "Of course she did, she only wanted to save it as a surprise for later," went on, Terry just smiled. Maddie was a fighter; she just didn't always know it.
Easter came and went, and Terry and Maddie kept praying for her brother. While Tim emailed Terry, and even John a few times to ask some questions, on the whole, Tim kept to himself.

As Maddie entered the last few months of her pregnancy, Terry and John worked like maniacs to finish the Singapore account in time for the baby's arrival. Better yet, Terry wanted to be free to help Maddie through the last few weeks of her pregnancy. He knew it wouldn't be easy for her, and wanted this account to be done. Sloppy work would never do though, for he and John were responsible for people's lives. How would he like it if his bank account were wiped out, because someone else had been in a hurry and hadn't done his job? Loving his neighbor as himself was a standard Terry held himself to every day of his life, so this account would get his very best.

Terry stayed up late, right up until his agreed-upon bedtime with Maddie. He poured over his work every waking moment he could, until he dreamt it in his sleep.

Then came the home stretch, when he was fueled by coffee, and live reports back from the techs in Singapore. Izzy watched over Maddie's sleep, while he and John hammered out the bugs and got things running.

By afternoon, Terry fell into bed, not intending to wake up for at least the next two days. Maybe three, if he could go without food for that long. His eyes felt like sandpaper, but he and John had finished. Seven months of work, and they were done. He would celebrate, but he was too worn out. A few seconds after hitting the pillow, Terry was out like a light.

He was done.

* * * *

Though she needed earbuds to get onto the bed, music actually helped other than to smother the sounds of the mattress giving way beneath her. Which was a good thing, for lunch was causing heartburn, and her hip was scolding her for that extra-long walk she'd taken with Izzy. Music was an umbrella for the clouds that had been gathering over her since they'd talked with Mrs. Harper across the street. Madison's nerves couldn't take much more. Even Little Bit was kicking and moving more than usual.
Madison knew she had to settle down. She listened to the music, the calm of the melody. She looked at Terry, fast asleep on the mattress beside her. He'd been sound asleep all morning, and all afternoon. Not even her clumsily getting onto the bed had been enough to stir him.

She wondered just when he planned on waking up? Maybe this was his way of celebrating. At least he was done working himself into the ground. That was the important thing. Oh, how she had missed him. Though Terry had made sure Izzy was there to help her, it hadn't been the same. If Madison could have, she would've sewn herself into Terry's clothes to be with him in the office. She wouldn't have minded listening to him work, even though he could sometimes drive her crazy.

Sitting in bed with pillows behind her back, and pillows under her legs, she studied him. How she envied him, for he could sprawl on his back, and breathe all the air he wanted without feeling labored. His stomach was muscled and mostly flat, while hers was not. Sometimes, Madison felt overwhelmed, like her body was failing her, especially when her hip acted up like this.

Little Bit kicked, and Madison smiled and caressed her belly. On the other hand, Terry didn't get to carry their child. Madison wouldn't have traded this for anything. Well, for one thing. She would trade this bloated feeling for giving birth and holding her baby, but she wouldn't have settled for anything less.

Her mind wandered back to Mrs. Harper, and Madison checked Terry. He really needed to wake up. Even after all this sleep though, he still looked so worn out, she hated to spoil his hard-earned rest. As much as she needed him to wake up, the least she could do was wait. She wished she could tell him her news so they could agree and move on. She hated the uncertainty, especially when she'd already pictured the way things would be. She could see the future, and it was comforting. When your body was an uncomfortable place to be, and your emotions were paper thin, you took comfort where you could.

Fingers brushed her hand, and she looked over and saw Terry blinking. Now that he was awake, she felt guilty. She pulled out an earbud as his mouth moved.

"How long have you been there?" he yawned.
"Please try not to move the bed. I need to talk to you."

Eyes half closed, Terry smiled. "Man, is my wife pretty."

"I am not." Madison lightly slapped his arm. "You're still asleep."

"Do these eyes look asleep to you?" He smiled, and Madison felt herself give in to that easy grin, the warmth of his hand when it sought hers. "Go ahead. I'm listening."

"I'm sorry if I woke you, but you can go back to sleep after I'm done." Madison saw Terry's smile turn sleepy, but when she squeezed his hand, his eyes opened and he nodded for her to continue. "This is important. When Izzy and I took our walk this morning, Alice Harper from across the street waved us over. She and Frank are getting divorced, and she's moving to Wisconsin to live with her daughter."

"What?" Terry sat up. "I didn't even know their marriage was in trouble."

"Izzy said in the ten years the Harpers have been in the neighborhood, they've pretty much kept to themselves."

"That's true enough." Terry rubbed his neck. "But why tell us?"

"They heard we had someone draw up plans for an add-on because we didn't have enough room, but were worried we might have changed our minds."

"Why?" Terry asked.

"Because they want us to buy their house. I told them we were still going through with it, that the only reason we haven't done anything yet is because you and John have been so busy."

Terry leaned forward on the bed and it was all Madison could do to not stuff her ears and hum.

"Sorry, I'll hold still. Let me get this right-- the Harpers want us to buy their house? The one across the street?"
"Please don't look at me like that."

"Like what? This is the way I always look."

"Besides the two-day-old beard, and the bloodshot eyes?"

"Besides that."

"I don't want to move, Terry, and I'll remind you that you don't either."

"We could at least look at the house. There's no harm in looking."

That lopsided grin got to her every time. Maybe it was the pregnancy pumping all those hormones into her system, maybe that was it. Madison didn't know. She only knew she found herself agreeing that it couldn't hurt to at least look. But to only look. Nothing more.

They called the Harpers, and Alice and Frank were all too happy to invite them over tomorrow, so they would have a chance to clean the house. If only they agreed more often, Madison thought, maybe they wouldn't be selling their home. Maybe.

At dinner, John and Izzy kept quiet, though John must have heard all about it from Izzy. It appeared they didn't want to influence any decisions. That was fine with Madison, for she already knew they were welcome here. She knew no one was hurrying them to the door, no one was ready to see them go. The conversation was carefully kept away from moving, and while John and Terry talked of their great relief over having finished the Singapore account, Izzy and Madison exchanged smiles. The men were trying a little too hard.

The next day, Terry showered, and shaved off the beard Madison had admired that morning. Madison didn't know why, but she put on her best maternity sweater to look nice for the visit. It didn't matter how she looked. They weren't buying the house. Izzy came from the kitchen as Madison and Terry went into the living room. John came from the office, and the triplets looked up from their board game on the living room floor.

"Have a good time," John smiled.
"We're just looking," Madison said, and Izzy nodded that she understood.

The sun came out as Madison and Terry stepped outside, making Madison wonder if she needed the sweater, after all. A chilly breeze off the bay made her decide to keep it on, and she took Terry's arm as they crossed the street.

A few steps, and they reached the Harpers' house. Madison had to admit it wasn't far. It wasn't white like John and Izzy's house, but the bluish-gray was easy on the eyes, and the white outlining the windows and doors gave it a happy charm. Of course, she'd seen the house before, but she'd never given it much thought. The trees in back were the same as the others that populated the area, and if she looked about at a quick glance, it was easy to miss, except for the windows and white door.

It was one story, like John and Izzy's, but it wasn't as big side to side. That was a plus. It meant less to vacuum.

Terry rang the doorbell and smiled at Madison, but Madison prepared herself to not like the house. She didn't want to move, she really didn't.

The door opened, and Frank showed them inside.

"Thanks for coming." Frank's smile looked nervous, as though he didn't quite know what to do with himself. "Do you want me to stick around, or would you be more comfortable if I left while you guys looked around?"

"Stay, please." Terry shook his hand. "I'm sorry to hear you and Alice are leaving."

"It couldn't be helped," Frank shrugged, leading them into a large room. "She would've been here to welcome you, but something came up. To be honest, I don't think she wanted to be here for this."

"Are you sure you both want to sell?"

"We're sure." Frank nodded to the fireplace. "It smokes, but only because it needs to be cleaned. It's been on my Honey-Do-List for ages. We haven't used it in a long time." Frank waved to the
room as though he wished it would go away. "This is the living room, it's wide open to the breakfast nook and the kitchen. There are two bedrooms down the hall-- our girl Missy used to have the larger of the two. The other is for guests."

"The master bedroom?" Terry asked, and Frank showed them the door to the right of the fireplace.

"Help yourself. Look around. If you want to know anything, just ask. I'll be here," he said glumly.

Terry gave Madison a pained look. She could tell Terry was having second thoughts. She looked about the large living room, and its dark gray carpet. It felt soft under her shoes, so it wouldn't have to be replaced anytime soon. True, the house looked bigger on the inside than it did the outside, and all this open space would need to be vacuumed. She liked the way it opened up to the next area though-- a table with chairs beside the kitchen. She could see Terry at a table of their own, laughing with their child while she got breakfast ready. Behind the table, sliding glass doors led to a patio, and though they were facing the wrong way to see the bay, the stand of trees surrounding the property gave a private feel.

While Terry stepped onto the patio, Madison inspected the kitchen. She looked over the counter space, and approved of the island counter, for she and Izzy relied on theirs. Though the cupboards could've done with a good cleaning, there were a lot of them. She looked around a corner, and found herself in the hall.

The first bedroom had purple walls-- not a color Madison would have picked for herself, but she liked the size of the room. She stood back a long while and was quiet.

"This place is kind of sad, isn't it?"

Madison jumped-- not an easy thing for a woman in her third trimester to do-- at the sound of Terry's unexpected voice. She steadied her heart as Terry gave her an apologetic look. "I don't suppose you could make a little more noise?"

"Sorry," he smiled. "I was just outside, and from what I saw, the roof looks to be in good shape, and the trees seem healthy." Terry shrugged. "The backyard is probably the happiest spot on the whole property."
"He'll hear you," Madison whispered.

"What's with you? Don't tell me you've been enjoying yourself."

"Can't you see our child in this room?" Madison moved out of the way so Terry could look inside.

"With purple walls?"

"We can repaint them."

Terry shook his head. "I thought you said you didn't want to move?"

"I don't." Madison sighed, and looked down the hall at the bathroom. "It isn't the house's fault the Harpers are getting divorced." She looked back at the bedroom. "It's not so far to get to the bathroom, is it? Do you think our baby will mind that the bathroom isn't closer?"

"That depends on what shape the bathroom's in." Terry went to go see the bathroom while Madison waited. When he came back, he gave a noncommittal shrug. "The caulking wasn't bad. I wouldn't mind getting a building inspector in here, and have an expert opinion before I trust my own. I know a good one-- she was reliable when I had to make a decision about buying my apartment complex. So you're really interested?"

"I'm interested enough to think about it." When Madison saw his wariness, she smiled. "You were the one who dragged me here."

"Dragged is a strong word." Terry looked into the purple bedroom again. "You're right, I would like to know how sound this house is, and if it's a good investment or not. A place-- any place-- is a commitment, but this one scares me. It's only available because the Harpers are getting divorced."

"The house isn't jinxed," Madison whispered. "I didn't think you were superstitious."

"I'm not," Terry sighed. "I'm not. I'll call the inspector when we get home."
It was a terribly big decision though, one that was testing Madison's faith. It was one thing to be part of a larger household, another thing entirely to be responsible for the house.

* * * *

When they had finished looking around, Terry and Maddie went home to find John and Izzy waiting for them. Of course they had to be told what was going on, for Terry never intended to keep any of this a secret, and neither did Maddie. Terry lost no time in contacting Sue, the building inspector he trusted, and in sitting down to look over his finances.

"Do you think you can handle a mortgage?" John asked, coming into the office and sitting down at the desk next to Terry's.

"I've crunched the numbers--" Terry looked over his spreadsheet-- "and after the job we've just finished, I can afford to pay off Maddie's wedding rings. We'll still owe on the car, but my credit is good, and I've been through the loan process before. I'm pretty sure I can get another mortgage. I've paid off the first one for the apartment complex, and at least this one should be smaller."

"Then why do you look so downcast? Izumi and I could loan you some money--"

"No, thanks, I'll be all right," Terry smiled. "It's just that a house is such a big commitment. If this actually happens, I'm going to be a homeowner."

John grinned. "A homeowner across the street. It'll still be a short commute. You gotta appreciate that."

Terry could.

"Thanks for not moving away." John gave Terry a punch on the arm, and Terry nodded. It was as touchy-feely as they were going to get, but Terry knew it came from the heart. John really hadn't wanted Terry to move out, but across the street? John could live with that.
Maddie had been right. It wasn't the house's fault it was so sad right now. Terry held onto that thought, but when Sue's report came back, he had to deal with the slightly mixed results. While the Harpers' roof had been good, there were some other repairs that needed to be done. Still, the foundation was solid, and there wasn't any mold. While it was overall a good house, it wasn't a buy-and-move-in-proposition, either. There would be waiting involved while the repairs were made.

To his surprise, Maddie didn't seem to mind.

"As long as we can afford the repairs," Maddie said, as they lay in bed one night, planning, and talking it over, "then we can wait. Besides, I won't want to move in right away. I'm going to need Izzy's help after I have this baby, and I'm going to be even more tired than I am now. There's so much I need to learn from Izzy, it'll be easier to do if we're still here. I also want to learn to trust myself to work with a kitchen knife after the baby's born, but we won't have to wait to move for that to happen. I can work with Izzy in her kitchen until Carol agrees I'm ready to work in my own." Maddie smiled. "I like the sound of that-- my kitchen. It's a big responsibility. I only help out around here, and in our home, everything will be up to us."

Terry smiled as determination firmed Maddie's mouth.

"We can do it. Make any repairs you need to. We'll just be across the street. We can work on the house at a nice pace from here, and move in when we're ready."

"You're sure about this?"

They looked at the crib railing where Maddie had taped up the latest ultrasound printout. The tech had known they were waiting to find out the gender, so nothing showed but a sweetly small face.

"I've prayed about it," Maddie nodded. "I'm sure."

He grinned. "The more I think about it, the more I can see us in that house." Resting his arm on the stack of pillows between them, he placed a hand on Maddie's belly, and the movement he'd seen a second before stopped. "It's me, Little Bit. How are you doing in there?" To his joy, the baby kicked at the sound of his voice. They had so much to do-- hiring a buyer's agent was only
the start. If he thought about it too long, he could grow weary fast. A small jab under his hand made him smile.

"You think we'll be able to get the house?" Maddie asked, and he nodded. Maddie rested her hand on his as Little Bit kicked.

"Am I invited to the baby shower next month?"

"Abby's so happy we're thinking of a house this close to home, she wants to invite everyone." Maddie caressed his hand, and closed her eyes. Her body was so tired, he could tell she was doing good to stay awake for as long as she had. He kissed her hair, said a quiet prayer for the night, for the health of their baby, and Maddie, then let Maddie go to sleep.

If Terry hadn't felt like a father before, he did that night. Faced with a future mortgage, car payments, a wife, and a new baby, he finally felt he had arrived.

* * * *

The first day of summer fell on a Saturday in June, which was also the first day of fishing season for smallmouth bass. For Terry and John that meant a wonderfully full day on the edge of the water. While John used the weight of the lure to make each cast, Terry used the heavy fly line, for Terry was all feathers. It made for different rhythms, different casts, but Terry loved it all. John was able to use the slick new case he'd gotten for Christmas, and Terry was able to test out his new gear on the smallmouth in the bay. For once, Terry could get away from the paperwork of the house he and Maddie were buying, and the well-wishes of everyone who constantly asked how soon until the baby's due date. While everyone else needed to pause and check the calendar, Terry could've answered them in his sleep.

Man, sleep. He hardly got any, not with Maddie getting up so often to use the bathroom.

He'd needed this. He kept up the back and forth rhythm until he was afraid of catching his quota of five for the day, and then went without a hook at all. He soaked up the sun like it wouldn't show up the next day. Every so often, he rubbed on more sunscreen, for Maddie was all mother right now. Thirty-five weeks into her pregnancy, she kept saying she felt like she was about to pop, though her due date was next month. Abby would've joined them if she could;
she was on a boat somewhere in the Thousand Islands with her camera crew, and Jake, and Ricky, filming a segment for Dennis. Although the weather had been perfect for it, Terry had missed his little fishing buddy.

When the day ended, Terry, Maddie, John, Izzy, and the munchkins gathered around the firepit to enjoy the day's catch and a good sunset.

That night, Terry had no trouble falling asleep, even with Maddie's trips to the bathroom. He was so out of it, he was soon lost in a dream of a roof repair gone wrong. As he and Maddie panicked over the lemon they had bought, and tied themselves to with a mortgage, Terry became dimly aware of someone thrashing beside him.

The leaky roof faded, and Terry blinked, thankful that he'd only been dreaming, but at the same time wondering why he was awake.

The blanket next to him jerked, and Terry pushed onto his side, and checked Maddie.

In the semi-darkness, he saw the sweat on Maddie's face, and his thought went to the baby. Something was wrong.

"Maddie?" He shook her arm, and she clutched her pillows even harder. On her side, and very pregnant, he wasn't sure if this was a flashback, or if she needed an ambulance. "Maddie, what's wrong?" Her eyes-- they were staying closed. "Honey, wake up. Come on, I'm here, and you're all right. You're safe." When she shook her head, Terry grabbed the cell phone playing by her pillow, lit the screen, and held it to her face.

She was awake.

"Maddie, I need you to open your eyes so I know you're all right."

"My belly," she gasped.

"What about it?" He pushed back the blankets, checked the sheet beside her and saw that it was dry. She wasn't bleeding. When he touched her belly, Maddie stiffened. "Does that hurt?" he asked.
She shook her head.

He pulled up her pajama top, and felt for movement.

"Little Bit is definitely awake. Come on, Maddie, open your eyes." Terry rubbed Maddie's face until she finally gasped and got her eyes all the way open. "What's wrong? Tell me what's wrong. Is it the baby?" He placed her hand on her belly, and it seemed to calm her. "You had a flashback, didn't you?"

Maddie shook her head.

"A night terror?"

She nodded. "I hurt myself."

"No, you kept our baby safe. See?" Terry got out of bed, went over and turned on the overhead light to assure her that all was well.

She moaned, and he hurried back to the bed.

"What?" he asked. "You're not hurt."

She couldn't hear him as she gazed at her stomach.

"Maddie, those are old scars." He touched her face until she looked at him. "I don't know what you were dreaming, but you haven't hurt yourself since before we were married. Can you hear me? Then calm down." He took heart when she clutched his hand, and her breathing started to come in normal breaths.

"I dreamt I was with him again." Maddie started to shake, but she steadied when Terry squeezed her hand and coaxed her to breathe. "It wasn't a flashback. This was different. I was trying to get away from him, and he was chasing me outside. I don't remember hurting myself, but I looked down, and I saw blood. I wasn't pregnant in the dream, but when I started to wake up, I thought--" Maddie began to hyperventilate, and Terry steadied her. "I thought it was real. I
thought it had really happened." She started to cry as she looked at her belly. "It's so ugly, Terry. My belly keeps getting bigger, and it's so ugly."

He leaned down, and kissed the tears from her face. "Do you know what I see when I look at your belly? When I see those old scars protecting our growing baby, I see hope. I see you not giving up. I see so much love, and I see hope."

Maddie wept and clung to him, and he tried to hold her as best as he could with the pillows between them.

"I'm never touching anything sharp again for as long as I live. What if I do something to hurt our child, Terry?"

"The Maddie I know would never do that-- not in a million years." Terry hugged her with everything he had. "The Maddie I know will keep taking each day at a time, and will keep growing in grace. Do you know how she'll do that? She'll grow in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior until the day He takes her home. Which, by the grace of God, won't be for a very long time." Terry took a deep breath, and held his friend as the music from her phone softly played by their pillow. "Listen to that, Maddie. They're playing our song."

She sniffed, and her hand relaxed in his.

Keeping hold of her hand, he pulled the blanket up over Maddie and her pillows.

"Leave the light on?" she asked, and he nodded, and got comfortable while she watched his every move.

"I'm not going anywhere," he smiled.

"Thank you, Terry."

Though Maddie was tired, she was still too shaken to fall asleep, so they talked of baby names until the wee hours of the morning. When she at last drifted to sleep, Terry let her rest as long as she wanted. She was giving this child all her strength. She was holding nothing back.
The new yellow maternity dress made her feel like doing something nice with her hair besides adding a ponytail, though she had trouble finding enough energy to put on her shoes. She couldn't bend down to put them on, and once she did, she knew they would soon pinch her feet. Her feet and ankles were a little swollen-- with emphasis on the "little," for she had already prayed, seen her doctor, and talked to Izzy. It wasn't preeclampsia, and though she sometimes felt like it, she wasn't dying.

"Maddie?" Terry came striding into the bedroom in his T-shirt and jeans. "Aren't you ready yet?"

She tried not to glare at him. She tried, and prayed she didn't fail.

"Do you want help with your shoes?"

"You might have to go without me," she sighed.

"It's our baby shower. You have to be there. If I come without you, they'll throw me out."

"What if I need to use the bathroom?"

"The Doyles have more than one. You'll have your pick." Terry knelt, and helped Madison into her shoes.

"I mean on the drive there? I'm drinking so many fluids to help with the swelling, and the baby's sitting on my bladder, I'm a time-bomb waiting to go off."

"It's a half hour drive, but say the word, and I'll find the nearest bathroom."

She looked down at her feet, but couldn't see them. Terry handed her a purse, and she had to think a moment before she realized that he'd given her the wrong one. Not that he would know the difference between her handbags. She slipped in her smartphone, and moved into the hallway as Terry followed from behind.
"Everyone else has already left, and Karen called a few minutes ago to say they’re almost at Dick’s place."

"So we’re going to be late?" Madison asked, trying to waddle faster.

"We’re on time-- they just wanted to get there before us. I’m only following instructions," Terry shrugged. "They said to leave now, so that’s what we’re doing. Slow up, before you hurt something, and I have to carry you."

"You wouldn’t be able to. Not even you." Madison waited by their silver four-door sedan while Terry locked the house. The baby gave a small jab, as though knowing they were going to a party. It wasn’t just any party, it was all for Little Bit; Madison only wished she didn’t feel so tired before they even got there. It didn’t seem fair to everyone else.

A light summer breeze came off the bay and fanned Madison as Terry opened the passenger door. She almost hated to get inside the car, it felt so good.

"You look pretty in that color," Terry smiled. "Wearing it on honor of the baby?"

Madison nodded. Her nerves were calming, and when Terry helped her into the car, she was able to breathe. The sunlight from the window felt soothing, the hum of the engine, even the familiar scent of Terry’s soap put her at ease. The thought of going to a party didn’t seem as overwhelming as before. It took effort to not melt into tears for no reason, to not panic at every odd sensation, to not worry twenty-four seven about the baby.

She pulled out her phone and went over her promises for Little Bit while Terry opened his window and let in some air.

When they neared the Doyles, Madison was grateful she hadn’t needed to use the bathroom until now. As something yellow and orange bobbed in the distance, she wondered what it was. Someone dancing? The movement had been too light for that, and there it was again, bobbing in the wind. As they came closer, Madison realized they were balloons-- pale yellow and orange balloons tied to a mailbox. Some read, "Baby Shower," while others had, "Welcome Precious Bundle" printed in happy white letters. Beyond the mailbox, the circular driveway was crowded
with cars. It amazed her to find so many, for she had thought this was going to be a small party. Abby had been joking about inviting everyone, hadn't she?

Madison looked to Terry, but he was busy finding a parking space. Since Abby, Izzy, Sara, Agatha, and Karen had let Madison pick the date for the party, Madison had chosen Saturday, after lunch. The women wouldn't have to feed everyone, and it wouldn't get in the way of work.

"Quite a turnout, isn't it?" Terry pulled in back of a familiar minivan, and grinned at Madison.

"Did you know all these people would be here?" Madison asked.

"They didn't tell me a thing." Terry got out, rounded the hood as Sara and Dick Doyle came from the house with Izzy and Karen.

Sara waved, and Madison smiled.

"Are you surprised?"

"I saw the balloons," Madison nodded, hanging on to Terry's arm as he helped her from the car. "Thank you for the party. It was very kind of you."

"It's not over yet." Sara stepped forward, and gave Madison a huge hug despite her big belly. "We're just getting started. Come in, and let's get you seated. We saved you a recliner so you can put your feet up. Dick, doesn't she look radiant?"

"She sure does."

Madison looked back at Terry, and Terry nodded in agreement. Madison took Karen's hand, and thanked her for making the long drive. As Karen insisted that it wasn't too long of a drive to come for her baby shower, they went inside. Sara showed them through the foyer, and into a wide room with lots of people. They were all smiling and expecting Madison to say something, and for one awful moment, Madison didn't know what to do.

"I-- I didn't expect so many people." She looked to Terry, and he laughed, and moved to her side with a hug. "Thank you. Thank you for coming."
"We have the best family and friends in the world," Terry nodded to the room.

People came around them, and Madison was finally able to slow her heart down to pick out a few of the faces. All of Madison's family was there, as well as Agatha and her husband. Emily came, but not Brian, since Emily's father had a minor medical emergency; though Brian had stayed, he'd insisted that Emily and Dave come. Sheriff Peterson and his wife were there, as well as AJ's friend, Tyler Greene, and Tyler's wife, and baby, and Tyler's parents. There were more, and as Madison was thanking them all, Sara and Jake carried something into the room. Everyone clapped, and it took Madison a moment to realize what was going on.

Then Madison saw the cake-- a teddy bear wearing a bib that spelled B-A-B-Y.

"Terry, look." Madison held onto her husband's hand and fought like crazy not to cry.

Terry hugged her, and smiled. "It's a sweet one, Jake."

"I got the design off the blanket you draped over the crib," Jake explained.

"It's wonderful," Madison smiled, wiping her eyes. She was glad she hadn't used mascara, especially when Dick snapped a picture of them in front of the cake.

"We're serving up cake and ice cream before the main event," Dick announced, while Madison whispered to Terry.

She had held it as long as she could. Madison hurried, and by the time she'd returned from the bathroom, Sara was waiting for her by a recliner. A dessert plate found its way into Madison's hands, and at her side, she found Terry in a comfortable chair, already enjoying some cake. Dick made sure the recliner kicked out, and Madison had to admit her feet felt better for the thoughtfulness.

Madison listened to the talk around her, the visiting between friends, neighbors, and family. The large room looked different than the last time she'd been there-- couches had been moved in, tables were against the wall, and balloons of all kinds had been tied to anything that would hold them down.
"It was good of you to include Ava," Tyler said nearby, as he sat with Abby and Jake. "She's starting to feel like she fits in here."

Abby ate some ice cream, and nodded. "That's because she does."

On the other side of the recliner, others were carrying on a conversation of another sort.

"How's business?"

"Decent enough," Terry shrugged. "I'm going to have to clear out Maddie's apartment to make room for new a tenant, and no one's moving out. So business is good enough."

"That reminds me," Dick asked, "have you heard back about your broken window? Henry, have you heard anything about Victor?"

"Well, he's stopped harassing Terry with phone calls. And it appears Victor has moved on and left the area. That doesn't solve any cases, but it does keep the peace."

"I was thinking I'd like to do something," Dick said thoughtfully. "Not about Victor-- you've already warned me to stay away, Henry-- but something to do for those I can help. Jake and I are trying to accomplish some good through the advisory board, and I believe we are. We're making progress. Unlike Jake though, I have more resources, and I'm retired. Terry, if you ever need help with another crusade, I hope you'll give me a call. I'd like to help out."

"Crusade? Sounds like you've been talking to Abby," Terry said with a smile in his voice.

"I've been listening to her. Abby knew I wanted to do more, and suggested that you and I work together-- though I don't know how you'd feel about a partner. She said if Jake wants to join in, she wouldn't be opposed to it, so long as Jake doesn't work alone. I'd rather keep Jake out of this, though. And after all you've been through, I don't even know if you'll be going back into the brink. Or if you'll consider a partner."
"Abby thought we should work together?" Terry paused, as if thinking. "I haven't talked it over with Maddie yet, but John and I were hoping to start a ministry of some kind. What, I don't know, but I'm not going to do it alone, either. I'm done with that."

"Then count me in," Dick said, and the subject was changed to how Ricky was doing in preschool.

Nothing about the talk surprised Madison in the slightest. She sorted through the frosting and ice cream on her plate, and looked at Terry. When she saw he was watching her, she smiled encouragingly. She had known all along God wasn't done with him.

The cake had been so nice, Madison wanted to show Jake how much she loved it by eating the entire slice she had been given. There was so much frosting though, she had trouble getting it down. Thankfully, Sara offered to take it from her before anyone noticed. Her feet up, Madison sipped orange juice and enjoyed the party when some people got up, and she was able to see part of a table behind them. A table stacked with presents.

"Terry," she tugged at his hand, "are those for our baby?"

"They're in baby gift wrap, so I would assume so."

"You're going to help me, right?"

"Everyone, let's get down to the presents," Dick announced. He came and placed a chair beside Terry and Madison as everyone got ready. "Sara will sit here and keep a list of who gave what so you'll have something to consult for your thank you cards."

"Have you gotten any rib kicks?" Karen asked from the next couch, and some of the other women gave knowing smiles.

Madison shook her head. "Not yet."

"Has the baby turned?"

"Little Bit is head down, and on my bladder."
"You're carrying narrow, so you know what that means," Agatha said, and looked to the other women. "It's a boy."

"She's been craving orange juice, though," Karen shook her head.

Madison looked at her glass.

"She's carrying low," Abby pointed out.

"That's because she's closer to delivery, and the baby dropped lower," Izzy disagreed. "She was carrying high before she was carrying low."

"Madison hasn't had any morning sickness, and I did, and I had Connie," Karen piped up, and the women laughed.

"Let's face it, ladies," Izzy said, "without an ultrasound, we can predict this child's gender with an accuracy of fifty percent."

As Madison took another sip from her straw, Terry leaned in.

"Do you want any more orange juice?"

Madison snorted, juice nearly coming out her nose. Terry handed Madison a napkin as Ruthie came forward with a teddy bear.

Hurrying to the chair beside Terry, Sara pulled out a notepad, and nodded that she was ready. Everyone smiled, and Dick took pictures.

"Thank you," Madison handed off her glass so she could hug Lizzie. The girl smiled eagerly as Madison took the teddy bear, and admired its fluffy ears. The bear played a different tune when you squeezed each one of its big paws, and when you hugged it, the bear's stomach lit up. Madison thanked Lizzie, and told her the teddy bear would get a good home next to the crib where it would be sure to get hugged every day.
Then Debbie stepped forward with a medium-sized box. Terry opened this one, and found a night-light that showed the night sky on your bedroom ceiling. Debbie had loved hers for a long time, and was sure the baby was going to want one, too. Terry hugged the sweet munchkin, and promised they would use it when the baby came home from the hospital, though Madison knew Little Bit wouldn't be able to see the stars yet.

Ruthie came next with a heavy gift bag she had to lift with both hands to get onto Madison's lap. Or what was left of her lap. Inside the bag were storybooks-- some from Ruthie's own bookshelf, for she had outgrown them, some were gifts from her friends at preschool, and some she'd bought with her mommy. If Madison had let her, Ruthie would have opened each book and explained every page. She was so excited to give these to the baby, Madison thanked her more than once.

Next came John with a stroller, Izzy with a baby monitor, Tim with a car seat, Karen with a stack of onesies in different sizes, Paige with a baby bottle gift set, and Madeline with a memory book. Even eight-month-old Connie gave a baby rattle. Abby presented them with a toy aquarium that lit up, and Ricky gave a snuggly lop-eared dog.

Then came Jake. Everyone was grinning when Jake stepped forward with his present, and when Madison saw it was large and flat, she had an idea why.

"What is it?" Terry grinned, getting up from his chair to accept the gift.

"It's not much." Jake took a step back and watched as Terry tore away the wrapping paper. "It's not just for the baby. It's for your family."

The back of a large gold frame-- that was all Madison could see, until Terry turned it to reveal a painting of Madison in her wedding dress, and Terry in his suit. They were on the dock, the bay was at their back, and Terry's mouth had that lopsided grin Madison loved so much. The way she leaned against Terry's shoulder, and the look in Terry's eyes, made Madison feel as though she was on that dock again-- though absolutely none of their wedding photos looked like this painting.
"I used your wedding pictures to get the details of your gown, and Uncle Terry's suit," Jake explained, "but I filled in everything else from watching the two of you on a day-to-day basis. I figured your child might like to have it one day."

"I'd like to have this," Terry said, setting it down to take a step back and get a better look. "Is it my imagination, or are you getting better?"

"He's getting better," Abby smiled. "An art gallery in Sackets Harbor has shown strong interest in Jake's artwork. We're not sure they're a good fit, but it's encouraging. And as far as I'm concerned, not at all surprising."

Jake shook his head. "Obviously, an unbiased opinion."

"Well, congratulations. We'll be praying it works out." Terry looked at Madison, and she motioned for his handkerchief. "Are you all right? I think we should put this up in our room, don't you? That is some painting, Jake." Letting John put the painting in a safe place, Terry sat down and hugged Madison until she could stop her tears.

"Thank you," Madison told Jake, and opened her arms to give him a hug. Though she couldn't find better words than thank you, Jake looked as though he understood.

"I don't know," Dr. Gregory said, looking at the box on his knee, "after seeing Jake's painting, my baby sling seems pretty lame."

"A baby sling?"

When Dr. Gregory saw Madison's interest, he brightened, and brought it over, and Madison was soon admiring his gift.

There were so many presents, Madison didn't know how to thank everyone enough, and was grateful for the list Sara was making, so cards could be sent later. By the time all of the presents had been opened, Madison was quietly panicking how they would be able to get them all home. Thankfully, Terry was able to pack everything into their car, so that John only had to carry home the painting.
Though the baby had been given a lot of presents, Madison had come away with the realization that her child was not only coming into a family, but a community.

* * * *

Madison sat in the living room of her tiny apartment while Terry, John, Tim, and Jake carried out the furniture from her old bedroom. As the wide couch she used to sleep on made its way into the living room, Madison listened to the grunts and strains of the men. She wished she could help them carry the couch, not sit from a safe distance, and watch.

The apartment felt even smaller with her belly so huge. Her due date had come and gone, and even though she'd already known women didn't usually give birth on their actual due date, Madison was struggling with disappointment. Especially today. It seemed she couldn't get comfortable, no matter what she did. Her hip wasn't great, but it wasn't awful, and in general she felt achy.

She had thought getting out of the house might help, so she had come to watch the men move out the furniture, and to thank Tim for driving up from Syracuse to help with the furniture. The activity wasn't making her feel any better, though.

"Stay out of the way-- coming through." Terry and Jake backed through the door as they manhandled the couch outside. John and Tim pushed, while Terry and Jake pulled. It was a snug fit through that door. Madison had seen it all before, but it still looked like a lot of work. "Any contractions yet?" Terry hollered.

"Be careful," Madison called back. "I'll let you know when it's time."

It took a lot of her own pushing to stand up from the recliner, but she finally managed, and waddled into the bedroom. She wanted to get the last of her things before they took out her dresser and moved it into storage, before it would then go into their house, once the house was ready. Madison saw her "Home Sweet Home" rabbit from the bookshelf, and put it into the box she'd brought. She was sentimental beyond reason right now, and was taking everything.

She opened her top dresser drawer, then took a break to go use the bathroom.
When she came back, the tightening that she'd felt earlier, returned. Madison tried to stay calm. She'd had Braxton Hicks before, had gotten excited thinking it was the real thing, and she was still pregnant. She just needed to keep moving.

She worked her way to the bottom-most drawer, then found she couldn't reach it, for she couldn't bend over.

"The couch is in the moving trailer," Tim announced, coming into the room, "so the dresser is next, if you're ready."

"Could you reach the bottom drawer for me?"

Tim smiled, and opened it. "What's this?" he asked, picking up a spindle of recordable DVDs.

Madison's heart dropped to her feet.

"What is it?" Tim asked.

"Would you do me a big favor?"

"Anything."

"Would you destroy those? Break those discs into hundreds of little pieces?"

"Sure." Tim looked at the spindle. "Should I ask what's on them?"

"I've never checked, so I don't know, but they're probably movies of me and the Dragon." Madison saw her brother turn pale. "Please, I'd forgotten they were in there. Terry doesn't know I have them." The dull ache tightened, and she leaned against the dresser until it passed. It felt like her period was starting— a really bad one. The pain was coming regularly, in waves, and they were getting stronger. It had been gradual at first, but this was more obvious.

"It's starting, isn't it?" Tim asked, and Madison nodded.
Tim hurried out the bedroom door before Madison could swear him to secrecy about the discs. She'd felt so safe, she'd been stupid and had forgotten they were in the dresser. She would have kicked herself, if her condition hadn't made it physically impossible to do.

She eased into the living room, then lowered herself into the recliner as Terry ran into the apartment with John.

"Are you all right?" Terry breathed, and she nodded.

"I want to go home, though."

"You don't want the hospital?"

"The contractions are too far apart. Where's Tim?"

"I think he left." Terry knelt by the recliner, and rubbed her knee. "You're going to be all right. I'll stay with you. You won't be alone."

"I know," she nodded. "Please, could we go home?"

"Sure. Sure, Maddie." Terry helped her up, and they left the apartment with the front door off its hinges. Lauren would have to look after things until Terry could get back.

When they came home, Izzy had Madison's hospital bag ready by the front door, for John had called ahead. Tim, though, was nowhere in sight. Trusting Tim to do as she had asked, Madison focused on the baby.

At Izzy's coaxing, Madison walked around the house to help the baby along, then went to the bedroom to take a nap, for she needed to save strength for the delivery. When sleep wouldn't come, Madison moved to the couch and turned on the TV to help herself calm down. With Terry pacing back and forth though, it was hard to do.

"Please go finish moving the furniture?" Madison finally asked. "I'll be all right. I'll call you the moment I'm ready for the hospital."
"What if I can't get back in time?"

"Izzy can drive me, and Jake can step over and watch the kids. Now would you go, before someone wanders into the apartment because there's no door?"

"Are you sure it's safe for me to leave?"

Madison smiled, and nodded.

"Promise you'll call? the moment you're ready to leave? Call before that, call the instant you know."

"I promise."

"Try not to do anything important until I'm with you, and think, 'don't push'-- not until you're at the hospital." With a sigh, Terry nodded to John, and the two headed out the door.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Madison turned up the volume to watch the show and get her mind off the contractions. Izzy joined her on the couch, and was a calm presence that steadied Madison. The pains were so far apart, Madison knew it was too soon for the hospital. Still, they were getting worse, and already, she was beginning to wish she hadn't sent Terry away.

* * * *

It was impossible to sleep, though Madison was trying so she could keep up her strength. She gripped the pillow. Terry was beside her, trying his best not to move the mattress, but she knew he was awake. She checked her phone. Three-ten in the morning, and they were awake.

"Should we call the hospital?" Terry asked.

"The contractions aren't less than five minutes apart. Unless my water has broken, we can't go."

"How bad is the pain?"

"I've had worse." The brave answer didn't impress him, for his hand touched hers.
"Tell me when it gets bad, and I'll call the hospital."

She nodded.

Madison closed her eyes, and prayed for sleep, but sleep would not come. She thought the contractions weren't supposed to be this sharp, this soon. Terry finally dozed off, but the pain kept Madison awake until morning, when Izzy knocked on the bedroom door to see how Madison was doing.

The talking woke Terry, and he sat up to listen.

"The pains aren't coming less than five minutes," Madison sighed. "I wish they were, because I don't even want to think about getting out of bed. It hurts too much."

"Did you get any sleep at all?" Terry asked, and Madison shook her head.

"Let me get you some breakfast. You can eat in bed," Izzy offered.

Madison thanked her, and while Izzy went to make breakfast, Terry rubbed Madison's back to try and ease the pain.

"I feel guilty about sleeping through your labor," Terry sighed. "You should've given me a strong nudge. I would've kept you company."

She patted his arm. "Do you know where Tim went?"

"No, I'm afraid I forgot about him in all the excitement. He's probably sleeping at my place-- he has the key. It's the weekend, so he won't have to show up for work until Monday. I know Tim was anxious about you and the baby, so I'm guessing he'll stick around as long as he can."

Picking up the phone that had been playing all night, Madison turned off the music, and called Tim.

"I'm getting voicemail."

"Tell me when it gets bad, and I'll call the hospital."

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Picking up the phone that had been playing all night, Madison turned off the music, and called Tim.

"I'm getting voicemail."
"Maybe he's sleeping in," Terry shrugged. "I'll try to stop by my apartment later, and see how he's doing."

Madison didn't have much time to think about her brother. Another contraction came, and she had to ride it out as best she could while watching the stopwatch on her phone. Her phone rang, startling her so badly, she almost wet the bed. Tim's name showed on the screen, and she answered it as best she could while bearing down on the pain as Terry rubbed her back.

"Tim? Where are you?"

"I saw him, Madison. I saw the Dragon."

"You what?" Madison gripped the phone. "I asked you to break those discs."

"I did. I promise, I did. The second one from the top though-- it had a name on it. It wasn't yours, and I was curious. I give you my word, Madison, I didn't see you anywhere on the video. It wasn't what you think-- it was his last will and testament." Tim sounded shaken. "I was ready to turn it off at any moment, just in case it was one of those videos you don't want to see, but this man came on. Madison, he wasn't what I was expecting."

"What's going on?" Terry asked.

Madison shook her head.

"He was so mild-mannered, so... so normal." She could almost hear Tim shudder. "I wanted him to be a monster I would've recognized anywhere, but he wasn't. He could have been anyone, he could have been me."

"Tim, are you all right?" Madison's breath caught as she felt another contraction.

"You're still having them, aren't you?"

"Where are you?" Madison asked. "I was getting worried about you." She groaned, and Terry slipped the phone from her hand.
"Tim, it's Terry. Maddie's been in labor all night, and hasn't gotten any sleep. I've been timing her contractions, and they're more than five minutes, but if this goes on much longer, I'm taking her anyway." Terry listened, and nodded. "It's hard to see her like this. All right, but tell us where you're at so she can at least rest. Good. I'll tell her. Use it for as long as you want." Terry hung up, and placed the phone next to Madison. "He's at my place-- he's going to stay over the weekend to see how things turn out with you and the baby. He also said we should wait before taking you to the hospital."

"I have to use the bathroom." Madison pushed back the blankets, and slowly got to her feet. She hadn't taken three steps when she felt something pop. Wet gushed from between her legs. Her first thought was that she'd just wet herself in the worst possible way, and right in front of Terry. The thought that followed, made her shiver. "Terry? It's time."

"What happened?" he asked.

"My water broke."

She didn't have to say it twice, for Terry was out of that bed and flying into his clothes.

"Call Tim and tell him which hospital we'll be at?" she asked, and Terry grabbed her phone.

A few moments later, Terry was pulling on his shoes and shouting at the bedroom door that it was time.

Madison wished he wouldn't say it that way. It sounded so final.

Someone knocked on the door, and since Terry had gotten his pants on, Madison called the person inside. She hated to move, for every time she did, more would leak onto her pajamas.

Izzy rushed inside, already dressed and with a phone to her ear, lining up a babysitter. "Abby and Jake would like to come-- if that's all right with you."
It was fine with Madison. She’d never done this before, but if everyone wanted to wait at the hospital while she gave birth, it was fine with her. Plans had already been made about who would be in the delivery room. Terry and Izzy would be her support team.

"I'll get the car ready, but don't push until I get you to the hospital. Okay?" Terry didn't look comforted when Madison nodded, but he ran off, nearly stumbling over Debbie as he left.

Madison smiled at the girl, who was soon joined by her sisters. They watched Madison with wide eyes, and Madison tried to stay calm for their sakes, remembering Paige and Madeline's reaction to the night when Karen went into labor. John came looking for Madison's hospital bag, and Izzy directed him to the living room.

The women let the girls stay, but closed the door, and Izzy helped Madison change. The contractions were getting much worse now, and Madison focused on getting to the hospital, on staying on her feet. She wanted to get down on all fours and push, but knew she had to get to the hospital. She had to wait. She gasped, the pain so bad she wanted to scream.

When Terry came, she grabbed onto him and made her way to the car as fast as she could manage. She heard Agatha somewhere in the background, telling the munchkins everything would be all right.

Madison wanted to believe it.

It was hard climbing inside the car, but Madison got in, and before she knew it, Izzy and John were in the back seat, giving directions to a hospital Terry had been to before.

"How are you feeling?" Terry asked.

Madison couldn’t speak. It took all her strength to ride out the pain. She wanted to pull her knees up in the worst possible way, and push.

"Hang in there," Terry said, and she felt the car speed up. "God, be with Maddie, and Little Bit," Terry prayed out loud, his eyes wide open. "Don't let the pain get so strong Maddie can't bear it. Give her a safe delivery, Lord. Cause the baby to be healthy."
Madison added her "amen" as she gripped the seat.

When they arrived at the hospital, they examined Madison and told her she was fully dilated. Madison could've cried her thanks to Heaven. She was ready for it to be over-- more than ready. The pain was sending her through the roof. When Dr. Nelson asked if she wanted an epidural, Madison nearly screamed "yes." As they gave her the drug, she held on to Terry's hand, and soon, she was able to speak without screaming.

Even Terry was smiling again.

A nurse propped up Madison's leg, and while Terry propped up the other, Dr. Nelson directed Madison to push. It helped that Izzy patted the sweat from Madison's face, for it stung when it ran into Madison's eyes. Gripping Izzy's hand, Madison pushed.

"When my heart is overwhelmed," Terry kept repeating, and Madison wanted to tell him to be quiet.

She was trying to push.

Madison cried, and Izzy squeezed her hand.

"I see a head, Madison. I need another push. Focus your pushes right here."

Madison screamed, and pushed even harder.

"Good job," the doctor coached her. "Now push, push, push."

"You're doing good, Maddie." Terry's face was pale, but he hadn't passed out. He supported her leg as she bore down and gave it everything she had.

"There you go. There you are," Dr. Nelson said. "Good job, Madison. Good job."

Madison gasped as a baby started to cry.
That cry was the most beautiful sound Madison had ever heard, but it was more than beautiful. It filled her with such love, such intense joy, it was overpowering. Madison's heart nearly burst as she tried to catch her breath. She looked at Terry, but Terry was busy watching what was going on, his eyes filling with tears.

A laugh spilled from Terry's lips. "We've got a girl, Maddie! A girl!" Terry gentled Madison's leg down, then came and planted a kiss on Madison's forehead as Madison zeroed in on the gasping cry of her daughter.

Her daughter.

A bundle in a blanket was placed in Madison's arms, the umbilical cord still attached. Face to face for the first time.

The baby opened its tiny mouth and let out a cry.

"It's all right, it's me. It's momma." Madison hugged her baby, kissed her baby's small head, and thanked God. The little one responded by quieting down so fast, Madison checked to make sure everything was all right, but she was just happy to be next to her momma, that was all. They removed the umbilical cord while Madison held her sweetheart, then a nurse explained they were taking the baby to the warmer to be cleaned up.

Madison didn't want to let go of her daughter, and the nurse seemed to understand, but the baby needed to be cleaned.

She didn't have any strength left, and she had to fight not to cry as the baby left her arms. The warmer was across the room, and Madison tried to watch what they were doing. Terry followed with his smartphone, sobbing uncontrollably, but trying to film what he could. Then Madison saw him push the phone to Izzy, and come to the bed.

"Are you all right?" he asked, wiping the tears from his face.

Madison nodded, and he smiled and shook his head in amazement over what had just happened.
"They're asking for a name. I like the last one we settled on for a girl-- remember?"

"Tell them," Madison breathed, and she watched as Terry went over and talked to the nurse.

When Terry came back, he hugged Madison. "I love you. I love you so much, Maddie." He kissed her, then broke into another sob as the nurse stepped forward, and offered the baby into his arms for the first time. "Oh, God is so good. Thank You, God. Thank You." Terry blinked back the tears and smiled as he looked into the face of his daughter. "Hello, Sweetheart. I'm your daddy." Terry looked at Madison. "She's so tiny. She really is a Little Bit." He lifted her into Madison's arms, and hovered while Izzy kept recording video.

"She's absolutely beautiful," Izzy beamed from behind the smartphone. "What's her name?"

"Gabrielle Hope Davis," Madison said, smiling down at her baby. "Gabrielle, after an angel, because one of them looked after Terry, and Hope, because I'll always have hope."

"We're calling her Ellie for short," Terry added.

"It's a sweet name," Izzy smiled, wiping the tears from her eyes. She turned off the camera. "Do you want to be the one to tell the others, or should I?"

"Please, would you tell them? I'd like to stay with Maddie and Ellie." Terry thanked Izzy, and slipped the phone back into his pocket while Maddie adjusted her gown at the direction of the nurse and started to feed Ellie. "She may have my brown eyes," Terry marveled, "but I knew this baby was going to have blonde peach fuzz-- I just knew she would have your hair."

Madison hadn't known any such thing, but she loved to see how much of Terry she could find in her baby daughter. It seemed Terry could see Madison, and Madison could see Terry.

"A girl!" Tim burst into the room and hugged Terry, then stepped close to the bed and hugged Madison. "Congratulations!" He touched Madison's arm. "I want you to know I was praying for you and the baby."

"You were?"
Tim nodded, and moved to see Ellie.

It took a little moving of blanket, since Madison was nursing, but she showed Tim his new niece.

"She looks just like you," Tim whispered. "There's some of Terry there, but she looks just like you. Did it go all right, are you and the baby okay?" Tim nodded when Madison told him they were fine. "I-- I never told you everything that happened yesterday."

"Terry said you were at his place."

"I was there this morning. But not yesterday." Tim paused. "I want to apologize. You know for what."

"I don't, Tim. You can talk in front of Terry. I haven't told him about the DVDs, but it's time he found out." Though she didn't have the strength, Madison briefly explained the discs to Terry, how they had been shipped in the box along with her birth certificates.

"What was on the discs to make your landlady send them here so quickly?" Terry asked.

"I don't know. Ask Tim. He watched one of them before destroying the spindle."

"There probably was ugliness on the other DVDs, but I didn't watch them, I only saw the one, and it was his last will and testament. I'm sorry I watched it, Madison. You trusted me to destroy it first."

The nurse tapped Tim's shoulder. "Mother and baby need rest now. You can come back later."

"The Dragon didn't have any money," Madison sighed wearily. "And even if he did, I wouldn't take it."

"That's not what I wanted to tell you." Tim asked for just one more moment with his sister. "I was at your pastor's house last night. He led me to the Lord."

"Oh, Tim."
The nurse looked at Tim kindly, but then nodded to the door. Tim smiled at Madison as he left, and to Madison’s relief, Terry was allowed to stay. Rest sounded so good to the exhausted new mother. While Ellie nursed, Terry settled into a chair by the hospital bed, and the push of the delivery began to fade even more.

Relaxing, Madison closed her eyes. "You’ll stay?" she whispered.

"I won't leave you," Terry promised.

It was all the promise Madison needed.

* * * *

The day Terry brought Maddie and Ellie home, the house had been cleaned from top to bottom. Terry knew, for Izzy had been cleaning all morning, well before he left for the hospital. As he pulled in front of the house, he saw the living room curtains move, and knew they were being anticipated.

In the back seat, Ellie was snug as a bug in her new car seat, while Maddie was seat-belted beside her and keeping her company.

"Are you ready?" Terry asked, as the front door opened, and John came out with the triplets. Terry looked in the back, and Maddie nodded. "Okay. Just let me know if we get to be too much for either of you." Terry pushed open the driver’s side door, and smiled at their greeting party. "We’re home," he announced, even though it was obvious. "Maddie’s pretty tired, but she’s eager to show Ellie to the munchkins."

"It’s good to have you guys back," John said, coming to the car as Terry opened Maddie’s door. "Welcome home. Girls, give them room. Don’t crowd Aunt Madison."

"I think Ellie enjoyed the ride-- she slept all the way home." Maddie got out, and waited as Terry unbuckled the baby. "Oh, thank you, girls." Maddie hugged Debbie, Lizzie, and Ruthie, and read the cards they gave her. "I’ll put these on the dresser, where I can see them every day."
The dresser was already pretty crowded, but Terry smiled and shook his head. Knowing Maddie, she would make room. He carried Ellie, and helped Maddie into the house while the munchkins followed as close as they could to get a glimpse of the baby.

In the living room, Maddie took a seat on the couch, then Terry lowered the baby into her arms. While Izzy smiled and watched, the girls climbed onto the couch and crowded around Maddie.

"This is Ellie," Maddie smiled, introducing the tiny newborn on her lap to the three five-year-olds. Ellie fussed a bit, and put part of her hand in her mouth, fascinating the girls. Ellie's yellow sleeper made the small blonde fuzz on her head stand out even more, though the receiving blanket hid some of the sleeper.

The munchkins went and washed their hands, and the first one back was Debbie.

"Her fingers are so tiny," Debbie marveled, as she let Ellie grab onto one of her own.

Terry looked up from his camera and grinned at John, who was busy taking pictures of his own.

The front door opened, and AJ came in with Ricky.

"Oh, Uncle Terry, Mom is right-- Ellie really does have your nose." Abby came close as Ruthie climbed onto the couch for her turn to hold Ellie's hand. "She's so precious. Ricky, look at your cousin. Isn't she precious?"

The boy looked at the newborn on Maddie's lap, then back at his mommy, as though he didn't quite understand what all the fuss was about. Terry laughed, getting the whole thing on camera. Jake picked up his son, so Ricky could get a better view, and father and son watched as Ruthie played with Ellie's fist.

They were home. Terry didn't know so much love could fit into one heart, but it was possible. He had proved it. As Lizzie got her turn, Terry thanked God for sending Maddie into his life. The future held promise: a ministry to be explored, a house that would be waiting for them across the street, a family he loved with every fiber of his being.

A brother-in-law with newfound hope.
Always have hope.

Terry would forever remember those words, and with Maddie, they would journey together in faith. For they were on a journey of the heart.

"Jesus answered them... These things I have spoken unto you, that in Me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."
~ John 16:31, 33 ~

Terry and Maddie: "Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me."
~ Acts 27:25 ~

End of Book.

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